



Open Access



## Fat Shaming: A Neoliberal Performance Review – Unveiling the Hidden Script Behind Body Policing

Mubra Noor<sup>1</sup> Areeba Noor<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** *The paper examines the widespread occurrence of fat shaming from the perspective of neoliberal ideology. The argument posits that fat shaming is not solely a societal stigma, but rather a deliberate strategy based on neoliberal principles that prioritise personal accountability, self-control, and economic efficiency. The study examines how overweight bodies are subjected to scrutiny and marginalisation through the analysis of cultural narratives and media portrayals. This reinforces socioeconomic hierarchies and perpetuates a cycle of discrimination and exclusion. The analysis emphasises the interconnectedness of fat shaming with matters of gender, race, and class, emphasising the necessity for a more comprehensive and analytical discussion on body politics. This critique seeks to question the underlying neoliberal ideology that supports the enforcement of societal standards on bodies, and instead promotes a more empathetic and fair approach to embracing and promoting variety and well-being.*

**Key Words:** Fat Shaming, Neoliberal Ideology, Body Policing

### Introduction

Spratt's (2023) "Understanding 'Fat Shaming' in a Neoliberal Era" examines the adverse social practice of fat shaming, describing its harmful effects and intricate cultural roots within the UK context. The article carefully navigates a web of interconnected concepts, weaving together analyses of fat shaming, performativity, healthism, and the overarching narrative of the "obesity epidemic." Through this exploration, Spratt argues that fat shaming operates as a performative act, coercing individuals into upholding neoliberal ideals of health, self-control, and, ultimately, economic productivity (Spratt, 2023). This review unpacks the strengths and weaknesses of Spratt's analysis, engaging with additional scholarly voices to enrich our understanding of this complex phenomenon and pave the way for more nuanced and compassionate approaches to health and body image in the neoliberal era.

This review adopts a multifaceted approach, acknowledging both the valuable insights Spratt offers and areas where the analysis could be further strengthened. The review begins by examining the key concepts underpinning Spratt's argument: fat shaming, performativity, healthism, and neoliberalism. It then delves into the strengths of the article, highlighting its contribution to understanding the harm and ineffectiveness of fat shaming, its focus on intersectionality and the disproportionate impact on marginalized groups (Murray, 2008; Warbrick et al., 2019), and its critique of healthism's individualistic blame game (Bayer, 2017). However, it also critically assesses areas where the analysis could be further enriched. This includes a call for a deeper historical context to situate the evolution of fat shaming practices within broader societal shifts (Knox, 2019), a closer examination of individual agency and the ways individuals navigate and resist shaming narratives (Carpino, 2017), and a more nuanced exploration of alternative frameworks like body neutrality and fat positivity movements (Reno, 2019) that move beyond weight-centric narratives and promote self-acceptance.

<sup>1</sup> BS Social Science of Health, Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, National University of Medical Sciences, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup> BS Social Science of Health, Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, National University of Medical Sciences, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.

▪ **Corresponding Author:** Mubra Noor ([noormalikn241@gmail.com](mailto:noormalikn241@gmail.com))

▪ **To Cite:** Noor, M., & Noor, A. (2023). Fat Shaming: A Neoliberal Performance Review – Unveiling the Hidden Script Behind Body Policing. *Qlantia Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 4(1), 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.55737/qjssh.725165441>



By engaging with a diverse range of scholarly perspectives, this review aims to shed further light on the complexities of fat shaming and its intersection with neoliberal ideology, highlighting both the strengths and limitations of Spratt's analysis. Ultimately, it strives to move beyond critique and towards the construction of a more inclusive and compassionate society where all bodies are valued and respected, regardless of size or societal expectations.

## **Analysis of Key Concepts: Navigating the Web of Fat Shaming, Performativity, and Healthism in a Neoliberal Era**

Spratt's (2023) analysis is based on understanding fat shaming not as an isolated act of cruelty but as a complex social phenomenon deeply embedded within the fabric of neoliberal ideology. To untie this web, it is necessary to first dissect the key concepts that guide Spratt's argument: fat shaming, performativity, and healthism.

### **Fat Shaming: More Than Just Words**

Fat shaming refers to the public mockery, ridicule, and stigmatization of individuals based solely on their body size. More than mere insults, Spratt convincingly argues that fat shaming operates within the "obesity epidemic" narrative, which medicalizes fatness and positions it as a moral failing deserving of public censure (Murray, 2008). This narrative, fueled by media and public health campaigns, often presents thinness as the pinnacle of health and desirability while simultaneously associating larger bodies with laziness, unhealthiness, and even immorality (Puhl & Brownell, 2001). The consequence of this cultural landscape is profound: fat shaming causes significant psychological harm, contributing to depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Puhl & Brownell, 2001). Further, these harmful effects disproportionately impact marginalized groups, with studies highlighting the intersection of fat shaming with racism, sexism, and classism (Warbrick et al., 2019).

### **Performativity: The Pressure to Conform in a Thin-Obsessed Culture**

Spratt's analysis takes a crucial step by framing fat shaming as a performative act within a neoliberal context. Drawing on Judith Butler's (1993) concept of performativity, Spratt argues that individuals are pressured to conform to neoliberal ideals of health, self-discipline, and productivity by enacting specific bodily performances. Thinness, in this context, becomes a badge of honour, signifying adherence to these desired qualities and securing one's social and economic "marketability" (Spratt, 2023). Fat shaming, then, serves as a mechanism to police these performances, publicly punishing those who deviate from the thin ideal and reinforcing the social consequences of failing to embody neoliberal values (Oliver, 2015).

### **Healthism: The Individualized Blame Game**

Neoliberalism's emphasis on individual responsibility extends to the realm of health. Spratt critically examines the rise of "healthism," an ideology that places the onus of maintaining health solely on individual choices and behaviours (Bayer, 2017). This framework conveniently absolves systemic factors like poverty, unequal access to healthcare, and unhealthy food environments from contributing to health disparities. Within this context, fat shaming becomes a tool for reinforcing healthism's individualistic blame game, stigmatizing fat individuals as solely responsible for their body size and any associated health concerns (Bayer, 2017). This not only ignores the complex interplay of social and biological factors influencing health but also perpetuates feelings of shame and inadequacy, further hindering individuals' capacity to prioritize well-being in healthy ways.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses: Illuminating the Scope and Limitations of Spratt's Analysis**

Spratt's "Understanding 'Fat Shaming' in a Neoliberal Era" shines a much-needed light on the detrimental social practice of fat shaming, offering valuable insights that strengthen our understanding of this complex phenomenon. However, recognizing both the strengths and weaknesses of Spratt's analysis allows for a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to combating fat shaming and its underlying ideologies.

One of Spratt's greatest strengths is the insightful framework he constructs by weaving together fat shaming, performativity, healthism, and neoliberalism. By moving beyond simplistic explanations, he reveals the intricate web of societal and cultural forces that shape and perpetuate fat shaming practices. This holistic approach not only illuminates the multifaceted nature of the issue but also provides a more effective platform for dismantling these harmful structures (Knox, 2019).

Furthermore, Spratt's unwavering focus on the detrimental impact of fat shaming is commendable. He convincingly demonstrates the psychological and social harm inflicted by this practice, challenging the often-downplayed effects of public ridicule and societal stigma. By highlighting the lived experiences of individuals subjected to fat shaming, Spratt underscores the urgency of addressing this issue with compassion and understanding (Puhl & Brownell, 2001).

Another noteworthy strength lies in Spratt's recognition of the intersectionality inherent in fat shaming. He sheds light on how this practice disproportionately impacts marginalized groups based on factors like race, gender, and class (Murray, 2008). This crucial insight necessitates moving beyond singular approaches and developing intersectional strategies that address the unique challenges faced by diverse communities (Warbrick et al., 2019).

Despite these strengths, some areas of Spratt's analysis could benefit from further exploration. One potential weakness is the limited historical context surrounding fat-shaming practices. Delving deeper into the evolution of these practices within broader societal shifts could provide a richer understanding of how neoliberalism built upon existing biases and inform more effective strategies for dismantling them (Knox, 2019).

Additionally, a more nuanced examination of neoliberalism itself could strengthen the analysis. While Spratt accurately connects fat shaming to neoliberal ideals, a deeper exploration of neoliberalism's complexities and internal contradictions could offer a more comprehensive picture of its influence on fat-shaming practices (Oliver, 2015).

Furthermore, while Spratt critiques the individualistic blame game of healthism, a closer look at the individual agency and how individuals navigate and resist shaming narratives could enrich the understanding of this complex dynamic. Engaging with works like Carpino's (2017) research on young women's experiences of fat shaming could provide valuable insights into this aspect (Carpino, 2017).

Finally, while acknowledging the limitations of healthism, expanding the discussion to include alternative frameworks like body neutrality and fat positivity movements could offer more hopeful and pragmatic strategies for promoting well-being beyond weight-centric narratives (Reno, 2019).

## Discussion

Spratt's "Understanding 'Fat Shaming' in a Neoliberal Era" presents a compelling argument: fat shaming operates as a performative act within a neoliberal context, reinforcing societal pressures to conform to idealized body images and upholding individualistic blame games for health outcomes. This main argument rests on the intricate connection between fat shaming, performativity, healthism, and the broader ideology of neoliberalism.

The analysis reveals how fat shaming functions as a performative act, forcing individuals to embody neoliberal ideals of thinness, self-discipline, and economic productivity (Butler, 1993; Spratt, 2023). Deviations from this thin ideal are publicly punished through fat shaming, reinforcing the notion that fatness signifies a failure to adhere to these desired traits and, ultimately, one's marketability within the neoliberal system (Oliver, 2015). This analysis resonates with Knox's (2019) work on fat empowerment and neoliberal discourse, highlighting how fat shaming is entangled with power dynamics and reinforces existing biases.

Further, Spratt critiques the individualistic blame game promoted by healthism, where the onus of maintaining "good health" rests solely on individual choices and behaviours (Bayer, 2017). Fat shaming aligns perfectly with this framework, stigmatizing larger bodies as evidence of personal failings and contributing to feelings of shame and inadequacy. As Ravary et al. (2019) point out, media portrayals often reinforce this association, presenting thinness as synonymous with health and success. Carpino's (2017)



research adds another layer by investigating how individuals, particularly young women, navigate and resist these narratives, highlighting the complexities of internalized shame and individual agency in shaping responses to fat shaming.

This performative and blame-driven environment of fat shaming has significant consequences, disproportionately impacting marginalized groups based on race, gender, and class (Murray, 2008; Warbrick et al., 2019). Zareba and Peri's (2021) research on microglial "fat shaming" in biology offers a fascinating biological parallel to this phenomenon, showcasing how internal and external forces can influence our perception of fatness. Recognizing these intersections and internal processes becomes crucial for developing effective interventions and fostering collective resistance.

To move beyond simply understanding fat shaming, Spratt urges us to actively challenge its underlying ideologies. This necessitates dismantling performativity's pressure to conform to thin ideals, embracing alternative frameworks like body neutrality and fat positivity (Reno, 2019), and advocating for health justice approaches that address systemic inequalities influencing health outcomes (Bayer, 2017). Warbrick et al.'s (2019) work on indigenous solutions and community-based approaches exemplifies this shift towards collective action and empowerment.

## Conclusion

Spratt's analysis serves as a critical torchbearer in navigating the labyrinthine realm of fat shaming. By weaving together performativity, healthism, and neoliberalism, he sheds light on the intricate social mechanisms that perpetuate this harmful practice. His focus on its performative nature within a neoliberal context exposes the pressure to conform to idealized body images, reinforcing individualistic blame for health outcomes and disproportionately impacting marginalized groups. This insightful framework illuminates the complex realities of fat shaming, urging us to move beyond superficial solutions and simplistic explanations.

Yet, Spratt's work also invites us to engage in a sustained dialogue, acknowledging the limitations of any singular perspective. While his analysis effectively connects fat shaming to larger societal forces, a deeper exploration of neoliberal nuances and internal contradictions could further enrich our understanding of its multifaceted influence. Delving into individual agency and resistance could add critical layers to the narrative, showcasing how individuals navigate internalized shame and subvert harmful messaging. Additionally, expanding beyond individual health and embracing health justice frameworks that address systemic inequalities becomes crucial for a truly comprehensive approach.

Spratt's call for continued critical examination resonates deeply. We must move beyond simply understanding fat shaming to dismantling its underlying ideologies. This necessitates fostering nuanced and compassionate approaches to health and body image. Embracing alternative frameworks like body neutrality and fat positivity challenges the thin ideal's hegemony and offers individuals agency in defining their own narratives of health and well-being. Additionally, amplifying the voices of marginalized groups and addressing intersectional inequalities remain essential in combating the disproportionate impact of fat shaming.

Ultimately, Spratt's analysis is not an endpoint but a springboard for further exploration and collective action. By engaging with diverse voices, recognizing the limitations of existing frameworks, and embracing nuanced approaches, we can move towards a future where all bodies are respected and celebrated, where fat shaming becomes a relic of the past, and where health and well-being are defined not by societal dictates, but by individual autonomy and a collective commitment to justice and equity.

## References

- Bayer, R. (2017). *Healthism: Culture, medicine, and the pursuit of perfection*. University of California Press.
- Bordo, Susan (2003). *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex."* Routledge.
- Carpino, T. L. (2017). *Young Women's Perceptions and Experiences of Skinny and Fat Shaming* (Doctoral dissertation, Carleton University).

- Cooper, Charlotte (2016) *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement*. Bristol: HammerOn Press.
- Knox, H. (2019). Fat Shaming vs Fat Empowerment: The Construction of Fat Bodies in Neoliberal Discourse. *Cultivate The Feminist Journal of the Centre for Women's Studies*,
- Murray, S. (2008). *Cultural History of Fat*. In V. Pitts-Taylor (Ed.), *Cultural Encyclopedia of the Body* (pp. 167-172). Greenwood.
- Puhl, R., & Brownell, K. D. (2001). Bias, discrimination, and obesity. *Obesity Research*, 9(12), 788–805. <https://doi.org/10.1038/oby.2001.108>
- Ravary, A., Baldwin, M. W., & Bartz, J. A. (2019). Shaping the body politic: Mass media fat-shaming affects implicit anti-fat attitudes. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 45(11), 1580–1589. [https://escholarship.mcgill.ca/catalog?locale=en&q=10.1177%2F0146167219838550&search\\_field=identifier\\_tesim](https://escholarship.mcgill.ca/catalog?locale=en&q=10.1177%2F0146167219838550&search_field=identifier_tesim)
- Rose Spratt, T. J. (2023). Understanding ‘fat shaming’ in a neoliberal era: Performativity, healthism and the UK’s ‘obesity epidemic’. *Feminist Theory*, 24(1), 86–101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001211048300>
- Warbrick, I., Came, H., & Dickson, A. (2019). The shame of fat shaming in public health: moving past racism to embrace indigenous solutions. *Public Health*, 176, 128–132. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2018.08.013>
- Zareba, J., & Peri, F. (2021). Microglial ‘fat shaming’ in development and disease. *Current Opinion in Cell Biology*, 73, 105–109. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ceb.2021.07.007>