

OF PUMPKIN SPICE LATTES, HAMPLANETS, AND FATSPEAK:
THE VENTING GENRE AS SUPPORT AND SUBVERSION
ON REDDIT'S r/FATPEOPLESTORIES

by

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ABSTRACT

JULIA A. SIGNORELLI. Of Pumpkin Spice Lattes, Hamplanets, and Fatspeak: The venting genre as support and subversion on Reddit's r/FatPeopleStories. (Under the direction of DR. PILAR GARCÉS CONEJOS-BLITVICH)

Ten posts from the Reddit community Fat People Stories (/r/fatpeoplestories) and their corresponding comment sections comprise an analytical corpus of 45,867 words. Using both Askehave and Nielsen's (2005) two-dimensional model for genre analysis and Bax's (2011) heuristic for discourse analysis, the corpus is examined through these lenses to determine the various move structures and rhetorical strategies that constitute the genre of venting and, more specifically, the communicative purpose of this genre in the Fat People Stories Community. This study is then able to forward a definition of venting as its own genre distinct from its frequent conflation with ranting in the existing literature to date. Additionally, as health and body image remains a contentious and controversial topic, the functions of venting within the Fat People Stories community has implications for discourse surrounding the obesity epidemic and public health as a whole.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1990s, the Internet continues to influence society, connecting billions to ever-increasing stores of information, entertainment, commerce, and social networking. Baym asserts (2010) that these new technologies “affect how we see the world, our communities, our relationships, and ourselves. They lead to social and cultural reorganization and reflection” (p. 2). Unsurprisingly, much of this “reflection” is shared via the myriad platforms that are, as culture columnist Garber (2015) notes, “technologies of exposure”:

We are participating in a voluntary anthropology of unprecedented scope and scale [...] The bigger thing, though, is that this sudden exposure of otherness—all that literal mind-reading, happening on a mass scale—has led to a kind of cognitive chaos. All these experiences and perspectives and opinions and I thinks and yeah buts and how could yous, buzzing and humming and screaming and insisting. All these you can’t say thats and check your privileges. All this indignation. All this outrage (para. 3).

Scholars across the disciplines have been investigating this veritable explosion of negative emotional expression—often referred to as *ranting*, *venting*, or *flaming* to name but a few—yet Martin (2014) admits that “the frequency and consequences of online anger are outpacing the research” (para. 1). More recent studies have attested to the productive possibilities of conflict and aggression in social life (Lange, 2014). However, just as the general public tends to use the terms *ranting* and *venting* interchangeably, the literature persists in conflating what are ultimately distinct genres with their own respective communicative purposes, moves, and rhetorical strategies.

The present study seeks to establish what comprises the genre of venting as opposed to ranting as well as how venting functions within a particular discussion forum on Reddit, the site popularly known as “the front page of the internet”. Reddit boasts 250

million users discussing nearly every conceivable topic—from international politics to photos of sexually suggestive avocados(/r/avocadosgonewild)—in over one million communities. A community that is indeed one in a million is Fat People Stories (/r/fatpeoplestories) which was chosen for this study as health and body image remains a contentious and controversial topic in popular discourse; additionally, the obesity epidemic is at the forefront of discussions regarding access to health care from both a public health and economic perspective. Given the sensitive nature of these discussions, they are often fraught with negative emotional expression, and individuals seek a variety of outlets to release these emotions and seek support, commiseration, and diversion. In the Fat People Stories community, users compose narratives—either real or fictional—describing encounters with people of size who are perceived to exhibit rude and entitled behavior. These stories are also open to commentary from other Fat People Stories and Reddit users.

An analytical corpus of 45,867 words across ten posts and corresponding comment sections was gathered and analyzed using Askehave and Nielsen's (2005) two-dimensional genre model and supplemented with discourse analysis of the individual texts with Bax's (2011) heuristic. Askehave and Nielsen's model is an optimal fit for this study because it accounts for the multi-media and multi-modal components not featured in traditional texts. This form of analysis can then make explicit the various properties and characteristics unique to digitally-mediated text. However, as genres are ways of organizing our lives, our identities, and our social worlds, venting reveals underlying perspectives about a given topic, situation, or individual(s) that can bear on how successfully (or not) a society manages to navigate through conflicts. Given that the

focus of the present study explores how venting unfolds in a digitally-mediated environment, insights gained can have implications on the ways humans sort through negative emotions and contention in face-to-face communication.

Chapter 2 lays the groundwork for this study by first explaining notions of community formation in digitally-mediated environments with special attention to Reddit due to its relative lack of attention in the literature; next, I consider research to date on ranting, venting, and complaining in online spaces before moving on to discussion of relevant social context such as health and disease discourse and fat studies. Chapter 3 outlines the study's methods and is followed by the results and discussion of the study in Chapter 4. Finally, Chapter 5 describes the conclusions and implications of the study by reconsidering the research questions established in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the World Wide Web has democratized access to information, it has allowed anyone with an Internet connection to enter public discourse on all subjects. Black (2012) states that digital discourse research involves the “ways that language becomes entextualized and re-embodied” and presents myriad opportunities to explore how such communication is, according to Agha (2012), “reincorporated into social life” (p. 276). However, early studies in digitally-mediated communication (henceforth, DMC) focused on language as a unique, homogenized “Internet” register and fixated on surface features such as emoticons and non-standard orthography (Herring, Stein, & Virtanen, 2013). Other linguists opposed this prescriptive dismissal of “netspeak” by claiming that the primarily written nature of DMC lends itself to “metalinguistic reflection” and along with “loose cross-turn relatedness in multiparticipant DMC”, it “encourages language play” (Herring et al., 2013, p. 5). Fortunately, with the sociolinguistic turn in the mid-1990s, studies have shifted to a social practices perspective and view online communications as embedded in extant norms, discourse styles, and registers (Herring, 2013; Akkaya, 2014).

In contrast, calculating the frequency of single semiotic features and ascribing them to “clear cut social variables” amounts to mere “coding and counting” (Herring, 2004; Androutsopoulos, 2011). This language variation approach—the aforementioned hallmark of initial studies in DMC—is not equipped to fully describe the perceived messiness and unpredictability of online communication. As Androutsopoulos further explains:

While to some researchers this is no more than a footnote, others have used ideas from pragmatics, conversation analysis, stylistics

and interactional sociolinguistics in order to study new media not primarily as technological containers of speech, but as sites of users' social activities with language (p. 281).

The current study thus joins the “others” in adopting a mixed methods, interdisciplinary approach to describe an emergent genre—venting—that allows participants in an online community to form support networks and subvert the perceived dominant discourses surrounding fat acceptance and obesity in their non-digital lifeworlds. Although it is by no means a new form of communication, research to date has neglected to recognize venting as its own digitally-mediated genre. Moreover, little to no discussion regarding how venting functions in digitally-mediated contexts exists in the literature. To both describe and define venting as well as to explore the functionality of venting within the Fat People Stories subreddit, the following sections discuss previous studies and the social context necessary to construct the theoretical underpinnings and relevance of this study.

2.1 Forums/message boards and Internet communities

Akkaya (2014) argues that Bakhtin's (1981; 1986) notion of dialogism—how utterances are connected to all uses across time, their meanings comprehended only through recognizing these connections— is a valuable lens with which to view online discursive performances (p. 288). While intertextuality speaks to Bakhtin's (1981;1986) concern with context and how utterances are interpreted regarding those that have come before or since, intertextuality also includes the “intrusion (or adoption by the speaker/author)” of features from existing texts into new texts as well as “hybridization of one genre or text type with another” (Bloor & Bloor, 2013, p. 52). Inherent in discussions of intertextuality is the concept of heteroglossia, or “discourse that combines

and mixes forms and contents” (as cited in Leppänen, Pitkänen-Huhta, Piirainen-Marsh, Nikula, & Peuronen, 2009, para. 5). Similarly, Androutsopoulos (2011) indicates that Web 2.0. environments, or sites that allow for user-generated content and social interaction, are “heteroglossic ‘hot spots’”, generating discourse resulting from deliberate “semiotic action”, or a process in which users combine “linguistic resources [...] in ways that index social, historical and ideological tensions and conflicts” (p. 294).

Online discussion forums and message boards are among a diverse and ever evolving list of technologies that are studied in digitally-mediated communication and embody Androutsopoulos’ (2011) notion of “heteroglossic ‘hot spots’”. Although the terms *discussion forum* and *message board* are often used interchangeably, Arendholz (2011) maintains that despite shared features, a forum is comprised of chains of comments on a topic (threads) that can be viewed at once; message boards, however, are arranged in thematic categories that users select from to then view all threads contained therein. As forums and message boards are sites of asynchronous communication, Kim and Kang (2014) note that “existing models for spoken dialogue typically capture a linear sequence of turn exchanges between two people” and do not account for the fact that asynchronous online discussions can contain messages from multiple people and are, in essence, polylogical (p. 602). More than one reply can exist for any one message and form “reply chains” arranged in a “tree structure where each link represents which message replies to which”; the researchers also maintained that whereas brief spoken messages tend to play a single role, text-based forum messages are of greater length “and often play multiple roles with respect to a prior message” (Kim & Kang, 2011, p. 602).

As Abrams (2003) notes, text-based, asynchronous DMC allows users greater time overall to formulate responses as well as recruit a variety of outside resources—whether reference-based or the incorporation of multi-modal elements. As forum interactions are asynchronous, interactions between participants do not necessarily “[take] place within a unified time-frame”: “[T]he second part of an adjacency pair can be produced, for example, a week after the first part” (Maccoccia, 2004, p. 117). Turns in the conversation can thus be lengthy as participants have additional time to process information and produce more complex responses whereas chats are conducive to rapid exchanges, less “serious content-centered discussion”, and “has a more pronounced phatic character” (Claridge, 2007, p. 88). Some may consider such technologies a recent phenomenon and may take these affordances for granted. However, a technology that emerged in the mid-1980s that served as the source of present day online message boards and forums—Usenet newsgroups—was also the site for one of the most significant early studies on Internet communities. Baym’s (1995) three-year ethnographic study of a newsgroup (rec.arts.tv.soaps or “r.a.t.s”) where participants discussed popular daytime soap operas revealed that an “on-line community’s ‘style’ is shaped by a range of preexisting structures [in which] participants strategically appropriate and exploit the resources and rules those structures offer”; for instance, r.a.t.s. users invented their own forms of expression such as the acronym IOAS (“it’s only a soap”), and new forms of jokes such as the “Soap opera laws” lists (p. 35).

Baym (1998) also addresses an early concern surrounding notions of community in online spaces: whether the anonymity afforded by online groups would encourage aggressive, antisocial behavior. As the purpose of communication technologies has been

to allow people to exchange messages without being physically present, this has resulted in a number of concerns surrounding what constitutes healthy use and behaviors not only in digital spaces, but also in how such “new” behaviors could find their way into the material world. Baym is a continual voice of reason and does not submit to either technological determinism or social construction; instead, she claimed that although digital connections have become a part of our lives, they are not “agents of radical transformation, either utopian or dystopia” (p. 153). In their study of the ““amateur exhibitionist community”” Gone Wild (r/gonewild) on Reddit, van der Nagel and Frith (2015) consider the implications of anonymity and the mounting discussion about moving to a ““real name”” Internet wherein users of sites would be forced to use their legal names to post content (n.p). Acknowledging the popular conception of anonymity as synonymous with incivility, van der Nagel and Frith call upon Marwick and boyd’s (2011) concept of context collapse. As users run the risk of encountering all members of their respective social spheres in one space when such a scenario is not likely in the material world, pseudonyms or screen names allow users some measure of security. To van der Nagel and Frith, however, anonymity is the primary means by which Gone Wild users practice agency:

This sense of intimacy is a key part of the pleasure of the subreddit: the audience feels connected to the people in the images, while those submitting are able to enact a playful, sexual identity while preserving their safety in ways that would not be possible on the “real name” Internet (para. 32).

Ultimately, the researchers argue that the aspect of choice “adds texture to being social on the Internet” by creating a space where users can “control what they reveal about themselves and who they reveal it to”, explore identity, and “make connections

“with people who share different interests without being limited by the social factors that routinely shape everyday life” (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015, para. 43). This work bears especial importance to the present study not only for the fact that van der Nagel and Frith elevate Reddit as a site worthy of serious academic inquiry, but also because Fat People Stories is devoted to posting of controversial content. While Fat People Stories prohibits the posting of photographs (both voluntary or otherwise), users rely upon linguistic resources to create unflattering, textual “images” of overweight and obese individuals. As all online content is preserved once posted, it can be potentially damaging if linked to identifying information. In a related study, Martin, Coyier, VanSistine, & Schroeder (2013) cite the oft repeated subtitle of Christopherson’s (2007) review on internet anonymity—“On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog”— and speculate that posters to Internet rant-sites would change their behavior and the content of their rants if forced to provide a valid Email address or their real name.

Not unlike claims that the Internet is ruining language, conventional discourse continues to perpetuate the myth that authentic relationships and community cannot be formed in digital spaces. Baym (2011) asserts that a variety of social supports that are considered integral in the formation and maintenance of face-to-face communities are present in online communities as well: social integration/network support, emotional support, esteem support, and informational support. This researcher’s reasoned approach is certainly foundational to the theoretical underpinnings of the current study in that it, too, seeks to confront popular media misconceptions. Although many may assume that offline support systems are more successful than various forms of online support, Yan (2017) draws upon Elfhag and Rossner’s (2005) claim that support in face-to-face social

contexts can be negative and interfere with an individual's progress towards a desired goal. Additionally, Yan (2017) explains that online support communities allow individuals to solicit advice and other resources from people all over the world whereas in offline contexts, this network is often limited to family members and close friends. Prior research from Wright, Rains, and Banas (2010) and Ballentine and Stevenson (2011) has thus identified "social contacts in offline settings as strong ties and social contacts in online settings as weak ties"; individuals tend to respond to these kinds of social contexts differently, and more often than not, individuals prefer the weak social ties offered in online settings (as cited in Yan, 2017, p. 2).

While some may choose to create disembodied selves for various purposes—not all of which are necessarily deceptive or nefarious—Baym (2011) has also cited compelling research that demonstrates how people are more likely to be honest as well as maintain existing social norms in online spaces. Lorenzo-Dus, Bou-Franch, and Blitvich (2011) studied a corpus of comments in response to the Obama Reggaeton YouTube video and found that impoliteness strategies were likely present because of the "performed nature of talk", yet many users interpreted such comments as violating the civility expected of public discourse (p. 2592). Similarly, Arendholz's (2011) quantitative analysis of posts on the popular British message board The Student Room demonstrated that "in most cases, interlocutors do not go online to pick a fight" with "comparatively few" comments marked as inappropriate (p. 302). Nevertheless, the Internet is a host to myriad environments where users share experiences and observations that can be classified as anything but positive, productive, or complimentary.

2.2 Complaining, ranting, and venting online

While the literature to date has demonstrated that users tend to bring extant social norms to their online communications, it does not follow that said practices do not adapt to the features of various digital technologies and therefore take on new or heightened social significance worthy of continual study. Certainly, complaining about unsatisfactory service encounters is not a new social phenomenon, nor is it new to academic study as the complaint has received considerable attention in the literature from both linguistic and interdisciplinary perspectives. According to Vásquez (2011), “the largest body of research on the speech act of complaint approaches the subject from a pragmatics perspective”, focusing on “which semantic formulas... are used in realizing complaints” (p. 1707).

In a corpus of 100 negative reviews of hotel accommodations on the website, Vásquez (2011) observed that over one-third of the complaints tended to “juxtapose an overall negative evaluation with some type of positive appraisal” and tended to “co-occur more frequently” with constructive contributions such as advice and recommendations as opposed to more negative or hostile speech acts such as warnings or threats”; regardless, the majority of complaints made no mention of positive attributes or framed any positive assessments as “the one” or “the only’ good thing” about the experience, thus utilizing extreme case formulation—an aspect of complaints that has been identified in previous research (p. 1714).

Moreover, Vásquez (2011) noted that while the majority of *TripAdvisor* complaints can be described as indirect, they can also be considered direct in that the complaints sometimes address the responsible party in the “complained-about actions or

circumstances” in addition to a general, undefined audience seeking feedback about a particular hotel or restaurant (p. 1715). However, the researcher acknowledges that the indirect/direct binary is likely more appropriate to describe and classify face-to-face interactions where both participants have some degree of familiarity or knowledge of each other. Conversely, in online complaints, it is not likely that the complainant and addressee know one another:

[T]he only feature that the two participants may actually share is some knowledge of/interest in the complained-about entity. In this respect, the participant framework – especially the relationship of the complainant to the addressee – is basically the reverse in online complaints as it is in face-to-face complaints (p. 1715).

Therefore, it is possible for online complainants to build rapport with an audience of fellow travelers, albeit travelers that are not known in a face-to-face context, with an underlying motivation to prevent them from experiencing a similarly disappointing experience. These findings are consistent with prior studies regarding the social functions of complaints as a “solidarity-establishing speech behavior [that] takes place among status-equal friends and acquaintances” (Boxer, 1993, p. 103).

Nevertheless, it is valuable to consider Vásquez’s (2011) results in light of prior studies to establish further points of similarity and contrast with ranting and venting. Although Boxer’s (1993) study measured indirect complaints (ICs) and their possible correlation to varying levels of social distance pertained to face-to-face conversations, her conclusion that “rapport-inspiring responses” in IC/commiseration sequences “are almost equally frequent for strangers as for friends and acquaintances” (p. 124). Indirect complaints are primarily used as part of small-talk “with the underlying strategy of obtaining agreement” and to establish some kind of common ground upon which the

interlocutors build a brief yet “more pleasant” encounter (p. 121). In contrast, reviews posted to TripAdvisor are monologic rather than polylogical or even dyadic, and, as a result of the relative anonymity of both author and addressee, “the complainant is not vulnerable” and “explicit complaint devices abound” (Vásquez, 2011, p. 1715).

Digitally-mediated complaints allowed *TripAdvisor* users to simultaneously address both the imagined complained-about entities as well as third-parties without expecting an explicit rejoinder from either. The complaint, then, can be interpreted as rapport-building insofar as it commands attention from various audiences who possess the ability to make changes.

Whereas the pragmatic function of complaints can be deemed utilitarian and primarily monologic in digitally-mediated forms, ranting is both participatory and performative. Rants can also be a part of exchanges both real and imagined, but their purpose is almost entirely rooted in self-styling and identity formation. Perhaps one of the most formative discussions of the rant comes from an article that focuses on a different yet inextricably related DMC phenomenon: Vrooman's (2002) examination of *flaming* which he defines “as the use of invective and/or verbal aggressiveness”(p. 52). By situating flaming in the rhetorical tradition of performative invective, it is necessary for Vrooman to discuss two other genres—the rant and “the dozens”. In so doing, Vrooman comments:

The idea that monologues of insult might be an indication of artistic genius hints at the performative nature of such rants. They are a method of creating a specific kind of curmudgeonly status, of carving out an almost antisocial place where the solo onlooker and critic might then examine and critique the absurdities of society (p. 55).

Regardless of this “artistic focus” of rants and of flaming, the range of topics from the pedantic to the scatological as well as a proclivity for profanity guarantee that the “practitioner of invective” remains separate from the society they critique (Vrooman, 2002, p. 56). Thus, the mission of a rant is to establish and defend a position of social distance—or rather, social isolation—regardless of the chosen medium for the message. The association between ranting and social distance is so strong that entire sites exist for the sole purpose of posting or reading anonymous rants; Martin et al.'s (2013) aforementioned small-scale study indicates that while those who posted rants “unanimously indicated” that they felt more calm or even “relaxed” after ranting, those who read the rants reported feeling sad or agitated (p. 121). While such results are not conclusive and could perhaps be more indicative of individual maladaptive coping behaviors on the part of the participants that read the rants, it is worth noting that emotions such as sadness often lead to distance and separation from others. In this case, readers did not mention any sense of connection or solidarity with the ranters, but rather experienced a statistically significant decrease in happiness and increase in sadness.

Unlike a complaint or the multiparty African-American game of insults called *the dozens*, any rapport established through ranting online is secondary and not a prerequisite for its formation and delivery. As Vrooman (2002) further establishes, the “withering sarcasm of ranters” is not required for the dozens which “employ more of a dramatic irony, a kind of high-context joking behavior” and demands “much of its audience and which in doing so helps cement community ties”; while both ranting and the dozens share some topics and speech styles, power is “signified by community rejections” in rants whereas “power is socially conferred” when crowning a winner of the dozens (p. 57, 58).

From this analysis, we can assume that ranting, then, is a resolutely “individualistic production of identity” regardless of whether the topic of the rant is real or imagined (Vrooman, 2002, p. 63). To harken back to the genre of service encounters, Manning (2008) utilizes “venting” to define the “rant”: “a genre that ‘vents’ options that perhaps have no other venue” and can take the form of “ranting monologues that can themselves produce dialogs, uptake, or sharing of similar experiences” (p. 104). Other studies also utilize this circular construction for definitions of ranting by describing the act as merely “venting anger” (R. C. Martin et al., 2013; Stephens, Trawley, & Ohtsuka, 2016). Within the service encounter genre, Manning focuses on conversations reported by Starbucks baristas or “Stupid Customer of the Week” stories—what she claims is a “decidedly non-dialogic primary speech genre... [that consists] almost entirely of an incorporated dialogic interaction as a secondary genre” (p. 103). Manning also identifies mini-rants that, while they take on the form of a simple narrative, they often “slide into dialogic format” (p. 105). By reproducing dialogs with “stupid customers”, Manning claims that they “[illustrate] what is wrong with service work in general, and therefore counts as a ‘rant’” (p. 116). Still, Manning’s inability to separate the “rant” from the “vent”—a genre that, in the author’s “own opinion” is “very neglected” in the literature—complicates other studies’ efforts to make a distinction between the two (p. 103).

Of equal importance to this discussion is the fact that not all digitally-mediated communication is solely text-based. Although the Internet has always been a space for users to both produce and consume content, more recent popular and academic discourse has begun to focus on content creation, or Web 2.0 technologies and the ability for users to integrate more multimodal content with greater ease (Brake, 2014). Cormode and

Krishnamurthy (2008) clarify that Web 2.0 differs from the “Old Web” in that it also allows for user interaction and customization and emphasizes the sociological. In the appropriately titled study “Multimodal Communication on Tumblr: ‘I have so many feels!’”, Bourlai and Herring (2014) explore whether users of the microblogging service Tumblr communicate differently with images versus text with regard to the expression of emotion. Bourlai and Herring thus constructed a corpus with two datasets: one consisting of posts containing text only and another with posts that include images and/or images and text. To collect user-generated data that represents both datasets, the researchers sampled from seven popular or trending tags on Tumblr such as #feels, #rant, or #vent.

Preliminary findings indicated that Tumblr users rely upon image communication for discussions of fandom and more positive and intense emotional communication overall. Text posts are devoted to discussing personal issues and frequently employ sarcasm; text posts also express more negative emotion and are commonly tagged #rant or #vent. Bourlai and Herring (2014) posit that since the process of selecting the most appropriate image and inserting it in a post is perhaps more time consuming, text is a mode that allows users to “let out” feelings more quickly (p. 4). Previous studies, such as Knobel and Lankshear’s (2006) analysis of the role of memes in cultural production, have claimed that text is a more distancing mode of communication. Considering Vrooman’s (2002) assertion that a rant seeks to establish social distance, the consistency in terms of how users rely on textual expression for #rant is promising. On the contrary, users and researchers alike still consider ranting and venting as the same speech act and use the term synonymously in the literature.

The attempt to articulate a comprehensive definition for “vent” and “venting” is further confounded by Lange’s (2014) more recent study of YouTube users’ responses to rants. In it, Lange claims that rants are a “participatory genre known for its emotional intensity” and found that the majority of text commenters “engaged with their content or expressed empathy or agreement to the rant” with relatively few deemed as “impolite or inappropriate” by the speech community (p. 59). Although helpful in the grand scheme of dismantling popular associations of ranting as solely “competitive, *ad hominem* attacks”, it does little to distinguish it from venting (p. 62). In this way, Lange extends Manning’s (2008) claim that ranting has a social function in “vent[ing] opinions that perhaps have no other venue: they are hidden transcripts made visible” (p. 104). As the subsequent chapter of analysis of ethnographic data and posts from the Fat People Stories community demonstrates, venting is deliberately and necessarily communal. While venting can share the “artful” characteristics of what are deemed the best rants, the artfulness of venting on Fat People Stories seems to translate to a kind of motivational force it engenders in participants to either take up or maintain healthy habits and weight loss efforts through the support of the community.

2.3 Health and disease discourse

Thus, Fat People Stories is situated in digitally-mediated discourse on health and disease. As De Choudhury and De (2014) indicate, copious studies have demonstrated that online message boards and forums as well as social media sites “provide a conducive environment allowing people to get connected with others who share similar difficulties, misery, pain, condition, or distress”—in short, a space to vent with others with the same shared experience (p. 71). Not unlike Manning’s (2008) claim that barista rants are

“hidden transcripts made visible”, Barak, Boniel-Nissim, and Suler (2008) attest to the powerful disinhibition effects in online support groups which allow group members to “share very personal thoughts or disclosures about themselves and their lives” as well as “secret emotions, fears, or wishes” that can result in strong social bonds despite the lack of face-to-face interaction (p. 1870). Some possible negative disinhibition effects can include, however, anxiety and regret about having shared too much information despite the relative anonymity of online group membership, or, perhaps in a “blind catharsis” which could presumably take on the form of a rant; even so, the researchers maintain that participation in online support groups are an intervention with largely positive yet admittedly nonspecific psychological effects such as an overall sense of well-being, control, “personal empowerment and improved self-confidence” rather than measurable therapeutic changes (Barak et al., 2008, p. 1874).

Becker's (2013) thematic discourse analysis of the Better Choices, Better Health Chronic Pain Management online workshop discovered two clear response types: validation and encouragement. On validation, Becker claims that it was necessary “to affirm and assure users that others could relate to their experience” and consequently posted with the understanding that the release of private feelings will be “met with substantiation” (Becker, 2013, p. 124). She also observes that one post by a user would result in a string of responses from other workshop participants and created “a community of voices and once one person shared a difficult emotion it acted as a gate to signal it was safe for others to share their feelings, too” (Becker, 2013, p. 125). Coulson (2005) refers to these speech events as “socially supportive discourse” that within digitally-mediated groups “allows richer insight into the experiences and needs” of those

affected by various disease (p. 581). In his study of a digitally-mediated support network for individuals suffering from Irritable Bowel Syndrome, Coulson (2005) contends that while emotional support was “less evident than information support” with various replies, he reports numerous occasions in which users “acknowledged the feelings of others and validated them by reiterating their own similar views and experiences” (p.583).

In his recent review of extant literature in discourse and health communication, Jones (2015) acknowledges the years of work devoted to study of health narratives not only in the linguistics field, but also in anthropology and sociology. Digital narratives are prolific in online spaces as the average person can use them as “resources for self-styling” (Georgakapoulou, 2012, p. 694). While blogs may be considered an expected site to find such stories, forums and message boards are common sites for digital narratives. As early as the 1980s, academics such as Polkinghorne (1988) have referred to the “narrative turn” in the medical field and how patients use various linguistic resources to represent and interpret their experiences and identities as someone who is “sick” or experiencing pain from an ongoing illness (as cited in Jones, 2015, p. 849).

While not taking place on online forums, Bülow (2004) illustrates that sharing experiences often take on the form of narratives. By analyzing audiotaped therapy sessions for people suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome, the two of the three narrative types were communal in nature: orchestrated chained personal stories and co-narrated collectivized stories. Not unlike the replies to several of the narratives on Fat People Stories, participants “by taking active parts and collectivizing, create a common fund of experiences and knowledge about their illness” as well as “[reinforce] the feeling of belonging and legitimacy” (Bülow, 2004, p. 49, 48) Such findings are akin to the

empowerment and validation effects in the previously discussed studies by Barak et al. (2008) and De Choudhury and De (2014).

A more recent study by Wen, McTavish, Kreps, Wise, and Gustafson (2011) focuses on the themes that surfaced in one woman's stories about her breast cancer disease trajectory on an online discussion group. Although the generalizability of a single narrative case study is limited in that it may not accurately represent other women with a terminal breast cancer diagnosis, Wen et al.'s work is vital in that it contributes additional evidence of the effectiveness of online support groups. Additionally, the positive benefits extend not only to those who compose stories of coping with their illness, but also provides support and guidance for readers. The researchers also call for additional study of whether the digital medium “changes the way one copes with an illness and/or changes how other support group members perceive their own illness” (Wen et al., 2011, p. 356)

As the current study focuses on a Reddit community devoted to constructions of health and body image, it is worth revisiting De Choudhury and De's (2014) analysis of mental health discourse on the site as well as discussing an exciting new case study on a related subreddit, LoseIt (r/loseit). The notion of support on Internet discussion groups devoted to various illnesses and health issues is not new, yet De Choudhury and De (2014) explore the additional implications of *karma*—a Reddit defined unit of measure based on upvotes (positive feedback) and downvotes (negative feedback)—and the semantic categories of words such as first person pronouns, negative emotion, and lowered inhibition as predictive variables. Results indicate that both negative emotion (NA) and positive emotion (PA) in posts are “significant predictors of karma and

comment count” (De Choudhury and De, 2014, p. 76). However, the original post (OP) sacrifices a higher karma count by including more negative emotion, but invites more comments from other users. The inverse is true for greater amounts of positive emotion: posts receive greater karma, but fewer comments.

Additionally, the researchers address whether there are any observable differences in the linguistic attributes of those redditors who post with their main accounts versus those who use “throwaways”, or accounts that allow users to create an individual account without an email address. Of the 1, 209 throwaways subscribed to the community, 92% have authored at least one post while only 42% of the throwaways have contributed comments. De Choudhury and De (2014) speculate that the disparity speaks to the inherently sensitive or face threatening nature of sharing specific information about personal mental health struggles while providing support through commentary is less so. The theoretical implications are significant in that the findings demonstrate how “Reddit fills an interesting gap between online health forums, and social media and social networks like Twitter and Facebook” in mental health discourse by allowing those “challenged with a stigmatic health concern” a place to both provide and receive “emotional and prescriptive feedback” (De Choudhury & De, 2014, p. 78-79).

It is unsurprising, then, that according to recent studies, almost a quarter of those who turn to the Internet for medical advice have searched for information about how to lose weight (Pappa et al., 2017). As it is still not clear whether involvement in online weight loss communities impacts weight, a group of researchers at a Brazilian university conducted a four year analysis of the activity and semantic content of messages of active users on Reddit’s LoseIt (r/loseit) community. Although starting BMI and 30-day weight

changes were self-reported, the study indicates that 70% of active users lowered their BMI over a 10-week period. Like De Choudhury and De (2014), Pappa et al. (2017) also accounted for Reddit's upvoting feature by equating upvotes to positive support. Thus, a greater number of upvotes is associated with higher amounts of weight loss.

Additionally, the researchers analyzed the most frequently discussed topics in posts and comments. While a list of topics alone does not reveal the words used to describe the topics, qualitative analyses of message content allowed them to determine whether discussion of, for instance, self-esteem correlated to progress and confidence in the users' weight loss journeys.

Pappa et al. (2017) are wise to include a thorough discussion of the study's limitations such as a reliance on self-reported user data and the inability to evaluate how outside factors such as nutrition could have positively impacted users' weight loss. Still, previous studies of online weight loss support groups have focused on user-centered communities (such as Facebook which focuses on connections with friends) rather than sites like Reddit wherein users are connected to content, not people. Thus, the researchers were able to foreground the semantic content of posts and more accurately represent the interests of active users. Although the success of any health intervention relies on the motivation and involvement of the individual, rising health care costs coupled with the increasing prevalence of digital technologies could provide affordable options for obesity treatment and prevention. Moreover, the rate of obesity is rising in younger generations. Given that many young people are social media natives, they could be more receptive to digitally-mediated weight loss support. Strangely, Pappa et al. (2017) did not include age in the demographic data collected from active users—a data

point that could have proven useful in bolstering their discussion of those most likely to choose a digitally-mediated form of support on health issues.

2.4 Fat Studies and Digital Media

From a discourse analytic perspective, Jones (2015) notes that “considerable interest” has been devoted to “the discourse of health promotion texts, the construction of health and risk in the media, and the discursive negotiation of health and risk in everyday life” (p. 841). Of course, it is no secret that weight and body image remains a controversial topic in popular discourse as well as in a variety of academic disciplines. The latest research from the Centers of Disease Control indicates that in the United States, over one-third of adults are obese, and, although the prevalence of obesity has remained relatively stable among children and adolescents aged two to nineteen, 17% have a Body Mass Index (BMI) in the obese category (Ogden, Carroll, Fryar, & Flegal, n.d.) .

While it is true and unfair that many have been subjected to judgment and ridicule as a result of perceived unattractiveness in a variety of domains—from body weight, intellect, complexion, to accent—a group of individuals calling themselves Fat Activists have taken up arms against the “war on obesity”. As Wann (2009) proclaims in the foreword to the *Fat Studies Reader*:

[I]f you believe that fat people could (and should) lose weight, then you are not doing fat studies—you are part of the \$58.6 billion-per-year weight-loss industry or its vast customer base (Marketdata Enterprises, 2007). If you believe that being fat is a disease and that fat people cannot possibly enjoy good health or long life, then you are not doing fat studies. Instead, your approach is aligned with ‘obesity’ researchers, bariatric surgeons, public health officials who declare ‘war on obesity’ (Koop, 1997), and the medico-pharmaceutical industrial complex that profits from dangerous attempts to “cure” people of bodily difference (p. ix)

In this way, Fat Studies is touted not about health, but about social justice. The so-called “O-words”—overweight and obese—are often represented in “scare quotes...to indicate their compromised status”; to use the medically accepted terminology such as overweight and obese to describe the degree above a healthy weight proportionate to height is “inherently anti-fat” and perpetuates “weight prejudice” (Wann, 2009, p. xii).

Ogden (2015), a Professor in Health Psychology at the University of Surrey, muses that academics “like [her]” have been “complaining” about the use of dangerously thin models in the media as they can “lower self-esteem, encourage unhealthy levels of dieting, and even promote eating disorders” (n.p.). To refer to the “complexity and conflict around fat embodiment” in popular media discourse is an understatement (Cain, Donaghue, & Ditchburn, 2017, p. 170). In their analysis of current obesity discourse in the online media, Cain et al (2017) have noted that voices formerly relegated to the “fat-o-sphere” of fat and size acceptance blogs and forums have been able to join the discussion in mainstream media outlet despite how digital news media discourse in the form of “anti-fat ideology retains much of its taken-for-granted authority” and primarily forwards three discourses “simultaneously: concern regarding ‘obesity’ and fatness; identification of the responsible culprits; and counsel regarding what should be done with a ‘problem like obesity’” (p. 171, 184). Even so, Cain et al. (2017) also maintain that critical discourse condemning “fat shaming” is a dominant element of popular media discourse surrounding weight.

Just as Ogden (2015) and other like-minded academics have criticized the use of underweight models and slim-embodiment as the ideal of femininity, Lupton (2017) acknowledges that “the emaciated self-starving female body has largely disappeared from

news reporting and women's magazines, to be replaced by the spectacle of the fleshy fat body as a figure of extreme embodiment" (p. 120). Regardless, Tess Holliday, known as the world's "first" plus-size supermodel at a US size 24, embraces major magazine covers and advertising campaigns for major clothing retailers such as H&M and Torrid—all while garnering praise in the form of hashtags like #effyourbeautystandards ("eff your beauty standards") and inciting ire alike. In a think piece for *The Boston Globe*, Cathy Young (2013) notes:

Our culture is prone to unhealthy extremes on many issues, including weight. Unrealistic ideals of bodily perfection certainly exist, and cause many, especially women and girls, to harm themselves through fad diets or obsessive exercise. The message that beauty and health come in different shapes and sizes is a positive one in moderation. But fat acceptance is no improvement on the thinness cult. It's hardly good that one in four overweight Americans think their weight is normal, or that most underestimate obesity's health hazards (para. 3).

Without question, the subjects of weight and body image are contentious and have inspired particularly fervent discussion of late. Continued development in digitally-mediated communication has provided more people more opportunities to "engage in resistant or activist responses to negative portrayals of their bodies" (Lupton, 2017, p. 120).

2.5 The digital field site: Reddit and r/FatPeopleStories

One such space where humans play with language to vent is Reddit (stylized as reddit), a social news and content aggregation site that combines elements of message boards and forums with no predetermined topic of discussion or categories aside from what users themselves contribute. A national survey also determined that 6% of all online adults are Reddit users, a number that rises to 15% among males aged 18-29

(Duggan & Smith, 2013). These Reddit users, or *Redditors*, create original content or submit links to existing content, and other Redditors vote on submissions that are ranked according to the total of votes. In this way, such sites “provide a type of web democracy” where users may only vote once for any given post or comment and provides users a choice of what to consume rather than what major media conglomerates decide to post (Fiegerman, 2014; Finlay, 2014). As Finlay (2014) further explains, the “net ratio of upvotes minus downvotes” that is displayed next to a post or comment is a “score”, and that score is “automatically assigned to a user’s profile as that user’s ‘karma’” with a high karma score perceived as a status symbol within the Reddit community (p. 20). Should a Redditor wish to award another user at an even greater level, that Redditor may elect to purchase and gift “reddit gold” (Anderson, 2015).

Submitted content is organized into smaller areas of interest known as *subreddits*, and any Redditor can create or moderate these “custom” Reddit groups (Weninger, 2014). It is not required to join Reddit to view posts, but in order to comment or contribute, membership is required (Finlay, 2014). Redditors can also subscribe to various subreddits so that they view top posts on the most active subreddits to which they subscribe to create a personalized front page or “Daily Me” upon sign-in (Mills & Fish, 2015). Every subreddit hosts its own unique community “with a distinct sub-culture, a social scientist’s dream” (Anderson, 2015, p. 9). While most subreddits have their own posting and commenting guidelines, Reddit is governed overall by the rules of *reddiquette*, or “Reddit etiquette” which are “created, followed, and self-enforced (with the help of official moderators) by the community (Sanderson & Rigby, 2013, p. 519). Arranged in a list of “Please do’s/Please don’ts”, the first two rules of reddiquette are to

“[r]emember the human” and to “[a]dhere to the same standards of behavior online that you follow in real life” (“reddiquette,” 2017). Those who violate the standards of reddiquette are swiftly called out and corrected via downvotes and reporting the guilty parties to moderators; thus a sense of community exists on Reddit that is unparalleled on an already unique site that privileges content over social connections (Anderson, 2015; Sanderson & Rigby, 2013; Tsou, 2016).

Reddit is also known as a “fierce defender of rights, from free speech to net neutrality” and was the first site to suggest a blackout to protest the Internet censorship bills Stop Online Privacy Act (SOPA) and The Protect IP Act (PIPA) (Anderson, 2015, p. 9). If a subreddit gains a high number of subscribers, “it can become part of the default homepage” or even become a front page default—subreddits to which new Redditors are subscribed automatically—“thus driving additional traffic and subscribers” (Silverman, 2012, para. 14). Given the existence of default subreddits with large readerships, “awareness of SOPA could permeate Reddit” with great speed (Mills & Fish, 2015, p. 238). As Reddit administrators rarely interfere or step in to censor content, such an “open forum” policy has allowed Reddit to live up to its slogan as “the front page of the Internet” and, in many cases, items that are popular on Reddit become viral and are posted on other social media sites or appear on the news (Ovadia, 2015).

Ovadia (2015) wisely notes that that “[o]ne of the drawbacks of anyone being able to create a subreddit is that anyone can create a subreddit” (p. 39). However, this hands-off policy also lends itself to the formation of what Massanari (2015) calls “toxic technocultures”(p. 330). Fiegerman (2014) indicates that in 2011, Anderson Cooper 360 exposed the subreddit Jailbait that featured provocative photos of teens and in late 2014,

the leaked nude photos of various celebrities led to the creation of the subreddit named after a term for masturbation, The Fappening. Despite former CEO Yishan Wong's insistence that they would "not ban distasteful subreddits", Reddit banned both communities (Fiegerman, 2014).

In the summer of 2015, further controversy erupted over the banning of five popular subreddits, the most popular of which was Fat People Hate (r/FatPeopleHate). A community that, in its own words, harbored "NO FAT SYMPATHY", Fat People Hate was known for lifting pictures from overweight and obese people's social media sites and posting them in threads for users to ridicule (Dewey, 2015). Despite the banning of these outrageously offensive subreddits, other controversial communities such as White Rights and Misogyny remain under the site's "ban behavior, not ideas" stance (Thielman, 2015). As Alang (2015) asserts in his piece in *The New Republic*, "without limits, such noble-sounding ideals invite chaos and hatred to bloom" (para. 3). For many, however, the voicing of unpopular opinions is often likened to hatred, especially when the ideas seem to attack a common site of vulnerability for many: weight and body image.

On a larger scale, "Reddit's intriguing atmosphere — one that encompasses the alarming, the serious, and the superficial — has several facets that have been largely unexplored in scholarship" (Kilgo et al., 2016, para. 6). Thus, Fat People Stories is indeed a "social scientist's dream" for exploring how members of this community use venting to discursively construct notions of health and body weight and how it operates within what Lunt and Stenner (2005) refer to as an "emotional public sphere" (Anderson, 2015, p. 9; as cited in Lange, 2014, p. 57).

2.6 Research Questions

Against the theoretical backdrop and context discussed in the previous section, this study seeks to answer the following:

Research Question 1:

What constitutes the genre of *venting*? How is it similar to or different from *ranting*?

Research Question 2:

What functions does venting serve within the Fat People Stories subreddit?

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

3.1 Research Design

To forward a description and definition of the *venting* genre, the present study adopts a mixed-methods approach and combines both corpus and genre-based methodologies. As venting remains largely unstudied or conflated with ranting in the literature to date, a mixed-methods approach can provide “a more complete understanding” of the research questions and potentially reduces the limitations inherent in both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). Creswell (2014) also notes that integrating both qualitative and quantitative data forms allows the researcher to compare different perspectives, such as including interview data from study participants to understand and corroborate experimental findings or to support quantitative results with open-ended data collection and analysis.

From a linguistic perspective, Stubbs (2001) explains that because of contributions by Austin (1962)—namely, the claim that people “do things” with words—language is widely regarded as “inseparable” from social action (p. 12). Thus, a considerable number of linguistic studies take on a solely qualitative approach, which, as Lazaraton (2003) relates, is met with “some degree of fractiousness” as quantitative studies are deemed “‘objective,’ ‘replicable,’ and ‘generalizable’” (p. 2). Regardless, researchers such as Denzin and Lincoln (2000) assert that qualitative research “is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” and “consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” and requires an “interpretative, naturalistic approach” (as cited in Lazaraton, 2003, p. 2).

It is this researcher's position that language and social action are tightly intertwined and in this way, the study is a convergent parallel mixed methods design: I collected both qualitative (genre analysis and ethnography) and quantitative data (calculation of lexical frequency via construction of a corpus). Certainly, focus on the lexico-grammatical patternings carried out at the sentence level alone is not sufficient to capture the communicative purpose of a given genre and authentically describe language in use. Flowerdew (2005) relates that a significant criticism levied against corpus-based studies is that concordancing software restricts analysis to a "somewhat atomized, bottom-up type of investigation of corpus data" alone wherein the focus tends to ignore socio-cultural context (p. 324). According to Swales (2002), such an analysis opposes a "more top—down kind of process-based analysis common to the genre approach" wherein the researcher begins with the "macrostructure of the text with a focus on larger units" (as cited in Flowerdew, 2005, p. 324). It is therefore necessary to evaluate a sizeable sample of textual data to justify observed linguistic patterns and rhetorical strategies as indicative of its own class of communicative events or genre.

Stubbs (2001) shares that the increasing availability of corpus data via the Internet presents both considerable benefits as well as challenges. When it comes to message boards and forums, Claridge (2007) asserts that they differ from other forms of DMC because of their inherently polylogic and "completely public" nature: chat sessions or emails are exchanged between small groups or, at the most, hundreds or thousands of participants within a specialized community and are "not meant for or accessible to the public at large" (p. 88). Conversely, forums can be accessed by anyone at any time—conversations that took place on an online forum are preserved indefinitely. Thus,

Marcoccia (2004) has declared forums to be a combination of interpersonal and mass communication. However, scholars such as Zimmer (2010) and Marwick and boyd (2011) have since problematized the supposed “completely public nature” of online discourse: posting online does not—and should not—mean that participants do not expect privacy (Claridge, 2007, p. 88.) Consequently, it is imperative for researchers to uphold ethical standards for issues such as informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, and data anonymization.

Imagine, then, the thorny matter of creating a corpus for linguistic study: although readily accessible by search-engine, message boards and forums “are not searchable text in the corpus-linguistic sense” and therefore must be “transformed in some way in order to be analyzable as a normal off-line corpus” (Claridge, 2007, p. 89). As Smarr and Grow (2002) have observed, search engines such as Google are designed for novice users seeking information or casual web surfers and are thus not attuned to the needs of linguists seeking to, for instance, annotate text with part-of-speech tags or analyze the collocation of words and phrases. Although the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the British National Corpus (BNC) have certainly made online access to millions of words from a variety of texts and genres available for linguistic inquiry, they do not capture the seemingly infinite examples of language in action that transpire in the comment sections of video-sharing websites or conversations on the walls of users’ social media profiles, both of which are just some of the ways humans communicate via Web 2.0 technologies. In fairness, neither the COCA or BNC are meant to capture such exchanges; as a result, many linguists manually construct their own corpora through processes that can be cumbersome and labor-intensive. To that end,

Claridge (2007) has called for the creation of a corpus of forum language and argues that forums represent a unique text type with variation that “makes it necessary to have more than ad-hoc forum corpora for isolated studies” (p. 100).

3.2 Data Collection

The present study is, indeed, isolated in that academic inquiry into both the digital field site (Reddit) and the topic of venting itself are still relatively—if not entirely—non-existent in the field of linguistics. Regardless, advancements in corpus creation and management as well as programming languages have made the process of constructing a corpus from message board text more efficient. To address both research questions, I selected ten posts from the Fat People Stories subreddit. The process involved a combination of random selection and the use of the subreddit’s search function to discover posts in which commenters explicitly utilize the term “vent” or “venting”. In order to select a random post from any subreddit, users can enter the following URL: <http://www.reddit.com/r/nameofsubreddit/random>. Any posts collected through random selection must have had at least 30 comments and a 90% or greater rate of upvotes. Eight posts were collected in this manner:

- “Drama at the Starbeetus”
- “Chronicles of my Junior High Nightmare, TheBeast. Part I”
- “Chronicles of my Junior High Nightmare, TheBeast. Part II”
- “Test Drive From Ham Planet Hell”
- “I miss being fat sometimes...”
- “The Caterham Tales XXVI- Love Me Tinder”
- “Wife is going to make it, guys”

- “WheelHam and her ‘friend’ SabotageHam”

Following the same criteria for rate of upvotes and number of comments, two posts — “The Twilard Saga: Life is Like a Box of Chocolates (SO PIG OUT)” and “Thin Privilege is being able to wear a shirt without getting judged”—were selected by utilizing Reddit’s search function which allows users the ability to either search all of the site or to limit the search to the current subreddit. Users can further filter results by specifying the age of the posts (such as “all time” “past hour”, “past 24 hours”, “past week”, “past month”, and “past year”) as well as through additional parameters such as “relevance”, “top”, and “new”. To capture posts in which users engage in metalinguistic discourse about their contributions by specifically identifying them as venting, I entered the term “vent” in the site’s search field and limited results to the Fat People Stories subreddit. This approach yielded 133 results when sorted by “all time” and for “relevance”. To select from more recent submissions, I limited the search to posts from the past year only. From these results, I opened each post and isolated the instances of the term “vent” using my browser’s find function to eliminate cases where “vent” is used as a noun to refer to an opening or outlet for the release of physical substances.

As Claridge (2007) specifies, contributions from message boards and forums must be altered to allow for close linguistic analysis. For this purpose, I used Sketch Engine, a corpus manager and analysis software that, among many other features, allows researchers to use the corpus-building tool WebBootCaT to create their own customized corpora without downloading or installing a separate program. Upon entering the URL for each post, WebBootCaT creates the corpus by downloading the data and then

eliminating duplicated text, spam text, or non-text elements. The compiled corpus of posts and comments contains a total of 45,867 words. The average original post length is 1,561. “Chronicles of My Junior High Nightmare, TheBeast. Part II” is the lengthiest post at 4,998 words and the shortest post at 347 words is “Thin Privilege is being able to wear a shirt without being judged”. The average number of comments per post is 91.5 with “The Caterham Tales XXVI- Love Me Tinder” and “Chronicles of My Junior High Nightmare, TheBeast. Part I” garnering the most and least comments at 281 and 39, respectively.

In order to address Research Question 2 as well as to place the texts in their situational contexts, I created an electronic survey with a variety of multiple choice and constructed response questions regarding users’ perspectives on the function or mission of the community, their motivations for visiting and/or contributing to the community, how norms are established, and whether they discuss the topics explored on the subreddit in face-to-face conversations. Whereas some scholars such as Hine (2000) and Androutsopoulos (2006) recommend digital ethnographic methods such as ““deep looking”” in online environments or ““guerilla”” ethnography, I made the decision to communicate directly with the members of the community in hopes of securing a greater response rate on my survey. While I am a Redditor, I have only subscribed to Fat People Stories under the account created for this study and to conduct virtual ethnography: I have neither contributed nor commented on any posts in the community with the exception of the post notifying members of the survey and to respond to any questions. To that end, I have taken on the role of a lurker—one who, as Hine (2000) explains, “reads messages posed to a public forum such as a newsgroup but does not respond to the

group” (as cited in Lenihan, 2011, p. 55). I share Lenihan’s (2011) interests “in knowing what the internet has come to mean as both a cultural space and as a cultural artifact” and how communities such as Fat People Stories use venting to discursively construct notions of health and body image as well as to challenge extant discourses on the same subjects (p. 50).

Prior to posting a link to the survey, I created a new Reddit account separate from my existing personal account and sent a message via Reddit’s direct messaging system to the subreddit’s moderators. Permission was granted with the stipulation that I post the survey on a Monday and tag, or categorize, it as “meta”. Many subreddits aside from Fat People Stories host a “Meta Monday” post in which members contribute discussion outside of the usual scope of the subreddit, usually to reflect on the state of the community. On the designated day, I contributed a text post in which I explained the topic of my research and goal of the present study. In accordance with Internal Research Board guidelines, users who elected to participate were first required to read a consent form and indicate whether they were 18 years of age or older—the only exclusion criterion for the study. The survey was open for responses for a period of eight days. After eliminating surveys from those who gave consent but neglected to answer any of the items, I collected a total of 242 eligible responses. Aside from age and gender, no other identifying information—including IP addresses—was collected. Participants could elect not to answer any of the items in the survey. For gender, only five respondents elected to skip the question. An overwhelming majority of total participants identified as female: 68.78%. Only 31.22% of the respondents were male. While

respondents represented a variety of life stages, 43.57% indicated that they are between the ages of 21 and 29.

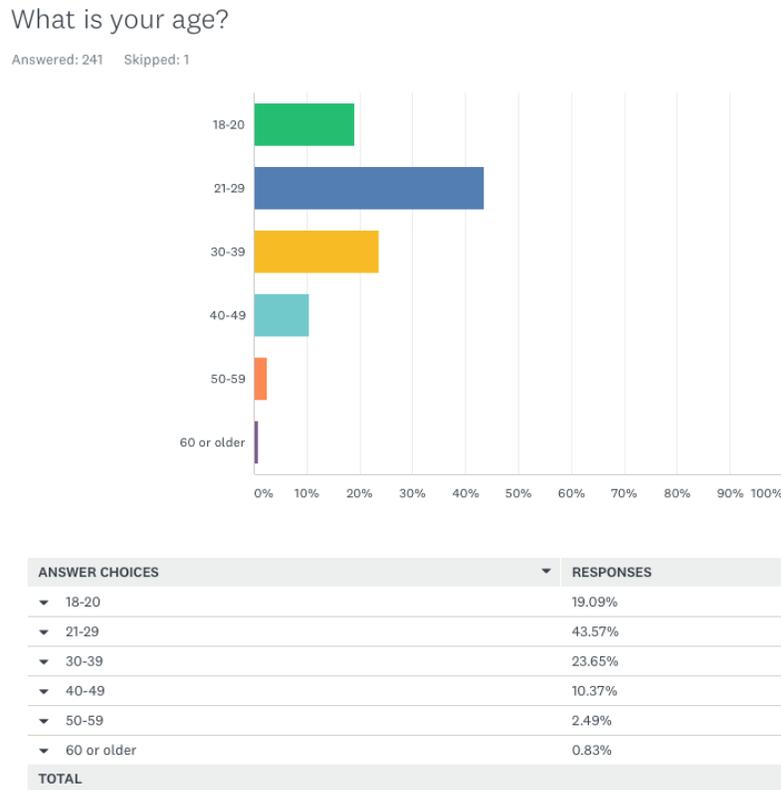


Figure 1. Percentage of survey respondents from each age group.

In order to place texts in their situational contexts, ethnographic data in the form of interviews was also collected. I messaged the moderators via Reddit's direct messaging system to ask if they would be willing to respond to questions regarding their perspectives on the function or mission of the community, how norms are established, and whether they discuss the topics explored on the subreddit in face-to-face conversations.



Figure 2. Message to FPS moderators

Two moderators consented to be interviewed. Other questions posted were designed to solicit their own metalinguistic practices and general participation on the subreddit. Additionally, I interviewed the creator of one post, “Drama at the Starbeetus”, in order to gather insight regarding their purpose for composing the submission as well as their perspective regarding the linguistic practices and functions of the Fat People Stories subreddit.

Conducted via Reddit’s direct messaging and “mod mail” system, the interviews were entirely text-based. No option was provided to use synchronous chat systems or other contact methods outside of Reddit. As participants are only identified by self-chosen electronic usernames that do not coincide with legal names, identification of the participants in both the interviews and surveys is not likely. Regardless, only the usernames of the two moderators and the creator of “Drama at the Starbeetus” are included in this study. For any excerpts from the analytical corpus reproduced in the analysis, no usernames are provided. Any images of various features of the subreddit are also edited to remove the names of other participants in the Fat People Stories subreddit.

3.3 Theoretical Framework

To address both research question 1 and 2 alike, I chose Inger Askehave and Anne Ellerup Nielsen's (2005) two-dimensional model for analyzing digital genres wherein the researchers adapt Swales' (1990) seminal model for genre analysis, Bhatia's (1993) framework for analyzing non-literary genres, and Finnemann's (1999) hypertextual mode to account for unique properties of the World Wide Web that influence text production and reception:

While these genre studies offer important insights into the notion of genre, it is also a well-known fact that the theoretical discussions and the practical genre analyses tend to focus on genres transmitted through speech or print whereas little has been done to use the genre model on genres transmitted through one of the most significant digital media of today: the World Wide Web.

The researchers discuss two media properties—"multi-medianess" and Sosnoki's (1995) concept of "hypertext/hyper-reading"—that shape the nature of web-mediated texts. One primary affordance of web-text production is the ability to combine text, images, sound, and animations to create a "'text' (a screen page) which has more in common with a television/video screen than with a text in its traditional sense"; as a result, users can read a text, listen to a song or broadcast, or watch a video—all of which "promote the tabular and non-sequential reading process of web text" (p. 13). By combining, Swales', Bhatia's, and Finneman's framework, Askehave and Nielsen "'upgrade' the genre model" by allowing analysts to account for how users shift between reading and navigating mode and consider how both are "present simultaneously in the production and consumption of web documents and their functional realizations" (p. 48).

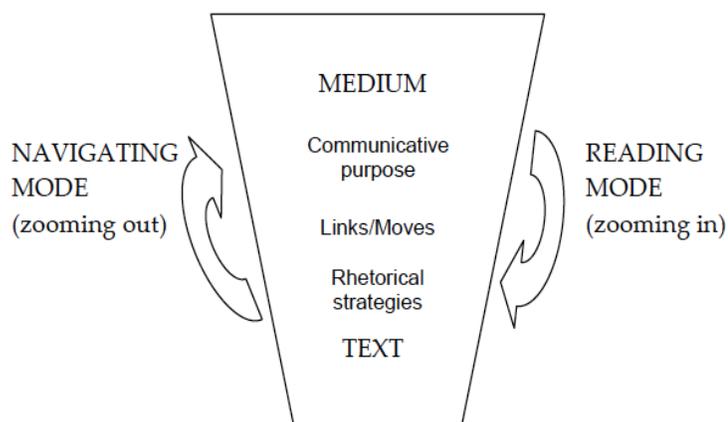


Figure 3. Askehave and Nielsen's (2005) two-dimensional genre model

Along these same lines, the analytical corpus of Fat People Stories posts and comments is examined through this lens while more closely considering how various move structures and rhetorical strategies constitute the genre of venting and, more specifically, the communicative purpose of this genre in the Fat People Stories Community.

To supplement Askehave and Nielsen's (2005) two-dimensional model, I also conduct a discourse analysis of the individual texts in the corpus with Bax's (2011) heuristic for discourse analysis in mind:

- I. The analyst first considers the texts in context, so as to identify their impact or effect in broad terms: What do the texts achieve (or not) or aim to achieve?" (p. 98)
- II. "How do the texts achieve their impact or function?" (p. 99)
- III. "Why do the texts seek to do this? What are the socio-political and ideological underpinnings of the text? What do the texts seek to foreground

and why? What do the texts seek to obscure or ‘background’ and why?” (p. 100).

Therefore, the subsequent analysis is two-fold: I will describe the communicative purpose, moves, and strategies that constitute venting as well as how it unfolds in interaction on the Fat People Stories subreddit.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS—RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The subsequent analysis and discussion in this chapter is divided into two sections that coincide with the two aims of this study: describing venting as opposed to ranting (4.1) and analyzing what functions venting serves in the Fat People Stories community (4.2). The first section, Venting as genre, applies Askehave and Nielsen's (2005) two-dimensional genre model by describing the communicative purpose of venting as well as the requisite moves and rhetorical strategies as realized in both the navigating mode and reading mode. Once the genre is described, the second section analyzes the functions of venting in the Fat People Stories (henceforth, FPS) subreddit.

4.1 Venting as genre

In their own analysis of the homepage using their two-dimensional genre model, Askehave and Nielsen (2005) choose to present the various features in a linear presentation, a form in which the researchers themselves claim “does not do justice” to their view of “web-mediated genres as dynamic documents” (p. 18). Regardless, given the constraints of one-dimensional, text-based genres such as an academic paper and a thesis respectively, I will adopt a similar structure for the analysis of venting as genre. Each section contains a summary of defining features with examples from the analytical corpus:

1 Analysis of “communicative purposes”

I will first describe the communicative purpose of venting in the navigating mode—an analysis that therefore considers the purpose of venting on a discussion forum as a medium. Next, I will describe the communicative purpose of venting in the reading mode, or, in this case, how venting functions as a text genre. Just as Askehave and

Nielsen (2005) note, this portion of the analysis “ignores the fact that the text is distributed through the web medium” and focuses on the characteristics of the genre as a one-dimensional text (p. 18).

2 Analysis of the “functional units”, “moves”, and rhetorical strategies of venting

Here, I will first describe how venting realizes its communicative purposes in navigating mode which includes the affordances of linked comment threads, nested comments, and up/downvoting in online discussion forums such as Reddit. Next, I will describe the moves of venting in the reading mode. In this way, this portion of the analysis resembles the approach to “printed” texts in traditional genre models (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005, p.18). Not only does the communicative purpose of a genre dictate a particular structure of functional units and moves, but so also are rhetorical strategies “used to realise a a particular communicative intention”; because there is usually “no one-to-one correlation between a particular move and the verbal and non-verbal strategies used to instantiate a move”, rhetorical strategies will be discussed when relevant to the purpose of a given functional unit or move (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005, p. 6).

4.1.1 Analysis of “communicative purposes”

Given that web-mediated genres must account for their unique ability to perform a communicative function in both the navigating and reading mode, I must first “account for the communicative purpose of web documents in both modes when making a genre analysis” (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005, p. 19). As Askehave and Nielsen (2005) further claim, all web documents in navigating mode are inherently designed to provide a means for users to choose their own reading path and to access various pages within a single site—or to reach a different site altogether. Whereas any home or landing page is

designed to serve as an overview of the contents of the entire site, a forum that tends to host contributions that can be classified as venting often presents a selection of topics that transcends the need to merely navigate to a home page or access other general categories of content. With venting, participants expect a site that satisfies both the “immediate information need of the reader” and the desire to join with other readers with similar interests and concerns (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005, p. 20). In this way, venting in digitally-mediated contexts seems to satisfy both the desire for connection, information, and access simultaneously. With message boards and websites alike, a *banner image* is the first impression of a group’s brand or identity. Sites such as Reddit also possess the additional affordance of a *sidebar*—a place for forum moderators to provide a description of the community, to link to related subreddits or websites, and to list any specific rules for posting.

In the case of online message boards and fora (and virtually any homepage or web-based document), “the hypertext system” allows users to click on links on the home or landing page to access various boards dedicated to a single topic for discussion (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005, p. 21). Users can then choose from a variety of active links that are titled to coincide with the contents therein. Once users click on a link, they are transported to an original post (OP) and the ensuing comment sections—or replies—to the OP. Alternatively, users may elect to click on a link that allows them to compose and contribute an original post to the forum. Regardless of whether a user chooses to compose an original post, offer a reply, or simply read the interaction, a participant chooses such a medium to join with other users who share similar perspectives or struggles regarding a given topic or situation. In this way, the titles of threads that also act

as links to a larger discussion detail the communicative function of venting in both the reading and navigating mode:

- To provide access for both contributing and receiving content that details experiences related to users' concerns or frustrations on particular issues or topics

Whereas venting in face-to-face contexts tends to rely upon some kind of previously established relationship between participants, Internet users need only turn to a search engine to discover communities related to a certain issue and therefore “connect” with others with but a few keystrokes and a click of a mouse. As most websites and web-based documents “play more than a purely informative role”, Askehave and Nielsen (2005) identify “image creation/consolidation” as a secondary purpose of homepages (p. 20).

4.1.2 Analysis of the “functional units” and “moves” of venting

I now turn to how venting realizes its communicative purposes. As noted in the previous section, the communicative purpose of venting in both the navigating and reading mode tend to operate simultaneously; however, it is important to note that since I am describing venting in digitally-mediated contexts, the “functional ‘chunks’” must be identified separately by mode (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005, p.22). Additionally, it is erroneous to use the same term—*moves*—to discuss the “functional staging structure” in both modes; the notion of a “move structure...indicates a preferred way of organizing the *text* [emphasis added]” and is “most notably obtained by creating a sequence of moves through which to go when writing and later reading the text” (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005, p. 22, 24). Because web-mediated genres employ a seemingly limitless array of resources and strategies that defy the notions of “linearity” and sequence, I concur with

Askehave and Nielsen (2005) when they claim that a “conventional” move structure for a digitally-mediated genre such as a homepage “is not particularly relevant” (p. 24). If the communicative purpose of venting online is to provide a means to both receive and possibly contribute accounts that express negative emotions about a given situation, then such access is realized by *hyperlinks* that “tie together the text chunks” rather than moves (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005, p. 25). Hyperlinks can be defined as interactive or clickable objects that allow a user to navigate to different locations within a single site or to a different website entirely. Rather than focus solely on how links are thought only to serve utilitarian functions, such as organizing the sequence of documents on a website, Askehave and Nielsen emphasize how links create relationships:

However, our notion of the functional value of links is concerned with the relationship established between the two chunks of information being connected; i.e. what is text B (the textual point of destination) doing in relation to text A (the textual point of entry)? Links do more than simply guide the navigator from one place to another. Links add meaning to the chunks of information which they connect, as they postulate a relationship between the two information units connected by the link (p. 25).

In the case of the venting genre as realized on a message board or forum such as Reddit, the titles of original posts serve as specific links according to Askehave and Nielsen’s (2005) functional typology of links. Rather than simply function as a point of departure or a “table of contents”, post titles are formatted so that they “[invoke] curiosity” in the user and therefore “invite” them to serve as a participant in venting; such specific links are “thematically contextualized” and are “usually introduced by ‘leads’” which explain the relevance of the link and which, together with the link itself, constitute the first macro-proposition in a particular text type sequence” (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005, pp. 32, 33).

As expected in a forum named Fat People Stories, specific links can be further classified into narrative and dialogical functions. Narratives are usually comprised of some or all of the following “stages or slots” as described by Bax (2011): abstract, setting or orientation, disruption or complicating action, recognition of disruption, attempt at resolution, result of resolution, evaluation, and coda (p. 76). While the links as post titles are not the narratives themselves, they are the “Text A” or “orientation” in Askehave and Nielsen’s typology wherein the links “[introduce] the navigator to the story and the link transfers [them] to the story itself” (p. 38). Consider also that post titles are designed to entice users to read the story—or “Text B”—and thus become a participant in venting.

On the FPS subreddit, the post title links can be further categorized by the narrative stage utilized to attract readers and fellow venters alike:

Narrative stage reflected in post title links	Setting/ Orientation	Disruption/ complicating action	Recognition of disruption	Evaluation
Post title links	“The Caterham Tales XXVI- Love Me Tinder”	“Drama at the Starbeetus” “Test Drive From Ham Planet Hell” “WheelHam and her ‘friend’ SabotageHam”	“Chronicles of my Junior High Nightmare, The Beast. Part I” and “Part II” “The Twilard Saga: Life is Like a Box of Chocolates (SO PIG OUT)” “I miss being fat sometimes...”	“Wife is going to make it, guys” “Thin Privilege is being able to wear a shirt without getting judged”

Figure 4. Classification of post title links on FPS by narrative stage

Appropriately, the narrative stage most widely represented by post titles alone suggests venting in that they are largely associated with conflict—the challenge or problem that characters must overcome to accomplish a goal. For instance, to describe an event as something “from hell” indexes an abysmal or wretched person, experience, or state of affairs that would warrant the need to release negative emotions to a sympathetic audience. Titles including the terms “saga” and “chronicles”—three out of ten texts in the analytical corpus—also indicate that in some cases, more than one episode of venting is required due to repeated encounters with an offending party or a difficult situation taking place over an extended period of time in the venter’s life.

Once a user clicks on a post title link (“Text A”), they are then transported to the full narrative itself (“Text B”). At this point, specific links take on a dialogical function—a foundational characteristic of venting in both web-mediated and face-to-face contexts alike. Whereas ranting can invite audiences who can choose to validate the artfulness of the ranter’s invective and rhetorical flair, this genre is innately monologic with the communicative purpose of individual identity construction and establishing social distance (Vrooman, 2002). Plainly stated, venting is not venting without a dialogue in which participants may provide empathy, validation, or any range of responses. Venting must have uptake and, in so doing, forge a community—even if the community lasts only as long as the interaction or venting session itself.

Upon arrival to “Text B” or the full-length narrative, users have the option to become participants in venting by typing a response in the comment box below. On FPS, a participant need not click a link to open the space to compose a reply: it is automatically

available for input. Once a participant has typed a reply in the comment box, they click on a link—now realized graphically as a button—that reads “save”:



Figure 5. Comment box appearing below a full-length narrative post

In this way, the full-length narrative is not a monologue, but rather, it is the initiating move in an interaction. Posting in the comment box, however, assumes that participants only have the option to reply directly to the full-length narrative or initiating move. Participants may elect to respond to an array of replies in nested comment threads. A comment with replies becomes a *parent* to subsequent replies called *children* as the original comment is what “spawned” the replies. To take a turn in the interaction by replying to either a parent or child comment, a participant clicks on a link unsurprisingly labeled “reply”:

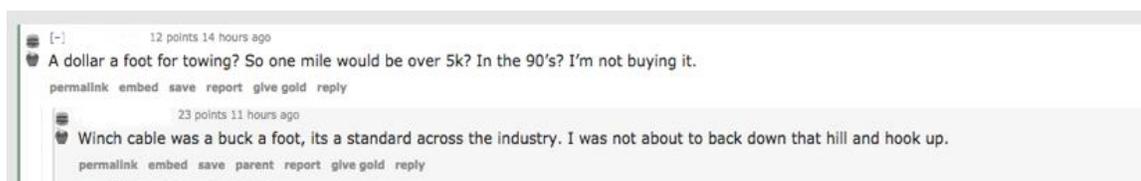


Figure 6. Specific links in interaction via replies to parent and child comments

While the example above is arranged into a neatly nested adjacency pair, replies to the initiation move in a venting session can be some distance away in the interaction.

Presumably, participants can respond to other replies not directly correlated to the full-length narrative of the original post or initiation move. Turns or replies in the interaction can therefore manifest as both *insertion sequences* and *side sequences*. Similarly, Bax (2011) acknowledges that “since adjacency pairs occur in writing as well as in speech...there might be a considerable time lag in the answers” (p. 83). Such is the case with venting in a digitally-mediated context: it is both written and often asynchronous. It is important to note, then, that the uptake and ensuing community formation need not be immediate to be considered venting.

Like the save button that must be clicked to post a comment and hence take a turn in the interaction, participants can also provide responses that are not linguistic but still index evaluation: on FPS and Reddit as a whole, participants can up or downvote both original posts and ensuing parent/child comments. On some subreddits, up/down voting are represented as symbolic icons appearing as up and down arrows respectively; subreddits such as FPS can also choose to stylize up/down vote icons to coincide with the subreddit’s image and goals. The concept of evaluation also bears on venting in the reading mode with regard to Page, Harper, and Frobenius’s (2013) notion of networked narratives—a move more closely described in the next section. On the whole, specific links with a dialogical function are, in essence, responsible for the venting genre in a digitally-mediated context. Without them, the interaction required for venting to be classified as such would not exist.

Within the context of message boards and fora, the analysis of the moves of venting in reading mode is akin to that of traditional texts. As Bax (2011) relates, moves within a given genre are, in essence, discourse modes. They differ from genres because “they do not have a specific social function in themselves; instead they are building blocks which we can draw on in many different genres and then use in actual texts in flexible ways for a range of purposes” (p. 63). Although the venting genre relies upon uptake and dialogue, there must be an event or problem to which participants can respond. To relay this information, venters rely primarily upon the narrating discourse mode to comprise the opening move. As narration may be an obvious feature for a subreddit such as FPS, venting observed in other contexts also take on the same move structure. Whether behind a computer monitor or in line at a coffee shop, storytelling happens among humans. Modern social-scientific thought has long held that “the essence of humanness” itself is “described as the tendency to tell stories, to make sense of the world through narrative” and is therefore “embedded in and constitutive of more durable, replicable sociocultural practices” (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015, p. 152).

In this way, the use of narrative in the venting genre is interactionally oriented and is the vehicle by which the venter presents the unfavorable set of events or conditions that have caused them to experience negative emotions that must be shared. Certainly, the narratives fulfill various combinations of the eight stages or slots for narratives as described by Bax (2011), but unique to narratives employed in venting are the use of various participation frameworks—particularly how they are “introduced, closed, and generally tailored to the context of talk and its participants” (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015, p. 156). All of the texts in the analytical corpus illustrate the great care with which the

venters anticipate and invite response from other users in the opening and closing of the posts. Below is a sampling of this observed feature of narration in the venting genre:

Post	Opening	Closing
“Chronicles of My Junior High Nightmare, The Beast. Part 1”	“Hi, FPS, using my actual account, [sic] I’ve lost the will to give a fuck to whoever sees. This is a story I’ve wanted to re-tell for a while on here...”	“Next I will talk about P.E. class and some of TheBeast’s more disgusting habits...Until then peace my internet friends.”
“The Twilard Saga...”	“Hello everyone! So, yesterday evening...”	“But I have a feeling this is not yet over.”
“Thin Privilege is being able to wear a shirt...”	“Hi. I’m a long time lurker, but this just happened to me today and I’m pissed, so I created a throwaway. Typing on a phone right now so no green text. I need to vent.”	“I’ve never experienced firsthand fat logic before. It was as if life had created this particular woman for the sole purpose of letting me post it on FPS later. However, regardless of who she was, she had no right to talk to me like that, and I’m just really, really mad right now.”
“Wife is going to make it, guys”	“My wife is fat, guys. Possesses some fatlogic around trauma and her leg/foot conditions, but knows what she should do, isn’t entitled, tries not to take up all the space in places like hams do.”	<i>Not observed</i>
“I miss being fat sometimes...”	“Ok, first of all, hello to you, people of Reddit!! [sic] I’ve frequented this site for years, but this is my first (and likely last) post. I’m not even sure if this is the right subreddit for this story, but I was unable to find a more fitting place for it.	“On that note, cue the cheesy, inspirational quote... ‘People will only ever rain on your parade because they are jealous of your shine and tired of their shade’.”

Figure 7. Table of interactional openings and closings of narratives in venting

Each post in the above table formats the opening of the narrative as a greeting to potential participants or the subreddit as a whole (e.g., “Hi, FPS”; “[H]ello to you, people of

Reddit!![sic]”) or by including some form of direct address (“My wife is fat, *guys* [emphasis added]). While closings can also include some form of direct address to participants—such as the closing for “Chronicles of my Junior High Nightmare”—the majority contain some form of a cliffhanger designed to elicit a reaction from participants. In some cases, especially those posts that are intended to be a part of a series, the cliffhanger is overt and explicitly notes the continuation of the narrative at some future point in time (e.g. “Next I will talk about...”; “Until next time...”). In others, suspense is crafted through more subtle means, such as the closing of “The Twilard Saga” post: “But I have a feeling that this is not yet over”. A “saga” is a lengthy story involving multiple accounts or a series of events. In this post, the venter forms the closing with a coordinating conjunction at the beginning of the sentence. “But” indicates that a contrasting thought follows, yet the narrative ends after that sentence. Combined with the knowledge that the post is one of part of a “saga” or series, participants must then infer that it (the disrupting event or complication that triggers venting) is indeed “not over”.

The stage is thus set for the venting to continue and for the requisite uptake from other participants to unfold. However, the interacting mode in digitally-mediated venting features not only the exchange of reactions to the narrative, but also the phenomenon known as “networked narratives” (Page et al., 2013). A new metaphor for Georgakopoulou’s (2007) concept of “shared stories”, Page et al., (2013) forwards “networked narratives” as the way participants use the affordances of social media to co-construct narratives and thus defy “narrative linearity as a closed temporal sequence” (p. 194). With venting, however, the narratives that emerge from participants in nested

comment threads must relay a tale with a similar negative situation as experienced by the original poster. Responses may fulfill some of the aforementioned narrative stages or simply take on the form of a short anecdote. Regardless, by contributing their own accounts, participants commiserate with the original poster, assuring them that they are not alone in their frustration, sadness, or otherwise unhappy state. The following excerpts from the analytical corpus demonstrate networked narratives in action:

- **Excerpt 1:** “I went to the same ‘kind’ of middle school as you, though I went due to an accident of geography and uninterested parents. I feel for you and Kyle, those three years were... Rough.”
- **Excerpt 2:** “Thin privilege is not having a car salesman direct you to a car that cannot fit your needs! I went to a Carmax to buy a family sedan. I had my son with me and my wife and daughter so that we could see if it would fit our needs. Well, the salesman got us a car that was far too small for us...”
- **Excerpt 3:** “My friends dad has a Dodge Neon, he's always complaining about how the alignments off, how bad it pulls and how fast it goes through tires. Dude, you're almost 450 pounds and you're the ONLY person who uses in it ever (hell, the back doors can't even open anymore).”
- **Excerpt 4:** “This is SO me. The abuse was fucking horrific and the fatter I was, the safer I was because he wasn't attracted to me anymore. I lost some weight, and then was sexually assaulted, so I let myself get bigger. Fat was *totally* my safety blanket.”
- **Excerpt 5:** “Oh man. Me and a buddy of mine ended up crashing a friend's tinder date that had the roles completely switched. Only rather than bail our friend out, we kept snapping pics of him and the ham at their table, drawing hearts and writing captions, then texting them to him mid-date.”

It is important to note that the narratives offered by other interlocutors (as opposed to the original poster) need not be true. For example, Excerpt 2 effectively retells the story from the original post (“Test Drive From Ham Planet Hell”) from the perspective of the eponymous “fat people” that a submission on the subreddit must include. Through

imitation, the commenter therefore indicates a form of positive evaluation and implied validation of the original poster's frustrations.

Additionally, excerpt two demonstrates another phenomenon observed by Page et al. (2013) in their analysis of Facebook updates as networked narratives. In some cases, shared stories “evolved to to incorporate the annotations found more typically in other online contexts, such as the hashtag”; in so doing, these shared stories “often provide the audience's reaction to and evaluation of the narrative content” with the “knowing use of conventions like the hashtag signal[ing] that the updater is positioning their evaluation of the events...as part of a much larger commentary” (p. 209). The commenter who contributed Excerpt 2 engages in this type of signaling by parodying the characteristically lengthy tagging of posts on Tumblr—the site on which the Fat Acceptance movement and other social-justice activism live (Safronova, 2014):

maintained, thinking that us fat people will just accept what's given to us!), AND the car was extremely slow! Not to mention it's expensive and gas guzzling! Those fatshamers who designed this car must have designed it for anorexics only, my whole family is about average in size! That salesman must have thought it would be funny to fatshame the Real family!

TAGS submission thin privilege fat shaming trigger warning bad doctors The Patriarchy's unfailing capacity to believe what it prefers to be true, rather than what the evidence shows to be likely and possible, has always astounded me. We long for an accountable universe where calories in equals calories out, and in the face of mountains of evidence to the contrary, we will pin all our hopes on the slimmest of doubts. Diets have not been proven not to work, therefore, they must work. -Fatlogician Pizza-or Hot-dogs-ov, "For I Have Tasted the Fruit Drenched in Caramel and Chocolate Sauce and Whipped Cream on my Fudge Sundae, then Went Back and Got Seconds Teehee "

[permalink](#) [embed](#)

[load more comments](#) (4 replies)

Figure 8. Parody of fat activism tags on Tumblr from Excerpt 2

While Page et al. (2013) remark that it is not necessary for the “shared stories [that] form a constellation of evaluations, retellings and reactions” to exist in a single sequence to be “embedded” in the larger discourse on a topic, it is interesting to note that

Excerpt 2 not only directly replies to the original post, but comments on the overarching discussion on fat activism and health with the inclusion of comment tags—a feature that is not a part of Reddit’s interface (p. 209). The author of Excerpt 2, then, conveys both simultaneous solidarity with the original poster—or venter—and disgust with the perceived delusion and entitlement of the offending parties in the encounter.

4.1.3 Analysis of “rhetorical strategies” to realize functional units and moves of venting

At this point, I have reached the final stage in the first sub-section where I discuss the way various functional units and moves are realized in the digitally-mediated genre of venting. A variety of strategies are available depending on mode—navigating or reading. So as not to exhaustively catalog every possible verbal and multi-media strategy available—a task best reserved for future research—I will focus on the following strategies in their respective modes:

- **Functional Units→navigating mode→hyperlinks→explicit outside link realization**
- **Moves→reading mode→narrative and interacting→othering**
- **Moves→reading mode→interacting→one-liners**

I will begin by discussing the primary strategy used to realize the functional units of venting in the navigating mode. As the communicative purpose of venting in the navigating mode is to provide access for both contributing and receiving content that details negative emotions about an experience or topic, the functional units that support this communicative purpose are invariably hyperlinks. Generally, the realization of a link lies in the technological capabilities of the Internet, and, as Askehave and Nielsen (2005)

explain “the codes are not immediately visible to the user” (p. 45). Since hyperlinks need to be visible to the user in order to access linked content, digitally-mediated genres rely on “almost exclusively...visual strategies” in the navigating mode which Askehave and Nielsen categorize further into “implicit link realization” and “explicit link realization” (p. 46).

To explain how this works in the genre of venting, I am forwarding the concept of explicit outside link realization. Adapted from Askehave and Nielsen’s (2005) concept of explicit link realization, this strategy describes how the website designer will often add an “extra explicit dimension to the realization where the link indication is immediately visible to the navigator”; conversely, implicit link realization depends on the user moving the mouse over an element for it to transform in such way (often the cursor to a pointed hand or change in color or shape of the linked element) that it “reveals” a gateway to another document or site (p. 46). While it is understood that explicit link realization can provide access to a different site altogether, such links almost *always* link to a page, image, video, or other multi-media element not contained within the site in which the venting takes place. Thus, I have added the term “outside” to more accurately describe how explicit links operate in the venting genre. These explicit outside links may occur in the venter’s original post, but they are most commonly found in the nested comments and appear as either a URL in blue text or as meta-text that is combined with “color shifts or underlining” when under a hovering cursor (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005, p. 47).



Figure 9. Variation of explicit outside link realizations: pasted URL (top) and meta-text (bottom)

Explicit outside link realization is usually a source of levity in a venting-text and provides a form of positive evaluation for the venter’s contribution. In other words, the commenter providing the explicit outside link deemed either the original post or some other commenter’s contribution worthy enough to warrant making a joke in the first place. On another level, explicit outside links can function as a way for the commenter to signal alignment with the venter’s annoyance with the situation and/or persons described in their original post. For example, a commenter in the text “Test Drive From Ham Planet Hell” offered a pasted URL introduced by the statement “I think this is more their speed” with “their” referring to the offending persons in the venter’s tale. When a participant clicks on the pasted URL, they are taken to an image of a 10-person Ford E350 handicap accessible bus suitable for 10 passengers:



Figure 10. Example of explicit outside link realization from comment in “Test Drive From Ham Planet Hell”

By offering the link to the above image, the commenter ridicules the size of the four passengers who complain of ““poor engineering,’ ‘low-quality tires,’ ‘no leg room,’ [and] ‘cramped interior’” of a full-sized sedan despite the fact that said passengers are estimated to be “at least” 300 pounds. Hence, the commenter validates the venter’s annoyance with the purported unrealistic expectations of the offending “fat people” in the story by suggesting a vehicle that should far exceed their seating requirements but is described as merely “more” appropriate.

Other commenters also use explicit outside link realization in meta-text form to commiserate with the venter or validate the venter’s feelings as expressed in the original post. In “Thin Privilege is being able to wear a shirt without getting judged”, one participant offers an outside link to a cartoon referred to as “this old classic”. In it, a stick figure asks an obese person why they are “so faaat[fat]” to which the scowling obese person exclaims, “IT’S GENETICS [emphasis in original]”. In the foreground of the scene is a carton of ice cream stylzed to resemble the popular Ben & Jerry’s brand. However, the brand of this “LOW FAT!” variety of “Triple Choc Rocky Road” is “Genetic’s”. Thus, the message of the image is that persons of size often blame their weight on uncontrollable biological factors when, in reality, the culprit is poor eating habits. Thus, this explicit outside link in meta-textual form allows for participants in the venting session to not only offer their own evaluation of the venter’s feelings, but also, through an intertextual reference, suggest that other voices outside of the immediate venting session also agree.

Another explicit use of hyperlinks in the navigating mode is mentioning other users in a submission or comment. Not unlike the @username function of Twitter and

other social media sites that utilize tagging systems, Reddit employs the /u/username code. If what is substituted for “username” in the code is valid, the mentioned user will receive a notification in their message center and can view as well as reply to the comment. Correctly formatted username mentions will also turn the code into “blue text” or a hyperlink that, once clicked, takes a navigator to a list of the mentioned user’s contributions. This feature can, in essence, flag users already in the venting session or bring in those who may have insight or experience to bear on the topic at hand. In the venting genre, the feature tends to primarily function as an emphatic method for addressing the venter and is usually accompanied by some expression of support or a question/request for additional information. An excerpt from the post “I miss being fat sometimes...” below exemplifies how a commenter employs Reddit’s username mention code to lend *information support* by asking whether the venter had considered counseling to sort through past trauma (Baym, 2010; Coulson, 2005):



Figure 11. Example of /u/username mentions for supportive questioning and commentary

Username mentions also function within the networked narratives that regularly evolve in the comment sections of venting sessions. In “Wheelham and her ‘friend’ SabotageHam”, the venter themselves utilizes the username mention strategy to respond to

commenter's similar story of struggle with the sacrifice and dedication required of weight loss efforts, especially when others in their social network attempted to disrupt their efforts. The venter thus "tags" the commenter to both offer thanks for the positive evaluation of their self-improvement efforts as well as to lend encouragement to the commenter in their mutual continued struggles with further weight loss and maintenance. Consequently, it appears as if users fully exploit the technological affordances of venting in the navigating mode not simply to establish distance from undesired behaviors or perspectives (as in "ranting"), but to consciously foster the various supports offered by both material and digital communities (Baym, 2010).

As community building is an explicit goal of venting, connections are not only forged by joining with like-minded individuals, but also by identifying and isolating those who do not belong. Accordingly, *othering*—or representing a person or group as different or alien—is prevalent when both narrating and interacting in the reading mode (Pandey, 2004). The discursive construction of the relationship between self and others is achieved through a variety of means, but when venting, this distancing is most commonly realized through *deitic language* and what Loadenthal (2017) terms *strategic labeling*. Variationist linguists such as Labov (1972) have argued that the "relationship between language and social difference [is] neutral and unidirectional" whereas Fairclough (1994) and other critical linguists maintain that social differences are both "encoded and *sustained* [emphasis in original] in and through linguistic choices" (as cited in Pandey, 2004, p. 155). Deixis, or the semantic activity of pointing or positioning, indicates the time, place, or situation to which a speaker refers and is context-dependent.

For example, the full meaning of deictic expressions such as “there”, “you”, “we”, and “now” emerge “from the interaction of *you* and context” (Nunberg, 1993, p. 1).

While deixis is an often benign method for orienting interlocutors in the world, such expressions can be divisive and polarizing. Surely, group formation is not spiteful or divisive by nature; as humans are social creatures, we require connections with other humans for fulfillment. Thus, some certainty about group membership is essential.

Exclusion, then, can be a “necessary evil”. DuPlessis (2002) writes:

Deictic words acknowledge that my here is not your here; my tomorrow is not your tomorrow [...]Deictic terms can only be understood by social understandings, by understanding intimate, particularized, historical and local sites[...] Pointing needs to be accompanied by a sense of sociality, of the transaction (as cited in Entwistle, 2013, pp. 71, 72).

In the interacting mode of venting, commenters utilize a range of deictic expressions to create an “us” and “them” binary and therefore establish distance from an undesirable situation or offending party. The analysis of the corpus revealed that the most common deictic expression is the use of the demonstrative adjective “these” or “those” followed by the noun “people”. Aside from indentifying the individuals not included in the present group of venters, such a construction is usually in service of a generalization about the behavior, perspectives, or status of the “other”; in essence, “those/these people” are not “my/our people”. In the excerpts below, the demonstrative adjectives “these” and “those” as well as other exclusive pronouns and possessives as “they” and “their” appear in boldface for emphasis, with other critical corresponding terms italicized:

- **Excerpt 6:** “**These** *people* need to realize that just because **they** may be average in **their** family or even peer group does not mean **they** are the average of the population.”
- **Excerpt 7:** “Someone needs to start making schoolbuses for **these** *people*.”

- **Excerpt 8:** “You're not nostalgic of the weight but the relationships you had with **those people**. **Those people** who were too insecure to deal with your self improvement.”
- **Excerpt 9:** “And you saying you don't want to go to mcdonalds or taco bell [sic] because you've lost 100 pounds in the last year and don't want to gain it back won't fall on deaf ears with **those people**.”
- **Excerpt 10:** “**Those** weren't friends, but fellow *prisoners*.”

Excerpts six, seven, and nine convey irritation with distorted expectations and, in the case of excerpt nine, overbearing behaviors by the offending parties and thus implies that the present company is not implicated in such matters. Aside from establishing clear social boundaries, deictic expressions also functioned as a way to lend support or reassurance to the commenter or venter. The commenter in excerpt eight, for example, reframes the venter's apparently wistful recollection of their former fatness as disappointment over the loss of past friendships—“those people”. Beginning the second sentence with the same deictic phrase also amplifies how fortunate the venter is to be rid of such negative influences that would have likely hindered their success.

Other uses of the demonstrative adjectives “these” and “those” in the analytical corpus were coupled with more inflammatory names such as “hams”, “hammies”, or “fatassess”. While some labels such as “hams” and “hammies”—short for the portmanteau *hamplanet*—are unique to FPS and related communities, it is not difficult to notice the obvious attempt to correlate people of size with food and animals known for their girth and propensity for overeating. In this sense, the strategic labels can be described as *dysphemistic*, or when a socially acceptable or inoffensive word is substituted with one more unpleasant or derogatory; whereas *euphemisms* are indirect

expressions meant to prevent the speaker from being embarrassed or offending others, *dysphemisms* are intended to insult by magnifying the unfavorable qualities of the target (Allan & Burridge, 2006).

Dysphemisms are common strategies employed to realize both the functional units and moves of venting and, in turn, the overall communicative purpose of the genre. In navigating mode, the post titles function as specific links that, once clicked, transport users to the full-text of the post (see 4.1.1 for full discussion). Titles must therefore pique interest by using the linguistic and visual strategies that would appeal to users. In the analytical corpus, six of the ten venting texts incorporated dysphemism to characterize the villain or antagonist, both of which are vital components of texts employing the narrative discourse mode. When including the interacting mode, all but one venting text in the corpus utilized dysphemism to comment on the egregious behaviors of the antagonist and the group to which they belong. As with the previous excerpts, the exclusive pronouns and possessives are boldfaced for emphasis along with dysphemisms:

Excerpt 11: “**Hamplanets** don't love food. **They** inhale it without truly appreciating it, and even then, **they** tend to ignore lots of really good foods like fruits and vegetables.”

In the above excerpt, the commenter constructs a basic Us versus Them binary, conveying distance from the group being described and attachment with the mainstream that ascribes to what Fairclough (1992, p. 87) calls a “naturalized” ideology, or knowledge that it has become embedded in discursive practices as “common sense”; here, the commenter suggests that food is meant to be savored and ingested in modest quantities. Thus, a “positive self-presentation” is implied (“we” or “I” is not

included in “they”) and “negative Other-presentation” of the They—or “Hamplanets”—who all binge on food devoid of wholesome nutritional value (van Dijk, 1997, p. 36). Paradoxically, overt linguistic pronominalization can disguise the prejudices held by the speaker towards an Other or members of an out-group as, unless a hearer is a member of the in-group, it is not clear to whom “they” or “them” refers. However, the use of the dysphemism “Hamplanet” escalates the comment to overt denigration and magnifies the contempt the participant or venter has for an Other.

In contrast, some uses of dysphemism in the interacting mode are more nuanced and complex. As before, the dysphemism is formatted in boldface for ease of recognition:

Excerpt 12: “It is sad and infuriating to watch in person.

Being a huge **Fatty McFatterson** myself, I know how hard it is to lose weight. I know how seductive the fatlogic of ‘It’s not my fault. Condishions! Health at every size! You’re fat shaming me!’ can be.

I know what it’s like when food has become more than just fuel and instead is comfort, celebration, entertainment, etc... I get trying to fill in the cracks and sadness of life with mashed potatoes and chocolate cake.

But I would hope that a doctor saying ‘Lose 20lbs or never walk again’ would shake me back to reality.”

In this excerpt from “WheelHam and her ‘friend’ SabotageHam”, the venter is responding to a participant who remarks that the tale is one of the most disheartening they have read on the forum. Rather than use dysphemisms to refer only to the offending parties (“SabotageHam” and “WheelHam”, respectively), the venter prefixes the criticism of “fatlogic” and other unhealthy practices by calling herself a “huge Fatty McFatterson”. Therefore, the venter simultaneously disassociates from the behavior of

the offending party but also empathizes with the Other because of their own present struggles with weight. The use of dysphemism in venting-texts, then, can serve to “create judgments and social distance from the group being described” while effectively forging community with other participants via a form of self-deprecation (Pandey, 2004, p. 162).

Through the use of *one-liners*, however, some instances of venting make little to no attempt to mitigate the censure of bad behavior or perspectives. As a “common flaming strategy”, the goal is “to insult the verbal prowess and online persona of the opponent, to silence the other person with a spank”; occurring in interaction over several exchanges, the tone is more conversational by lacking the “visceral impact of longer, ranting flames” and rather reflects the desire to decompress and “let off steam” (Vrooman, 2002, pp. 61, 62). Within the context of venting, the target is shifted away from the participants in the thread and aimed squarely at the offending party in the specific venting text:



Figure 12: Example of a chain of one-liners

In this case, the venter (comment A) themselves responds to a quip that they should have a shirt new shirt made—the aforementioned “I <3 Food I just don’t overeat” [emphasis in original]—by noting how many “angry hams... would waddle after my blood”. This

already hyperbolic statement is amplified by the use of strikethrough formatting to mark out the venter's original word choice of "chase" to ridicule an obese person's presumed lack of mobility. The ellipsis at the end of the venter's contribution seems to invite further ribbing at the offending party's expense, and at first, a commenter responds only with a positive evaluation of the one-liner by bemoaning that they cannot upvote a single contribution more than once. However, other clever (yet cruel) participants chime in with one-liners that mock overeating and portion control. Comment E also exemplifies how one-liners can incorporate other venting strategies to make a multi-modal contribution to the exchange. Certainly, these one-liners, "which often seem to invite a communal response, are a more collectivistic invocation of identity" (Vrooman, 2002, p. 64).

4.2 The functionality of venting on r/FatPeopleStories

This section of the analysis turns to the second research question of the present study which seeks to describe how venting functions on the FPS subreddit. First, I will consider how the subreddit realizes the communicative purpose of venting through features unique to a digitally-mediated environment such as banner images, sidebars, and hyperlinks. In addition, I will include ethnographic data in the form of interviews from the author of the venting-text and two moderators of the subreddit as well as survey responses from members of the FPS community. Finally, rather than consider multiple excerpts from throughout the analytical corpus as in the previous section, I will focus on the moves and rhetorical strategies utilized to realize venting in one post as well as its corresponding comments: "Drama at the Starbeetus" by user lookingformolle.

4.2.1 Realizing communicative purpose on Fat People Stories

For users to vent about an offending party or situation, they first need to have access to an environment where such activity unfolds as well as be “enticed” to participate. As examined in the previous section, an elemental component of venting is interaction; without uptake from other participants, the user is merely shouting into the abyss. Rather, the would-be venter must know that a given site is amenable to such activity and is a place where they would find like-minded interlocutors. Image consolidation is, in essence, a primary purpose of venting in digitally-mediated environments and is contained within the notion of access. Fat People Stories embodies these purposes through various elements of the front page of the subreddit. The banner image welcomes users with a cartoon whale giggling “teehee” in the top-left corner while an obese man clutching a flag styled as a slice of pizza zooms across the galaxy in a motorized scooter. The sidebar on the right of the screen states that the community is “**NOT** in any way, shape, or form affiliated with Fat People Hate” as they “**do not support bullying and hate**” (emphasis in original). A quick scroll through the current top posts reveals titles that refer to obese individuals in terms connected to either animals or food such as *Beasties*, *Glob Glob*, or *hamplanet*. Potential participants in venting sessions on FPS are thus made immediately aware that discourse in this community presents unfavorable accounts of persons of size.

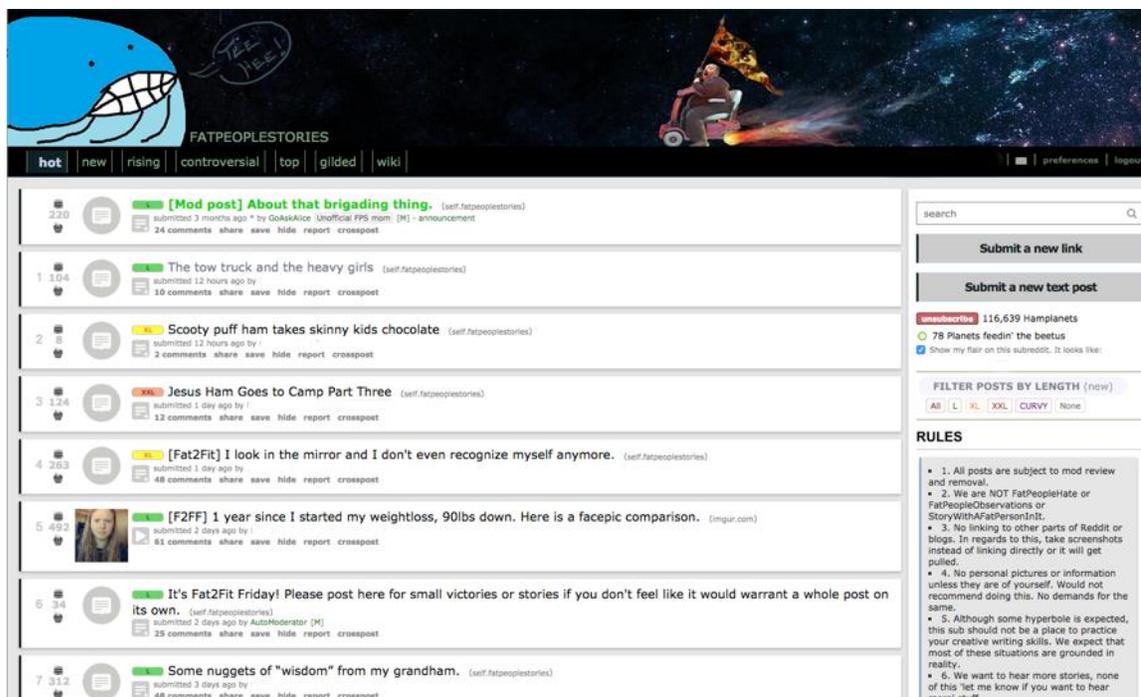


Figure 13: FPS front page featuring the banner image, sidebar, and latest posts

As FPS guidelines dictate, all posts must be a story about a fat person, but said fat person must be a *hamplanet*. Dysphemisms in the form of *portmanteaus* are common in FPS and in other online speech communities as well as in popular culture (e.g. *mansplain*, *fandom*, and *sharknado*). Here, the term *hamplanet* strategically slams together the association of ham with pigs (an animal and slang for a gluttonous person) and planets, which, in astrology, can negatively influence people and events.

The subreddit's posting guidelines state that for a person to receive the label of *hamplanet*, they must display the "*hamentality*--rudeness, entitlement, *fatlogic*". According to the FPS FAQ page (n.d.), "[Fatlogic is] anything that deviates from the scientific facts of body weight management. This can range from fundamental misunderstandings of how biology and physics work to lengthy political diatribes about how everything is society's fault" (para. 1). Similarly, the *Fatlogic* subreddit—a *sister*

sub of FPS--claims that it “may be utilized most by those who stand to ‘benefit’ from it, enabling them to continue unhealthy habits” with those of a healthy weight often espousing “nonsense health related fatlogic such as juice cleanses, etc.” (“FAQ”, n.d., para. 2).

If any story posted to FPS just features a fat person who does not exhibit hamplanity, fellow moderator SometimesIArt claimed that the story “is not a proper FPS. It’s just bullying” (personal communication, November 14, 2015). GoAskAlice further clarified that the hamplanet designation is reserved only for those who have “a delusional and self-centered perception” and who also disregard the comfort of others in private settings as a result of their size:

An obese person recognizes that their increased size means certain problems might arise. They anticipate and accept this. They recognize that they are more equivalent to smokers than to civil right’s [sic] martyrs which is what a hamplanet thinks when they are asked to purchase more than one airplane seat (personal communication, November 14, 2015).

SometimesIArt forwarded that this unabashed honesty is what makes FPS “informative”, “constructive” and “serves as both motivation and an information basis for good health” (personal communication, November 14, 2015). Like a majority of the other FPS moderators, SometimesIArt shared that she once was a self-professed hamplanet and that many members are overweight and in the process of shedding the excess pounds. On Fat2Fit Fridays, members share successes and setbacks on their fitness journey; in this way, SometimesIArt claimed that FPS serves as both a “support and vent group that helps people let off some of their frustrations” (personal communication, November 15, 2015).

Responses from survey participants further corroborate the moderators’ sentiments about why they participate in the subreddit as well as the purpose or “mission”

of the FPS community. Of the 242 total respondents, 36% visit the subreddit on a daily basis. 96% of the respondents chose to share why they visit FPS. Text analysis revealed that 32.7% of the responses cite “motivation” for continued weight loss efforts and maintenance:

- **Response 1:** “I am losing weight, and after losing nearly 100 pounds, I’m almost to my beach body goal. Reading about the worst of what could happen if I give up **helps me maintain self-control**, and entertains me.”
- **Response 2:** “I am obese and I post and comment on [FPS] as an outlet for my own self-hatred relating to my appearance. These stories on [FPS] are **motivation for me to lose weight, or at least maintain** my current weight.”
- **Response 3:** “**Motivation.** Seeing what I don’t want to ever become has helped me get more active and watch what I’m eating. And most stories are very entertaining to read throughout the day.”
- **Response 4:** “I am morbidly obese. I visit r/fatpeoplestories **for motivation for weight loss and eating healthy** as well as to remind myself that I am not the kind of fat person that give fat people a bad rap (e.g. The Fat Acceptance and Body Positivity movements that shun and vilify people who live healthy lifestyles.) On occasion, FPS provides grim reminders of the real-time consequences of morbid obesity on the body.”
- **Response 5:** Because I used to be fat and oblivious. It's a cathartic way of expressing regret at how I was and **reinforcing my commitment to my health and never being that way again. It motivates me to keep making good choices.**”

Just as all of the above responses are from users who are either currently overweight/obese or had been in the past, a majority of other users who participate on FPS mention that it serves as a reminder of what they had been—or what they could become—if they did not change their lifestyle. Responses two and five also refer to their activity on the subreddit as a release for negative emotions surrounding their body and health; for one user, it is “an outlet for [their] own self-hatred” while another describes the subreddit as a “cathartic” means for “expressing regret” for their past mistakes.

Certainly, one way to interpret such activities is venting. Nevertheless, 7.76% of the responses for this item explicitly mentioned venting in some form. The following is but a sample:

- **Response 6:** “Additionally I visit r/fatpeoplestories **as a way to vent** by proxy all the fat people that make nasty comments about my weight, or spread bad science or are just jerks in general.”
- **Response 7:** “It’s **a place where you can vent** about how being overweight can lead to a bad lifestyle, as well as how it leads into/or a symptom of mental illness. How obesity negatively affects others in all aspects of their lives. It’s also a place where people support each other with their problems.”

A more significant number of respondents mention venting on the item that asked users to articulate the “mission” of the subreddit. Here, 14.41% of the 229 respondents cited venting as a larger purpose behind the existence of FPS. If explicit mentions of “support” and “community” in survey responses is included with the mentions of venting (14.41%), then the figure jumps to 22.71%:

- **Response 8:** “I would argue it is **a place for people to vent about negative experiences with fat people**. One cannot really **vent** about fat people IRL without risking the scorn of others. The anonymity of the site allows it’s users to **vent** about what they may hold in.”
- **Response 9:** “Other users also **use the sub to vent about their family members who display toxic behaviours** when it comes to food, body image, or health in general. Often these users are upset that their family members are killing themselves or just make life unpleasant for others because they’re unhappy. r/fatpeoplestories is **a safe place to vent without being silenced for the sake of ‘body positivity’, which is a popular idea nowadays.**”
- **Response 10:** “I would explain /r/fatpeoplestories **as a place to vent, and receive or give support**, about people who act unkind and use their weight as an excuse even when it is not. I love the sub because it strictly adheres to this instead of devolving into a clone of the now-defunct /r/fatpeoplehate.”

While entertainment is another commonly cited reason for both visiting the subreddit and for the existence of FPS in general, it appears the expectation that a venter's contribution will be acknowledged and discussed rather than dismissed keeps users returning to the community. Responses eight through ten above indicate that their participation on FPS is both to lend and elicit support as well as to speak "honestly". As response eight notes, venting about overweight/obese people in face-to-face interactions is met with "the scorn of others" and the relative anonymity of an online forum provides a place to escape such judgements.

Additionally, all of the above responses address the persistent controversy and taboos surrounding the discursive construction of health and body image. In particular, response nine mentions the "body positivity" movement—a title punctuated with quotation marks to presumably indicate sarcasm—as one of the "popular ideas" or forces that "silence[es]" individuals. One respondent communicated that the aim of the subreddit is to confront "the nonsensical political correctness of our times that contradicts scientific facts and logic in favor of 'feel good' BS". Other responses echoed similar sentiments and viewed the act of venting as a form of resistance against misinformation surrounding the correlations between weight and health as well as identity politics—and the FPS subreddit provides a "safe space" for such discourse to unfold. However, rather than take on the form of "rambling, emotional monologs" (Lange, 2014, p. 56) that characterize ranting, venting-texts on the FPS subreddit—original posts and comments alike—reflect the complex interaction of expectations, ideologies, and emotions that are best described by a closer examination of one post and its corresponding comments. Such is the focus of the final sub-section of this discussion.

4.2.2 The functional units, moves, and strategies of venting in action: “Drama at the Starbeetus”

In this sub-section, I will delve into the moves and rhetorical strategies used to realize one example of the venting genre on the FPS community. First, I will consider how the title of the post itself functions in both the navigating in reading mode before turning to the constituent moves of the venting text and comments in the reading mode exclusively. Insight from moderator interviews and survey responses are included where appropriate.

The title alone—“Drama at the Starbeetus”—is first a hyperlink and is but one in a list of myriad contributions to the FPS community. As a functional unit of venting, hyperlinks are intended to both encourage the desire to access a text as well as provide said access to the text itself. This appeal is cultivated via the reading mode by considering the hyperlinks as titles ostensibly chosen for their correlation to a central aspect of the text. According to the crowdsourced online dictionary of slang, *Urban Dictionary*, “drama” is a disproportionate emotional reaction to benign events; further, it is assumed that a person who creates or engages in “drama” seeks to add excitement into an otherwise mundane life at the expense of others’ peace and normalcy. The *Oxford English Dictionary* corroborates this popular use of the term with the draft addition of “drama queen” in 2006: “a person who overreacts to a minor setback or who is prone to exaggeratedly dramatic behavior; also a person who thrives on being the center of attention”.

It can thus be assumed that the speaker of the full-length post “Drama at the Starbeetus” will likely vent about a struggle or uncomfortable situation in a public venue. Such is the case according the author/venter of the post, user lookingformolle. In an

interview conducted via private direct message, lookingformolle disclosed that the purpose of “Drama at the Starbeetus” is to share frustration stemming from an obese woman’s rude behavior at a Starbucks while viewing an online lecture on their laptop one afternoon: “I wanted to convey that sense of ‘Can you believe the nerve of this woman?!?!’[sic]” (personal communication, November 12, 2015).

As a narrative, “Drama at the Starbeetus” fulfills several of the stages that Bax (2011) proposes. Although this post does not begin with a direct address to the anticipated audience (see Figure 6), the narrative is still interactionally oriented as it begins *in medias res* with a single line of dialogue: “A venti pumpkin spice latte with extra whip”. Such a narrative device ensures that readers begin to form questions that have yet to be answered and sufficient tension is established. Here, the stages of *disruption* and *recognition of disruption* are fulfilled at once, for the venter notes that he “screwed in [his] headphones a little more, hoping to block out the loud, angry woman’s voice” that was “worming its way between me and my video lecture” (para. 2). While not overtly resorting to dysphemism, describing the woman’s voice as “worming” establishes the venter’s annoyance and suggests that her request, while not in a library, was perceived to violate the relatively quiet nature of most coffee shops.

In paragraph four, the venter reveals that the “angry woman” is speaking to a four-year old child (presumably belonging to the woman) who stands in front of the counter clutching money to pay for the order. The text then moves to acknowledge how it is both a Fat People Story and a venting-text: the focus is on a person who is overweight and also exhibits the rudeness characteristic of hamentality, or, as lookingformolle reiterates, “It’s not enough to be fat, you have to be fat and an asshole”

(personal communication, November 12, 2015). Thus, lookingformolle chooses to foreground the disgust that stems from both the woman's behavior as well as her form. Estimated to be "about 5'4" and 350 pounds", the woman is "nearly spherical". Rather than simply sitting in a chair, the woman "managed to wedge herself" into a seat with "buttock fat...oozing over the armrests" (para. 4).

As hamplanet status is commonly assigned to an overweight individual who exhibits entitled behavior, this relationship is established by comparing the woman's attitude to "someone sitting on a throne looking down upon her subjects and dispensing orders as she saw fit" (para. 4). At this point, the venter uses a *dysphemism* to describe the woman that puns on the name of the drink she orders: Pumpkin Spice *Fatte*. By replacing the letter "l" in *latte* with an "f", the pronunciation becomes 'fa,teɪ and suggests a high-class affectation for the term *fatty*, or a derisive nickname for a fat person. Given that the woman is described as petulant royalty in the same sentence, the moniker is consistent with the "air" of privilege that lookingformolle assigns to her behavior (para. 4). In paragraph five, Pumpkin Spice *Fatte*'s child heads to the "massive line" to order her mother's drink. The venter furthers the woman's spoiled image by noting she ignores the situation by "play[ing] on her cell phone, long acrylic nails tapping out a rhythm on the screen". Long nails can be associated with talons, and since talons are claws on birds of prey, it coincides with later inclusions of animalistic imagery such as "the roaring of the beast" in paragraph seven and the speaker tag "growled" later on in paragraph 11.

While the woman's first line of dialogue is rendered in General American speech, it shifts to a nonstandard form in paragraph six: "WHATCHU MEAN SHE WADN'T IN

LINE?” (emphasis in original). The author of the venting-text referred to this speech as “an agitated southern drawl” and conveyed that they wanted “to textually convey some of that agitation” (personal correspondence, November 12, 2015). Moderator SometimesIArt identified this register as *Fatspeak* and explained that it originated on the Internet several years ago, but since its use can make a text “unreadable”, the FPS community does not view excessive use of *Fatspeak* favorably. This sentiment also attests to how the venting-text is interactionally situated and must be composed in such a manner that will presumably provide the most responses in the form of upvotes or comments. Thus, moderators and survey respondents alike were eager to explain what qualifies as an effective post on in the subreddit:

- **Response 11:** “People who are overweight get that way for a reason: they need to fill a void, they are trying to protect themselves, they have impulse control issues, they warp their logic to suit their desires. A good Fat People Story usually highlights one or more of these. Typically, they involve people being rude, manipulative, selfish, careless, or people who have ignored their problems by medicating with food. Good Fat People stories incite anger, sadness, fear, sympathy and can even, on occasion, be heartwarming.”
- **Response 12:** “It needs to have some sort of entitlement or fat logic expressed by the ham. Alternately, a fat person realizing they have become a victim of fatlogic and renouncing the fatlogic makes for great stories as well.”

Perhaps the attention to overcoming fatlogic and the admonishing of dehumanizing language seems paradoxical given that the terms to describe the foundational criterion of Fat People Stories—e.g. hamentality—are associated with animals. Regardless, members of this community view such moves as simply “hat[ing] the behavior and not the person”:

- **Response 13:** “They need to not be overly mean about the people, i [sic] prefer a more distant approach, like a nature documentary, describing what happened in detail but not passing too much judgement.”

- **Response 14:** “The fat person's behaviour must be actively inconveniencing or offending another person. For example, just being fat and smelly on an airplane isn't enough. The fat person must be rude also.”

The woman's shouted snippet of dialogue in paragraph six, then, serves as additional disruption not only for the venter, but also for other Starbucks patrons who “were staring” at the woman “waving an accusing index finger across the ten or so feet between her chair and the cashier”. The barista makes an *attempt at resolution* and is portrayed as a victim who in a “soft spoken” voice tries to reason with the angry woman in paragraph seven. Using an ellipsis in the barista's response (“Ma'am she's...the line begins back there”) suggests hesitation and that she struggled with embarrassment as well as the overarching belief that, in the service industry, the customer is always right. In paragraph nine, the venter comments on how others “speculate as to why people don't stand up for ‘justice’ or ‘equity’ or ‘fairness’ in these situations” and seeks to foster sympathy for those who “at \$10 an hour...make a choice”.

Next, the venter shifts focus to how they perceive the woman as lazy and by extension, a bad mother, since the child is left to grab the drink that she “struggled to reach” from the counter (para. 10). The child “slunk back”, an indication that she was fearful of the response she anticipated from her mother and likely felt shame from undesired attention (para. 10). The woman is now “extremely exasperated” and “growl[s]” in Fatspeak “OH FER GAWD'S SAKE” (para. 11). The verbs that describe how the woman claims her drink from the counter—“clutched”, “grabbed”, “snatching”—further characterizes her as rude and echoes the dysphemistic description of the woman's behavior in previous paragraphs.

Paragraph 14 ends the story on an ironic note with a *cliffhanger*. As the woman now holds both the tea and a second Pumpkin Spice Latte, she “down[s] half” of her daughter’s drink and “frown[s]” with disapproval. The woman questions her husband about whether the daughter’s tea has sugar, but responds to her own inquiry with the assessment that the child “don’t need no sugar”. The speaker tag “snarked” indicates a derisive or mocking attitude. This closing sentence also suggests that her family is complicit in enabling (or at least not challenging) the woman’s rude behavior since they are “caught in her gravitational orbit” and implies that similar situations are likely to occur in the future—all of which are fodder for the series of comments in the interacting mode that follow the text.

While demonstrative pronouns are a practical means to refer to a thing or situation just mentioned, the first commenter employs *deictic language* by referring to the offending incident as merely “this”, suggesting a disgust so profound that the commenter cannot completely articulate magnitude of the woman’s many violations to propriety. This sense of speechlessness is corroborated by the commenter admitting in the “side note” that it took them several minutes to craft a comment in response to the woman’s behavior in the venter’s tale:

- **Excerpt 12:** “Sounds like she does **this** often, to skip the line. Using the child to do that is totally shitty.

Side note: It took me 5 minutes to think of something to say while my brain got stuck on 'wtf... wha.. I don't... huh?' in a loop at her entitlement. ---
 additional: have you thought about posting this to [/r/talesfromretail?](#)”

While perhaps hyperbolic in nature, the first commenter resorts to such exaggeration in an attempt to convey that they, too, are horrified at the woman’s behavior. It is thus an

early form of validation for the quality of the venter's contribution. The commenter also includes a *meta-textual outside explicit link* to recommend that the venter also post the tale to another subreddit that encourages retail workers to vent about badly behaving customers, co-workers, and managers. In this way, the suggestion to post the same tale to another subreddit is an emphatic endorsement of the venter's frustration with the woman's behavior at Starbucks that day. Other commenters also employ deictic language in various forms to join with the venter in admonishing the offending party:

- **Excerpt 13:** “**That woman** is not going to stop, she's going to make her child bring her everything and make her into a servant as she grows up and will be capable of more.”
- **Excerpt 14:** “**That child** sounds young enough not to know how to read.
- **Excerpt 15:** “Personally, I have more hate for **this person** because they're a shitty parent and awful human being. Could weigh 85 pounds and I'd hate them just the same.”

While it is apparent that the above commenters are annoyed with the woman's attempt to be served before all other patrons because of her lack of mobility, the commenters appear more troubled by how she exploits her child as “a servant”. Consequently, this woman is not only ill-mannered, but a “terrible parent”. Rather than be repulsed by the child, the demonstrative pronoun use in excerpt 14 conveys sympathy for one so young that they cannot read—or question the authority of their parents.

More inflammatory forms of othering emerge in the form of *strategic labeling* and *dysphemism*. As with other excerpts, the relevant terms are in boldface for ease of recognition:

- **Excerpt 16:** “In addition to not wanting to ruin the other customers' experience with **the squeals of a denied sow, you can tell Fatte is the type of hick/ghetto shitball** who would take it out on her poor little girl, so I don't blame the baristas for giving in either.”

Aside from the comparison of the woman to cattle, of particular interest in the above excerpt is the generalization the commenter makes about class. Here, the generic “you” included in the phrase “you can tell” includes “another dimension to the expectation of a ‘majority’ reader or participant” as it can refer to an array of referents such as “you” the venter, “I” the reader, or “you and I”—all of whom are assumed to be different from the other group—in this case, the “hicks” who reside in the country and the “ghetto shitballs” living in urban, low income neighborhoods (Pandey, 2002, p. 169). The “you can tell” also seems to justify the use of derogatory comments by appealing to “the force of facts”; according to van Dijk (1997), “derogation of others” is grounded in a number of “‘good reasons’” why someone deserves scorn or ridicule (p. 38). The commenter in this excerpt, therefore, implies that groups of people living in communities are “the type” known to be ignorant and abusive—and this “known” information is touted as fact. Consequently, the semantic portrayal of social distance through strategic labeling reproduces existing stereotypes and status quo representations of various cultures.

A chain of *one-liners* then surfaces later in the comments that are derogatory to the point of profane. However, as elucidated in the previous sub-section, the goal is not to silence the other participants, but rather to elevate the intensity of scorn and ridicule at the offending party's expense:

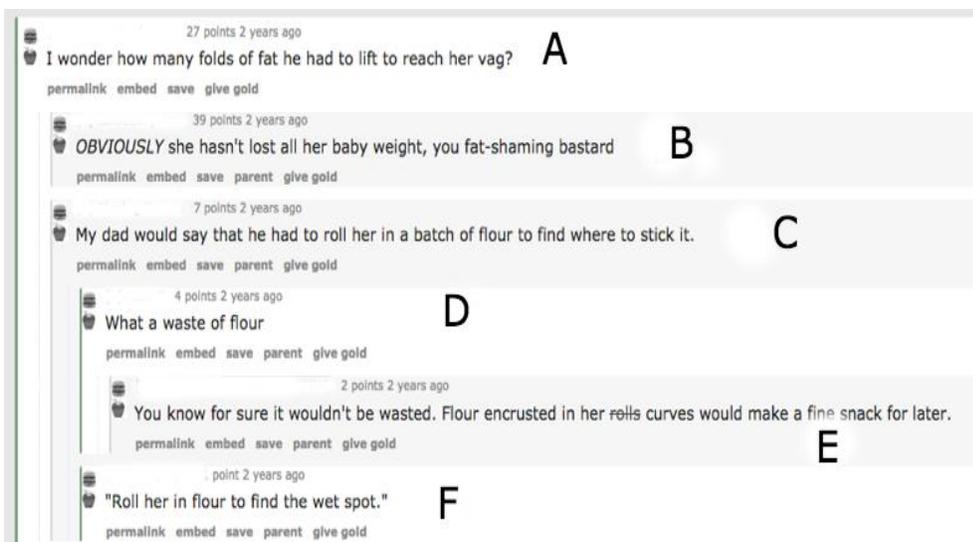


Figure 14. Chain of one-liners in the comment section for “Drama at the Starbeetus”

In comment A, the participant poses a question that is not meant to be answered with a literal figure, but is instead designed to magnify the grotesque nature of the offending party’s weight and suggests that the woman’s husband must struggle to have intercourse with his wife because of her size. In the original post, the husband isn’t described until paragraph 12: having “a very small gut” and is “barely overweight”, the venter notes that the man “had been crazy enough to stick his dick in crazy” and implies that overweight/obese women are incapable of having or maintaining a conventionally attractive partner or even having a romantic partner altogether. The venter also includes a reference to two characters from the *Star Wars* franchise (Jabba[the Hutt] and Princess Leia) to highlight the “difference” in weight and the presumed incompatibility between the woman and her husband. As the couple serves as a “reverse” of the relationship of the *Star Wars* characters, the woman is assigned the role of Jabba the Hutt—the antagonistic, alien crime lord with a ravenous appetite.

As a one-liner, comment A “seem[s] to be asking someone else to provide the joke” with the question format acting as an “accelerant” and “appeal” for others to interact, not unlike the structure of jibes in “audience-participative comedy clubs”:

Comedian: “Thing/Person is so _____”; Audience: “How ____ is it?” (Vrooman, 2002, p. 63). Rather than provide possible answers for comment A, the next participant mocks an apparent oft-repeated reason some women cite for not being a healthy weight and adds the epithet “fat shaming bastard” to suggest the petulant nature of such arguments. Comments C through F, however, provide one-liners that seem to provide possible solutions for the husband’s and offending party’s assumed sexual struggles. It is important to note, however, that not all instances of one-liners in the venting genre and on FPS embody such vitriol. Directly after this exchange, a moderator chimes in with the following warning:

- **Excerpt 17:** “Maybe it's just me, but I am getting a serious whiff of FPH [Fat People Hate] here. Y'all gotta calm down, okay.”

The venter immediately responds by asking whether “it was coming from [their] direction”, apologizes if that is the case, and offers to edit the original post and any of their comments. When the moderator clarifies that comments from other participants were the source, the venter replies that they had taken great care to “scrutinize the story” to ensure that no aspect is similar to the type of content found on the now defunct (at least on Reddit) Fat People Hate community. The venter then confesses that they had written some post in the past that was questionable in terms of whether or not it complied with the stated FPS community norm that “[they] are NOT Fat People Hate or Fat People Observations or Story With A Fat Person In It”. Such expectations are also shared by survey respondents:

- **Excerpt 18:** “Stories about the author's distaste towards people who are simply fat, who aren't demonstrating the sorts of bad behaviors and personality problems which often go along with personalities inclined to obesity, then it isn't a fair story anymore. Talking about how fat people are gross, for example, that's not a story and that's not reflective of the deeper issues which affect some (not all!) of the fat people we meet.”
- **Excerpt 19:** “The antagonist of the story needs to exhibit bad qualities that are tied to their weight. They can't just steal the protagonist's video games, they need to steal the protagonist's food. They can't just call the protagonist a bitch, they need to call them a skinny bitch. Me personally, I like the stories that cool down with the dehumanizing language. I want to hate a bad person for being bad (with a particular flavor to their badness), not dehumanize someone.”

While venting-texts and comments alike can take on a more rancorous or profane tone usually reserved for ranting or flaming, it is not considered a necessary component for their success. In fact, as evidenced by comments from several members of the FPS community, it can result in a decreased likelihood that other participants will respond or validate the venter's emotions—an aspect that is indeed essential for venting to take place.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The aims of this study were identified as two-fold: to forward a description and definition of venting as its own unique, digitally-mediated genre and to explore how it unfolds in interaction within a specific online community. In Section 2.6, two research questions were established to guide the study in this direction. The following sections will return to these questions and provide further discussion of the study's results and its implications.

5.1 What constitutes the genre of *venting*? How is it similar to or different from *ranting*?

A sizeable corpus of both posts and corresponding comments from the subreddit Fat People Stories was analyzed to determine the constituent parts of venting as its own digitally-mediated genre distinct from ranting, a genre with which venting is often conflated. Using Askehave and Nielsen's (2005) two-dimensional model for genre analysis and supplemented with Bax's (2011) broad heuristic for discourse analysis, I propose the following definition:

- Venting is a genre wherein a participant releases negative emotion for the purpose of eliciting a response from one or more interlocutors and therefore forging a community grounded in shared experience.

Therefore, the results of this study indicates the need for scholars to regard venting as a separate social practice from ranting. While venting can share the derogatory and profane elements of ranting and flaming as well as allow the venter to establish social distance in a digital world, my analysis supports that venting is a polylogical rather than monologic discourse that focuses on collective identity construction. This does not mean, however, that venting forsakes the interests and needs of the self despite the fact that we never truly

communicate as individuals, but also as members of the various social worlds in which we inhabit. Regardless, venting allows individual users not only an outlet for negative emotions, but also an opportunity to position themselves against what they perceive to be unfavorable or morally reprehensible ways of being in the world. Through uptake from other users, venters can commiserate with other like-minded individuals and find that their reactions to an offending party are valid. In this way, venting does facilitate the construction of group ideologies, which, in turn, can be wielded in the reproduction of dominant discourses and marginalization.

To conclude, Askehave and Nielsen's (2005) two-dimensional genre model proved valuable in describing the characteristics of the venting genre in that it allowed for the complexities and affordances of digitally-mediated texts to come to the fore in ways that traditional genre models would likely not allow. Aside from describing the components of the venting genre through analysis of a sizeable corpus, it is the first analysis of its kind. As the communicative purpose of a genre must be consistent regardless of varying individual contexts in which a text is produced, it is thus necessary to test this definition with additional digitally-mediated texts.

5.2 What functions does venting serve within the Fat People Stories subreddit?

In this section of the analysis, I considered how members of this subreddit realize the communicative purpose of venting through features unique to a digitally-mediated environment such as banner images, sidebars, and hyperlinks. Next, using Bax's (2011) broad heuristic for discourse analysis, I described how the moves and rhetorical strategies took form in both the original post "Drama at the Starbeetus" and the subsequent responses to this text from other users. To support my analysis, I also incorporated

ethnographic data in the form of interviews as well as survey responses from 242 members of the subreddit. Through posts in the form of narratives about encounters with overweight/obese individuals as well as comments in response to the posts, members of this subreddit use venting as a means to support other users in their continued quests for weight loss or maintenance when a support network does not exist in an offline or face-to-face context. Networked narratives in the interactive mode of venting also allowed users share their own experiences as a way to commiserate with the venter (Page et al., 2013). In this way, venting in the FPS subreddit satisfies all of the forms of support sought through online interactions as identified by Baym (2010): social integration or network support, emotional support, esteem support, and informational support. Successful venting-texts also serve to remind users of the type of person that they do not want to become or, in some cases, remind themselves of a state to which they do not want to return. Thus, the uptake of successful venting-texts in this community carries a kind of motivational force in the offline lives of users of the FPS subreddit.

Venting also seems to function as a way to subvert what is deemed to be the promotion of unhealthy lifestyles under the guise of body positivity in popular discourse. Various moves and rhetorical strategies of venting take on a decidedly critical tone in the subreddit as a way to resist pervading misconceptions and outright misinformation about weight loss and fitness when the offline world purportedly does not condone such discussions. As evidenced by the comments in the interacting mode of “Drama at the Starbeetus”, venting can become inflammatory. However, it is important to note that such interactions were deemed inappropriate by other members of the community, and the moderators also take an active role in enforcing a strict no bullying policy.

With nearly 117,000 members at the time of this writing, Fat People Stories continues to thrive and remains a safe-haven for users to sort through encounters in the material world that confront the notions of appearances and power, health and morality, intellect and ignorance, support and subversion. Moderator GoAskAlice seems to capture most accurately the dichotomy that this subreddit inhabits: “A number of users come for the schadenfreude, but I come to here to remind myself that I never want to be a hamplanet again. I come from a fatlogic family, and I have fat friends. It isn’t because I hate fat people” (personal communication, November 15, 2014).

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APPENDIX A. FULL TEXT OF “DRAMA AT THE STARBEETUS”

¹"A venti pumpkin spice latte with extra whip."

²I screwed in my headphones a little more, hoping to block out the loud, angry woman's voice worming its way between me and my video lecture.

³"A venti pumpkin spice latte with extra whip. A venti. Pumpkin spice. Latte. *With* extra whip."

⁴I finally looked up from my laptop, wondering if this woman was trying to summon a PSL out of thin air like it was Beetlejuice. The woman was a nearly-spherical person who was about 5'4" and 350 pounds. She had miraculously managed to wedge herself into one of Starbeetus's brown leather chairs and sat so high up on her buttock fat that her sides were oozing over the armrests. Pumpkin Spice Fatte had the air of someone sitting on a throne looking down upon her subjects and dispensing orders as she saw fit. But things were rough for this woman, as she had to bend nearly in half in order to talk to the four-year-old child standing in front of her, clutching a twenty in one hand. For a moment my brain refused to process what I was seeing. The woman said it again, and again, until finally the wide-eyed kid nodded and scurried off to the line.

⁵ Problem was, the line was massive, and stretched onward to the left, while the child uncertainly hovered to the right, trying to look up at the cashier over the counter. The line shifted for a bit. Mesmerized, I watched the child while her mother played on her cell phone, long acrylic nails tapping out a rhythm on the screen. Finally I looked back down at my laptop, reminding myself that I could only be ensconced in my little corner for so long before the metro came and went without me.

⁶"WHATCHU MEAN SHE WADN'T IN LINE?"

⁷The roaring of the beast caught me off-guard and my head jerked up again. Pumpkin Spice Fatte was now waving an accusing index finger across the ten or so feet between her chair and the cashier. The child was looking from the cashier, to her mother, to the cashier, holding up the twenty dollars in the air. By now the other patrons were staring. I

couldn't hear as the cashier leaned over to talk to the child, but I heard a soft-spoken, "Ma'am, she's...the line begins back there"

⁸ "AH SENT HER UP THUR TO GET MAH DRANK. AH NEED MAH DRANK, IT'S A VENTI PUMPKIN SPICE LATTE WITH EXTRUH WHI-YUP."

⁹ I've seen a lot of people speculate as to why people in retail don't stand up for "justice" or "equity" or "fairness" in these situations, but at \$10 an hour you make a choice. Staring down at the child, the cashier ran the calculus in her head: None of the many customers in line would pitch a bitch like Pumpkin Spice Fatte, who would continue to yell until she got her way. Yes, they might grumble, but she could dispense with any drama in one transaction instead of several, and she wasn't risking the kid getting lost in the line, and thus wouldn't have to endure more bellowing, which would start the cycle of angering customers all over. So she took the kid's order, and laboriously bent over in half across the counter to take the kid's money and give her back change.

¹⁰ Starbeetus was really busy at this time, and their policy is to call your name and place your drink on a wide counter before rushing away to help out down the line again. The woman's name and drink was called and the little girl struggled to reach it, as it had been placed on the countertop. She hopped up on her feet, trying to reach it, spilling change in the process even though she kept a tight hold on the bills in her hand. After giving up she slunk back to her mother, who was extremely exasperated with the whole ordeal.

¹¹ "OH FER GAWD'S SAKE," Pumpkin Spice Fatte growled. She literally rocked her body from side to side and was so fat that her sides were stationary when she shifted her core. Finally, after much creaking and groaning from the chair, she popped herself out like the cork on a bottle of wine. Stumbling forward, she clutched the counter and grabbed the drink, snatching the money from her kid and walking back to the chair, coins on the floor abandoned. The wedging began anew. At this point I had wasted quite a chunk of time staring at these two and worked on my laptop for a bit. The child stood in front of its mother as she downed that PSL like she hadn't had a drink in months.

¹² Eventually the man who had been crazy enough to stick his dick in crazy showed up and kissed Pumpkin Spice Fatte on the lips and asked if there was anything she needed. He was over 6'0" and while he had a very small gut, he was barely overweight. The

difference was such that it made the whole thing a bit like watching a reverse Jabba and Princess Leia.

¹³ "Ah need uh pumpkin spice latte with extruh whip. Oh, a grande^{teehee}," she replied, "And git hur summin too." The un-wedging began again, but this time PSF was left alone for the process as her husband and child got back in line. The husband came back with another PSL and a small Passion tea for the daughter. After gathering her purse and taking a long drink from her second PSL, she snatched the tea away from her kid.

¹⁴ "GIMMIE DAT. What's in this?" Downing half of the tea, still clutching her own drink, Pumpkin Spice Fatte frowned and smacked her lips. "Is thur sugar in this? She don't need no sugar," PSF snarked at her husband as the trio walked out the door, caught in her gravitational orbit.

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONS SUBMITTED “DRAMA AT THE STARBEETUS”
AUTHOR

1. Based on the posting guide and sidebar info, it seems that the sub seeks to define itself more so by what it is *not* than what it actually represents or “stands for” (e.g. “We are NOT Fat People Hate...”). How would you describe the purpose of the community other than a place to post stories that happen to have a fat person as its subject? If you had to identify a larger purpose or “mission” for r/fatpeoplestories, what would it be? (Alternatively, how would you explain the sub to someone who is not a member of the community?)
2. Why are you a subscriber of this particular sub? Are you a member of any related subs?
3. Do you discuss the type of topics explored on this sub and the sister sub, r/fatlogic (if you are a member) in any face-to-face, offline conversations?
4. How often do you visit or contribute to r/fatpeoplestories? Have you written and posted other stories?
5. Since a Fat People Story seems to represent a particular type kind of story, how would you define it? What is the necessary criteria other than it needing to involve a fat person/people?
6. What would you consider to be the larger point/purpose of your story “Drama at the Starbeetus”? Is it based on one true experience, a collection of various similar experiences, or a work of fiction?
7. The fat person in your story, Pumpkin Spice Fatte, begins by speaking in standard spoken English, but then PSF shifts into a different register. What is it called (or perhaps, what would you call it) and what is the purpose of such speech? Alternatively, why did you make the choice to represent her speech in this way?

APPENDIX C: QUESTIONS SUBMITTED TO FPS MODERATORS

1. How would you describe the purpose of the community other than a place to post stories that happen to have a fat person as its subject? Alternatively, how does this sub position itself in the larger discussion of health, fitness, and body image? If you had to identify a larger purpose or “mission” for r/fatpeoplestories, what would it be? Since the sidebar makes the explicit claim that "We are NOT Fat People Hate", what sets this sub apart?
2. Why are you a member of this community? Why did you choose to become a moderator?
3. Are any of you members of r/fatlogic? How/why was this designation of "sister sub" established?
4. Do you discuss the type of topics explored on this sub and the sister sub, r/fatlogic (if you are a member) in any face-to-face, offline conversations? How does the way you that you speak about the topics in a face-to-face conversation differ, if at all, to how you discuss the same topics with other members in the sub?
5. In the sidebar item "What makes a good FPS?", it notes that "hamplanet is not just about the weight, but about the hamentality-rudeness, entitlement, fatlogic, etc.. Can you explain/identify what would fall under "etc."?
6. Whenever groups of people come together based on mutual interests and common goals, it is likely that they develop their own linguistic norms and essentially form what can be called a "speech community"; if you had to create a guide to describe the common terms or vocabulary of Fat People Stories, what would you include? (For instance, what is the significance of *teehee*, *beetus* [as there is definitely another meaning other than the Wilford Brimley/elderly pronunciation origins], *hamplanet/hambeast*, *scooterbeast/scootypuff*, *trigger(s)*, *curves*, *condishun*)
7. The full posting guide admonishes excessive use of "fat speak" in stories. What are the characteristics of fat speak (other than all caps)?

APPENDIX D: SOCIAL MEDIA POST FOR RECRUITMENT

Greetings good people of reddit, and thank you for your interest.

My name is Julia Signorelli, and I study linguistics at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte where I am currently working on my master's thesis. I am particularly interested in discussions surrounding health and body image in online spaces. Fat People Stories is a fascinating example of a kind of "digital public sphere", and I think it holds significant potential for understanding how people engage with each other on sensitive issues such as weight.

This survey aims to learn more about your experience using r/fatpeoplestories and about discussion surrounding health and human interactions. It is totally anonymous and is entirely for educational, nonprofit purposes. Depending on your answers, this survey should take around 10-20 minutes to complete. Questions are a mix of multiple choice and open-ended/constructed response.

My ultimate goal is to have my research published in an academic journal, and possibly in more popular formats such as articles or as a book chapter. My hope is that data from this survey and my research will ultimately prove useful in better understanding the ways that we construct perceptions of weight and health through language and what, if any, implications this may have for face-to-face communication about these same topics.

It will take me a few months to craft all of my research into a finished piece, but when I do, I will definitely post it here (with permission from the mods, of course!).

The link below will take you to the survey where you will first read the consent form and indicate your agreement to participate before taking part in the survey itself.

If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to contact me at jasignor@uncc.edu.

Thank you in advance for your consideration and for your participation!

APPENDIX E: ONLINE CONSENT FORM AND ELECTRONIC SURVEY

The purpose of the study is to explore how people discuss issues surrounding health and body image in online spaces. Participation should take no more than sixty (20) minutes to complete. Before taking part in this study, please read the consent form below and click on the "I Agree" button at the bottom of the page if you understand the statements and freely consent to participate in the study.

Your participation in this survey is voluntary. You may refuse to take part in the research or exit the survey at any time without penalty. You may skip any question you do not wish to answer for any reason.

You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us better understand the social functions of “venting” versus “ranting” and what, if any, implications this may have for face-to-face discussion about obesity and body image. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life.

Your survey answers will be sent to a link at SurveyMonkey.com where data will be stored in a password protected electronic format. Survey Monkey does not collect identifying information such as your name, email address, or IP address. You will be asked to provide your age and gender for the sole purpose of data aggregation and analysis of responses. All responses are treated as confidential and your responses will not be linked to your identity. Be aware that confidentiality will be maintained to the extent possible. There is always the risk of compromising privacy, confidentiality and/or anonymity when using the internet. However, the risk to your physical, emotion, social, professional or financial well-being is considered to be less than minimal.

If you have further questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, contact the Office of Research Compliance at (704) 687-1871 or uncc-irb@uncc.edu. If you have questions concerning the study, contact con-investigator jasignor@uncc.edu or Principal Investigator, Dr. Blitvich, pgblitvi@uncc.edu.

1. You may print a copy of this form. If you are 18 years of age or older, understand the statements above, and freely consent to participate in this study, click on the "I Agree" button to begin the survey.
 - A. I Agree
 - B. I do not agree

2. What is your age?
 - A. 18-20
 - B. 21-29
 - C. 30-39
 - D. 40-49
 - E. 50-59
 - F. 60 or older

3. What is your gender?
 - A. Female
 - B. Male

4. Are you a registered member of reddit, or are you a guest/visitor/lurker?
 - A. Registered member
 - B. Guest/visitor/lurker

5. How often do you visit r/fatpeoplestories?
 - A. 1 to 2 times a year
 - B. 1 to 2 times a month
 - C. Once a week
 - D. 2 to 3 times per week
 - E. Daily
 - F. Multiple times each day

6. Please describe your participation on r/fatpeoplestories:
 - A. I lurk only.
 - B. I lurk, but I will upvote/downvote posts and/or comments.
 - C. I comment intermittently.
 - D. I comment regularly but do not submit posts.
 - E. I comment and submit relatively regularly.

7. Why do you visit r/fatpeoplestories?

8. Based on the posting guide and sidebar info, it seems that the sub seeks to define itself more so by what it is not than what it actually represents or “stands for” (e.g. “We are NOT Fat People Hate...”). How would you describe the purpose of the community other than a place to post stories that happen to have a fat person as its subject? If you had to identify a larger purpose or “mission” for r/fatpeoplestories, what would it be? (Alternatively, how would you explain the sub to someone who is not a member of the community?)

9. Aside from what is posted in the sidebar, what makes an effective or “good” Fat People Story? What is the necessary criteria other than it needing to involve a fat person/people?

10. Do you discuss the type of topics explored on this sub and the sister sub, r/fatlogic (if you are a member) in any face-to-face, offline conversations?