EXPLORING DIGITAL SENSE OF COMMUNITY AMONG PLUS-SIZE SOLO WOMEN
TRAVELERS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF @CURVY

By

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July, 2022

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The age of the internet has allowed human culture to take a digital form. The subsequent impact of the internet undoubtably created different avenues of interest for scholars. This research is situated within the interest of online safe spaces for marginalized travelers. As a feminist geographer, I am interested in understanding how gender and body size impact the lived experiences of solo female travelers. I believe it is possible to study this marginalized group of travelers by accessing one of their online spaces. To investigate my interest, I select a Facebook group for plus-size women travelers, @Curvy, to serve as a case study. Within @Curvy, global members post and interact with one another through sharing personal stories, tips and other content related to travel and body size. After narrowing down a timeframe, I gathered relevant posts using purposive sampling to perform a qualitative content analysis. From this, I discovered evidence of McMillan and Chavis' sense of community theory. Therefore, my study utilizes this theory to discuss how similar lived experiences can now result in a sense of community taking shape online.

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A Thesis

Presented To the Faculty of the Department of Geography, Planning and Environment

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

M.S. Geography

by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank Dr. Justin Robertson for kicking me out of high school my senior year. Your decision to hold me accountable for my unsatisfactory attitude and behavior was the wakeup call I needed. Your tough love made me realize if I wanted success, I would have to change. My changes eventually led to a master's degree, which I will forever be proud of. My second and most significant thanks go to my adoptive parents- Chris and Laura. The love, support, kindness, and compassion you two have shown me in the last six years has completely changed my life. I am eternally grateful for each of you, especially your cooking Chris. I would also like to thank my soon-to-be husband, Kenneth Tolliver. Your love and friendship are my greatest blessings. It is impossible to express my full appreciation for you and the support you have given me throughout my time as a graduate student. I will attempt to do so by removing myself from your payroll, only partially. Finally, I would like to extend a ginormous thank you to my thesis committee and in particular my advisor, Dr. Beth Bee. My time as a graduate student was made whole by the relationship we formed. I am so thankful for your many words of encouragement that pushed me towards the finish line. I made it, with your help!

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Advancements in modern technologies have connected people around the world like never before. Social media in particular has aided in the progress of global communication. According to Chaffey (2022), there are approximately 4.62 billion people around the world using social media platforms. This equates to nearly half the global population having an online presence on a site such as Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, or Facebook to name a few. In fact, the average American in 2018 spent nearly six hours a day on social media (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). Whiting and Williams (2013) explored why people use social media to the degree that they do. They identified 10 uses and gratifications of using social media- social interaction, information seeking, to pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about others.

The most used social media platform is Facebook. In 2019 there were 2.4 billion people using the social media platform (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). One major distinction from Facebook and other social media platforms is Facebook's group feature. On the homepage of Facebook groups, there are 17 categories of groups to join. To name a few, there are groups for those interested in fashion/style, home/garden, science/tech, fitness/health, and travel/leisure. Facebook users join groups for entertainment, socializing, access to information and other personal reasons (Park et. al., 2009). However, some users seek to promote hate, violence, and spread misinformation (Hutchinson et. al., 2021).

Nevertheless, this research instead focuses on the positive outcomes of engaging in online spaces. People are now able to create an online space that meets their needs and/or wants, as well as the needs and/or wants of others who join. DeWolf et al. (2014) supports this claim by stating that, "Facebook users can employ settings that limit the audience to whom the

information flow is directed or, together with others, agree on what type of information can be disclosed." (pg. 444). In other words, privacy settings allow groups to develop for certain people based on criteria that members must meet to join. Privacy settings allow group creators the authority to set the group as private, meaning they must approve the members to the group. Typically group creators ask those requesting to join the group questions that will answer whether the requesting individual meets the criteria for joining or not. This can be particularly beneficial for those whose lives or interests exist outside of normative expectations. Scholars, such as Lucero (2017), now refer to these types of groups as 'safe spaces.'

Clark-Parsons (2018) emphasizes how women in particular have made use of online platforms as 'safe spaces.' She argues that the spaces have been used in different ways, such as a way to battle gender-specific concerns, like sexual harassment. They do so through women-only groups that discuss lived experiences rooted in womanhood and all its complexities. According to Duggan (2014), these spaces are considered 'safe' because they exclude men, the primary perpetrators of misogyny. Johnsson (2021) argues that women-only online safe places are attractive for women because, "these communities can provide a sense of community and belonging, support, and the relative anonymity can make it easier to talk about topics that are sensitive and difficult to talk about publicly" (pg. 11).

This creates a unique opportunity for feminist geographers interested in researching the lived experiences of women[1]. Feminist geography encompasses many things, but at its core, it draws attention to the ways that gender inequities shape and are shaped by material space and place (Rose, 1993). In fact, feminist geographers Domosh and Seager (2001) argue that feminist geography can radically shift male dominated and Euro-centric approaches to space and place by asserting an emphasis on gender. In other words, by studying women in a geographical context,

feminist geographers can challenge masculine forms of knowing which perpetuate gender inequality. From a feminist geographic perspective, the women-only communications that exist within Facebook groups provide insights into both Facebook groups as 'safe spaces' for women as well as the spaces outside of Facebook that these women navigate and discuss in the group.

My research showcases how women navigate both virtual and material travel spaces and create a sense of community through a content analysis of @Curvy, a women-only Facebook group focused on travel. I combine feminist geography with McMillan and Chavis' (1986) 'Sense of Community' framework to investigate an online community for plus-size, solo women travelers, or women who travel by themselves. My research used qualitative methods, which are privileged in feminist geography and expanded upon in the methodology chapter (Kwan, 2001). I also apply pre-existing feminist geography literature, like that of Lloyd (2019), to lay the foundation for understanding the value of my research. She argues,

> "our emotional interactions with spaces and people around us can become embodied in a way that implicates our size as felt, so that there are multiple ways that size can be lived and experienced. Like emotions, our body size is dependent on the socio-cultural spaces that we find ourselves in. How body size is experienced can change throughout the day, as people move around the city in relation to different places and people, and the practices we engage in" (pg. 815).

My project is driven by my interest in gender, body size, and solo travel. Hence, my interest in investigating the experiences of plus-sized, solo women travelers. This population is a particularly favorable for this study for three reasons. First, solo women travelers are located in and traveling around the world, therefore they speak to the spatial distribution of those impact by negative body discourses. Second, despite being aware of how their body size is perceived

locally and abroad, they chose to embark on solo travel anyway. In this way, plus-size solo women travelers serve as disruptors to the negative body discourses which historically restrict their lives, as will be highlighted in my results. Thirdly, I focus on solo women travelers because of the different experiences they have compared to women who travel in groups or with men. According to Jordan and Aitchison (2008), solo women travelers are more subjected to the male gaze because being alone is perceived as being available. In other words, solo women travelers are more aware of their gender and its restrictions because of how they, as solo women travelers, are received by others.

This research also emphasizes how scholars can study communities which take form online. Plus-size solo women travelers are a community without defined geographic boundaries. They are globally positioned and therefore cannot be easily studied in the physical world. With this being said, my research draws attention to how online communities allow for global communities to be studied. My project utilizes the 'Sense of Community' framework to help structure this research on an online community. This framework contains four elements, (1) Membership, (2) Influence, (3) Integration and the fulfillment of needs, and (4) Shared emotional connection. I used qualitative coding and this framework to understand the experiences of solo plus-sized women travelers and how they create a sense of community online. Figure 1 visualizes these four elements and how they were used in my research. The words and word groups attached to the elements are codes (in quotations) and categories I created to make sense of my data. I will discuss this process in detail in the methodology section.

Sense of Community Framework

Membership		Influence		Integration & Fulfillment of Needs		Shared Emotional Connection	
Body Size	**Gender**	**'Admin Post'**	**'this group'**	**Competence**	**Shared Values**	**'Flying'**	**'Bathing suit'**

• 'Curvy'
• Fat
• 'Big/bigger'
• 'Plus-size'
• 'Overweight'
• 'Chubby'
• 'Heavy'
• 'Fluffy'
• 'Chunky'
	• 'Girl'
	• 'Woman'
	• 'Mom'
	• 'Gal'
	• 'Lady'
			• Happiness
			• Hopefulness
			• Personal actions
				Personal topics Resource suggestions	Needs Priorities Goals
					• 'space' • 'Don't • 'love
					      let size myself'
					      stop
					      you'		

Figure 1: Visual of 'Sense of Community' framework usage in my project

My research questions are:

- RQ 1- Who are members and how do they show their right to belong in @Curvy?

- RQ 2- What does influence look like in @Curvy?

- RQ 3- How are members rewarded through being a part of @Curvy?

- RQ 4- How do members establish shared emotional connection in @Curvy?

The findings to these questions contribute to feminist geographers who study body size and gendered travel experiences separately. However, my study combines these two topics to understand how body size and gender intertwine to influence plus-size women travelers experiences.

My research is significant because it creates an avenue for feminist geographers to draw attention to two important conversations. First, cultural norms and values about body size are flexible and vary from place to place, meaning they are not static, unchanging, or universal (Batnitzky, 2011). Second, plus-size solo women travelers disrupt negative body stereotypes which restrict the lives of women around the world. The following chapters elaborate on these topics, contributing new conversations in feminist geography.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 <u>Feminist Geography</u>

Feminist geography, a subdiscipline of human geography, is essentially the application of feminist theory to the discipline of geography. As suggested by Crossman (2021), feminist theory:

> "..shifts its assumptions, analytic lens, and topical focus away from the male viewpoint and experience toward that of women. In doing so, feminist theory shines a light on social problems, trends, and issues that are otherwise overlooked or misidentified by the historically dominant male perspective." (pg. 1)

When feminist theory is applied to geography, conversations surrounding women and gender across time and space come to the forefront. Susan Hanson was an early contributor to feminist geography. Hanson (1992) discussed the application of feminist theory in geography in her presential address when becoming the president of the American Association of Geographers. She says, "from geographers, feminists need to learn to appreciate the geographic basis of all social life, and from feminists, geographers need to learn to acknowledge the gendered basis of geographic patterns and processes" (pg. 582). She concluded by suggesting that when applied together, geography and feminist theory can contribute powerful new insights about the world.

Put simply, feminist geographers explore avenues of geographic research using a feminist perspective. For example, geographers are interested in comparing and identifying difference based on varying locations of environmental and cultural factors. Feminist geographers are more specifically interested in the analysis of gender in places and how it influences the lived and embodied experience of women (Billo & Hiemstra, 2010 & England, 2006). The multitude of geographic research areas explored in feminist geographers can be observed in Figure 2.

Feminist Geographies

Geography of Women

Topical focus	Theoretical influences	Geographical focus
description of the effects of gender inequality	welfare geography, liberal feminism	constraints of distance in spatial separation

Socialist feminist geography

Topical focus	Theoretical influences	Geographical focus
explanation of inequality, and relations between capitalism and patriarchy	Marxism, socialist feminism	spatial separation, sedimentation of gender relations in place

Feminist geographies of difference

Topical focus	Theoretical influences	Geographical focus
The construction of gendered heter(sexed) identities; differences among women; gender and constructions of nature; heteropatriarchy and geopolitics	Cultural, post-structural, post-colonial, psychoanalytic, queer, critical race theories	Micro-geographies of the body; mobile identities; distance, separation, and place; imaginative geographies; colonialisms and post-colonialisms; environment/nature

Feminist transversal geographies

Topical focus	Theoretical influences	Geographical focus
Citizenship; migration; nationalism; transnationalism; ethnographies of the state; development; political ecology; geopolitics; state violence; relations between global North and global South; material objects; progressive possibilities for mapping and GIS; affect and emotions	Theories of transnationalism, globalization and transversal networks and circuitries; non-representational theory; political ecology; Agamben; political economy; theories of affect	Global networks and circuits; multi-scalar and multi-site focus on connections; relations and processes; constructions and disruptions of scale; space of exception; borders and border breakdowns; embodiment and connectivity; dispossession

Figure 2: Interwoven Strands of Feminist Geography (Pratt 2009, pg. 248).

Although the focal topics of research vary within feminist geography, Pratt (2009) identified six common tendencies in feminist geography. First, feminist geographers are critical of gender oppression, manifestations of heteronormativity in society, and the ways in which these topics are reproduced in geographical knowledge. Second, feminist geographers tend to analyze sexism within geographic institutions by observing staffing within geography departments. Third, feminist geographers highlight the interconnectedness of geography's sub-disciplines, including economic geography, social geography, political geography, and cultural geography. Fourth, feminist geographers are committed to the idea that knowledge is partial and dependent on context. This leads to the fifth tendency of challenging traditional masculine knowledge and its restrictions to be objective and scientific. The sixth common tendency is to produce knowledge aimed at political and social transformations (Pratt, 2009).

Although not mentioned by Pratt (2009), an additional focus in feminist geography is the concept of embodiment (Longhurst, 1995; Sharp, 2005; Nash, 2010). This avenue of interest in feminist geography is discussed by Richardson (2015). She says:

"Our bodies are at the core of our experience of the geographies we inhabit. We live our lives as embodied creatures; feeling, sensing, and thinking through the body. Our relationship to space, place and landscape is inescapably shaped by the kind of bodies we have. And yet our embodiment is often written out of geographical discourse." (pg. 6)

In a 21-year review of *Gender, Place, and Culture*, the flagship journal for feminist geography, Longhurst and Johnson (2014) gather all articles pertaining to embodiment. Their study emphasized the different types of identities that scholars center their research around. For example, one of the articles referenced examined how place and identity are coproduced through the study of black southern women after emancipation in the United States (McKittrick, 2000).

This involved exploring how identities of gender, race, and class played a role in the embodied experiences of a group of women from a particular time and place. While concluding their review, Longhurst and Johnson (2014) offer explanations for why feminist geographers study embodiment. First, feminist geographers and their discussions of embodiment have the potential to disrupt "hegemonic masculinist structures of knowledge production" (pg. 268). Secondly, feminist geographers study embodiment because they have a "desire to address unequal power relations and an acknowledgement that bodies are historically and geographically situated" (pg. 271).

2.1a <u>Feminist Geography and Body Size</u>

As discussed, feminist geographers are interested in how various intersecting social markers-gender, age, class, religion, race, and ethnicity, interact to create different lived experiences (Hopkins, 2008). However, it was not until recently that feminist geographers expanded their research interests to include engaging with body size as a social identity (Evans, 2006). Lloyd (2019) illustrates the justification for this expansion in research by suggesting that body size is a lens which can be used to analyze gendered experiences in different places. However, it was Longhurst (2005) who first called for geographers to start thinking about the influence of body size, weight, and shape. She says, "It is time to write body shape *geographically"* (pg. 247). Subsequently, feminist geographer began to do just that, taking the conversation of body size, shape, and weight in different directions depending on their interests.

For example, research by Colls (2012) sought an "understanding of the spatialities of bodily experience" (pg. 175) Whereas Evans et al. (2012) were not only interested in the spatial analysis of body size, but its relationship with the built environment. Their work aimed to "explore body size and embodied experiences of urban space in order to uncover exclusionary

geographies which shape people's lives" (pg. 105). This was echoed in research by Colls and

Evans (2014) which stressed the importance of highlighting how "particular social, cultural,

political, and economic environments can make *living* as a fat body problematic" (pg. 735).

Lloyd (2014) studies body size and gender in a completely different context, through a

conversation of migrating domestic workers. Her paper emphasizes how modern women and

their bodies cross social, cultural, and national borders. She facilitates her research through

transnationalism, using an approach she refers to as 'trans-sizing.' This is explained as a

viewpoint that privileges cross-cultural research which challenges the nature of (some) national

understandings of sized bodies. She suggests that a trans-sizing agenda enables body size

identities to be studied geographically, which can "provide valuable contributions to feminist

geographical research" (pg. 128). Her paper highlights how body size can be studied in different

contexts to better understand the spatially variations of body size norms and values towards

women.

2.1b <u>Feminist Digital Geography</u>

In addition to studying the material experiences of gender and its intersecting identities,

like body size, feminist geographers are turning their attention to digital spaces. McLean and

Maalsen (2013) believe digital studies could revitalize feminist geography. More specifically

they say, "social media provides a space for multiple voices and thus can more effectively

mobilize a variety of issues" (pg. 245). This sentiment is also discussed by Tudor (2021) who

focuses on queer communities and how sexuality and embodiment take different shapes on and

offline. These scholars speak to how feminist digital geographies apply feminist theory to a

broad range of topics within the study of online space and digital technologies. McLean et. al.

(2020) argue that feminist digital geographies are beginning to account for "the broadening and

deepening of digital engagement in everyday lives, as well as challenging the structural

dynamics that may reproduce inequalities and intensify corporatization and commodification

processes" (pg. 469).

Elwood and Leszczynski (2018) highlight a few of the many research avenues in this

study area. They suggest one avenue involves exploring how women's involvement in the digital

sphere disrupts the gendered idea that computing is masculine or male-only. For example, Light

(1996) discusses how women's employment with switchboards challenged a previously male-

dominated field. She argues that "less centralized forms of control in digital spaces opened new

opportunities for advancing women's socio-political status" (pg. 633).

Elwood and Leszczynski (2018) also discuss the avenue of research that is critical of

digital spaces that unevenly represent male viewpoints. For example, Stephens (2013) draws

attention to how crowd-sourced data primarily reflects male views of landscape. Her work from

2013 utilizes Google maps as an example, saying:

> "The features and attributes on OSM [OpenStreetMap] reflect a male view of the
>
> landscape. Google Maps, the proprietary basemap, while structured differently, suffers a
>
> related gender problem: as men dominate as contributors to the map, and men also
>
> dominate as reviewers of the information contributed by volunteers" (pg. 982).

Stephens (2013) also emphasizes how masculine spaces, such as brothels and strip clubs, were

more highly represented on Google maps than spaces considered to be feminized, such as child-

care centers. This example speaks to how some scholars in feminist digital geographies identify

and criticize digital spaces which unevenly represent male viewpoints.

Feminist digital geographies also investigate how technologies are also changing research

methods within geography (Longhurst, 2017). For example, Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst

(2017) highlight how digital technologies now allow interviews and content analysis to be carried out digitally. They suggest digital technologies are "stretching fieldwork in new directions across time and space" (pg. 148). This avenue of interest is particularly noteworthy given the recent global pandemic as the Coronavirus restricted most face-to-face research methods (Nguyen et. al. 2020). However, digital technologies allowed research to continue despite limited physical human interaction. My research echoes this idea by relying solely on a digital space as a source of data.

2.2 <u>Geography and Sense of Place & Community</u>

In a traditional sense, Geographers such as Relph (1976), Buttimer (1976), and Tuan (1977) emphasize the taken-for-granted nature of place. They each emphasize how place is a dimension of human life that is inescapable and therefore previously unquestioned by scholars. As a result, their work highlights the depth of place and how it plays an integral role in human experience (Seamon & Sowers, 2008). This led to the idea that geography as a disciple is centered around the notion of place. As Seamon and Sowers (2008) put it, "astronomy has the heavens, History has time, and Geography has place" (pg. 43).

However, not all geographers tackle the concept of place the same way. Creswell (2009) suggests geographers have three approaches to studying place. The first approach is descriptive, meaning the geographer aims to identify and describe each particular place and its uniqueness. Regional geographers typically employee this approach. The second approach uses a social construction lens to understand how places are instances of underlying social processes. Radical and feminist geographers mostly apply this approach when studying place. The third approach is phenomenological, meaning places are an essential part of the human experience. Humanistic geographers often use this approach.

Geographers also developed an interest in understanding the psychological bonds and emotional ties people feel towards a place (Bow & Buys, 2003). This has resulted in geographers attempting to measure and map the idea of place attachment (Brown et. al., 2015). Bow and Buys (2003) suggest one way to investigate place attachment is through a study of communities. They argue that a sense of community is intrinsically linked to place by saying, "It is generally agreed that community is somehow tied to place because of the powerful relationship that exists between them, so much so, that it is often difficult to separate them in conceptual terms" (pg. 3). In other words, it is possible to understand deeper feelings held towards a place by studying the communities within the place under review. Essentially, a sense of community can be seen as something that develops peoples' attachment to place.

According to Townley and Kloos (2009), Seymour Sarason is regarded as the first to study the sense of community. Sarason (1974) was a community psychologist who conceptualized sense of community as a phenomenon of bonding between community members, which he argues is essential for personal and collective well-being. Four years later, Doolittle and MacDonald (1978) created a 40-item scale to determine the sense of community in social organization. The scale was used to rank communities into low, medium, and high sense of community based on five things: (1) informal interaction with neighbors, (2) safety or having a good place to live, (3) pro- urbanism, or having privacy, (4) neighboring preferences involving the preference for frequent neighbor interaction and (5) localism which is the opinions and a desire to participate in neighborhood affairs. Others also created their own method for measuring sense of community (Bachrach & Zautra, 1985). However, McMillan and Chavis (1986) are recognized as have the most widely accepted sense of community framework (Rivera-Segarra et al., 2016 & Schwarz, 2009).

2.2a <u>McMillan and Chavis' Sense of Community Framework</u>

Feminist geography is one half of my theoretical framework, which is essentially seen as what guides and structures the development, collection, and analysis of research (WUL, 2022). The other half is the Sense of Community framework by McMillan and Chavis (1986). The 'SOC' framework provides researchers with four major components of communities that can be explored: (1) Membership, (2) Influence, (3) Integration and the fulfillment of needs, and (4) Shared emotional connection. The explanation for the framework's success is discussed by Wombacher et al. (2010) who say, "Unlike previous community frameworks, theirs was the first to be thoroughly grounded in psychological literature and for that reason perhaps has become the most widely accepted and applied in community research" (Pg. 672).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) claim that a sense of community is dynamic with various forces that work together to produce the experience that is a sense of community. Their goal was to identify the multiple elements at play when discussing sense of community. In doing so, they identified four key elements in sense of community: (1) Membership- feeling of belonging and of sharing a sense of personal relatedness, (2) Influence- the sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members, (3) Integration and the fulfillment of needs- feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their group membership, and (4) Shared emotional connection- belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences (Wombacher et al., 2010). McMillan and Chavis (1986) then used these elements to create their own definition of sense of community, which is "..a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (Pg. 9).

In their article, McMillan and Chavis (1986) reference multiple pre-existing community studies. Some focused on specific neighborhoods (Doolittle & MacDonald, 1978; Glynn, 1981; Riger & Lavrakas, 1981) while others studied rural communities (Bachrach & Zautra, 1985). However, only one reviewed the sense of community in a non-site-specific group. Hillery (1955) studied sense of community in an organization where members vary geographically, the American Psychological Association (Hillery, 1955). McMillan and Chavis (1986) then discussed the idea that communities can be both tied to a geographic space and exist without geographical boundaries. They suggest two types of communities, one is based off a territorial notion of community and the other is relational with no reference to location.

After the SOC framework was published, the internet was developing and quickly changing global communication as we knew it. As Leiner et al. (2009) puts it,

"…by 1985, Internet was already well established as a technology supporting a broad community of researchers and developers and was beginning to be used by other communities for daily computer communication" (pg. 26).

In other words, the age of the internet allowed for communities to take shape in what is now known as 'cyberspace.' This then allowed scholars to apply the SOC framework to a broad range of online communities. For example, the SOC framework has been applied to studied online communities of people who play video games (O'Connor et al., 2015) and those struggling with infertility (Welbourne et al., 2009). My research adds to literature which studies online communities of marginalized people. This is achieved by applying McMillan and Chavis' (1986) SOC framework to the content of a women-only Facebook group for solo, plus-size travelers.

2.3 <u>Solo Women Travelers</u>

Historical books and journals from women travelers of the past, such as Gertrude Bell (2014) and Isabella Bird (1880), teach us that women have been traveling for leisure purposes for centuries. These historical texts are not only examples of how feminist geographies and tourism can connect, but also shed light into the lived experiences of women travelers from long ago. Their books and journals highlight how the social position of women in those times resulted in men typically accompanying women on their journeys. This can best be illustrated through the story of Jeanne Baret, who lived between 1740 and 1807. She is best known as the first woman to circumnavigate the world, however she did so disguised as a man because otherwise she would not have been able to travel independently (Youlden, 2022). This story speaks to the restrictions placed upon women by what Welter (1966) calls 'true womanhood.' She divided the attributes of "true womanhood" into four virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. To be a true traditional woman one must be religious, a virgin until marriage, obedient to men, and perform domestic duties well. These include all aspects of homemaking: becoming a mother/bearing child, raising the children properly, cooking family meals, and constantly cleaning and tidying up the home. As you can imagine, this left little time for anything outside of domestic work for most women, including traveling. The exception was elite women, whose lifestyles afforded them more free time (Domosh, 1991). These traditional roles persisted for decades and continue to exist today. However, technologies and industrialization brought forth varying degrees of social changes for all, including women. According to Hartman (ho), single women couldn't help but see new opportunities for themselves as factories, retail, and offices began to open. It important to note how the new employment options were primarily reserved for

single women, as married women were continuously confined by the idea of "true womanhood."

When women began to earn their own money, they experienced new economic and social freedom like never before. This likely explains the continuous rise of women choosing to travel solo. According to *The Wandering RV* magazine (2020), internet searches of "solo female travelers" has increased 62% between 2016 and 2019. This statistic speaks to the rise of interest, and subsequently, the rise in the number of solo women travelers. Essentially, a solo woman traveler is a femme-identified individual who embarks on a journey without a travel partner or group. Solo women travelers are stereotypically thought to be young, attractive, single, white, and western girls (Specia & Mzezewa, 2019). One Facebook group for solo women travelers, Solo Female Travelers Club (2020), conducted a survey of 5000 of their members. They found that over 75% of them were from the US, Canada, and Europe. Additionally, nearly 50% were under the age of 35. 44% of those surveyed were also single compared to the 30% of those in a relationship.

However, the stereotypical idea of solo women travelers does not capture the diversity of women travelers, who actually vary in age, ethnicity, race, marital status, nationality, body size and other social categories. There are some studies which do account for the diversity of solo women travelers. For example, although Dillette and Benjamin's (2021) work discussing the modern "Black Travel Movement" isn't tailored only toward solo women travelers, it touches on topics that apply to them. Their research discusses how the residue of hundreds of years of slavery and racist inequities still impact black travelers today, including black solo women travelers (Dillette & Benjamin, 2021). This example speaks to how race can play into the experiences of solo women travelers.

Other studies explicitly analyze the phenomena of solo women travelers from around the world, includes southeast and eastern Asian countries, as well as solo women travelers who travel to predominantly Muslim countries (Xie, 2019; Osman et al., 2020; & Hosseini et. al., 2021). For example, one study highlights common trends in those who identify as Muslim solo women travelers: (1) emphasizing the facets of Muslim life (i.e following dress codes, no alcohol or pork consumption, the necessity to getting families' consent), (2) approaching travel in a brave, well-prepared and flexible way, (3) valuing information sources, (4) clear inspiration deriving from other Muslim women who travel alone, (5) a prevailing attitude that comes from being positive and open-minded, (6) prioritizing safety, and (7) encouraging others to try new things (Oktadiana et. al., 2019). This example highlights how religion affects solo women travelers.

There were also studies of solo women travelers which are not centered around race, nationality, or religion (Berryman, 2015; Pereira & Silva, 2018; & Terziyska, 2021). Instead, the research primarily pertains to the constraints and motivation of all solo women travelers (Valaja, 2018; Kaba, 2021; & Karagoz, 2021). For example, Jordan and Gibson (2005) discuss how solo women travelers feel subjected to surveillance because of their gender and other's perception of them being alone. Their results found that solo women travelers were

> "… conscious that they were the subject of sexual speculation because of their solo
> presence in the sexualized and potentially limonoid spaces of tourism. They worried that
> their singleness signaled availability and constructed them as the subjects of unwanted
> sexual attention of men in the places they visit" (pg. 206).

Other constraints can be seen in work by Wilson and Little (2008), who applied Valentine's (1989) 'geography of fear' to discussions of solo women travelers. Their work identified two

additional fears or constraints of solo women travelers: (1) the personal sense of being prone to vulnerability in unknown spaces and (2) a sense of restricted access and temporal mobility based on fear in their travels.

There are also scholars who, while acknowledging the challenges that arise when women travel solo, instead investigate the positive elements of solo women travelers and their experiences. This includes Chiang and Jogaratnam (2006), whose research aims to "investigate the leisure travel motivations of women who travel alone and to examine the characteristics and the consumption patterns of solo women travelers" (pg. 60). In other words, their project seeks to understand what motivates women to travel independently and what their travels consist of. Their project determined five motivations for solo women travelers: (1) to have new and exciting *experiences* of new places and ways of life, (2) to be *social* by meeting new people and having fun, (3) to improve *self-esteem* by developing independence, (4) to relax and spend time doing only the things they want and (5) to *escape* their typical day to day routines. These sentiments are also found in the work of others who study why solo women travelers, like Wilson and Harris (2006). Their research explores how traveling independently is meaningful for women. By analyzing the words and stories of solo women travelers, Wilson and Harris (2006) identified three themes which bolsters their concept of 'meaningful travel.' The first theme is searching for self and meaning, the second is seeking self-empowerment and the last is yearning for "connectedness with others" (Pg. 167).

2.4 Skinny Culture

Within the literature about solo women travelers, there has yet to be a study exploring the impact of a woman's body size when traveling solo. Therefore, my research takes into account the intertwining of body size and gender when traveling solo. As such, it ignites conversations

about how body size greatly influences a person's lived experiences (Colls & Evans, 2014; Longhurst, 2005; Ingraham & Boero, 2020), including those involving travel. This is especially stressed by Fuller (2021) who says we are living in an era "where plastic surgery, injections, dangerous diet culture, and extreme workout regimens became the norm for decades as skinny jeans and size two waists seemed to be the perfect body type for mainstream society. This "skinny" culture quickly led to low self-esteem, depression, alcoholism, and extreme eating disorders." (pg. 1)

Biefeld et al. (2021) argue that discourses about bodies are gendered such that "women often face more stigma than men as well as more pressure to be thin" (pg. 289). This is especially true in westernized societies (Albertson et al., 2003). At the same time, the ideal of thinness reinforces stereotypes about women and body size. As a result, thinner women are socially perceived as more intelligent, popular, attractive, and happy than plus-size women (Biefeld et al., 2021). These stereotypes and the pressure to be thin lead to the social marginalization of plus-sized women.

The literature offers two explanations for why plus-size women are marginalized. The first is directly connected to what Striley and Hutchens (2020) calls 'thinness culture' which creates the negative connotations associated with plus-size women. Put simply, the size and shape of a woman can immediately result in negative assumptions based on collective knowledge about plus-size people. These stigmas are dated and can be found in literature from the 90's. For example, Bell and Valentine (2013) discusses how a plus-size body is understood to be unhealthy, ugly and sexually unattractive. Their work goes on to say that these stigmas create a process where "fat people are stereotyped as undisciplined, self-indulgent, unhealthy, lazy, untrustworthy, unwilling and non-conforming" (pg. 36). Stoll (2019) suggests the negative

associations of size result in thinness being a marker for social status, and therefore a desired feature. In thinness culture, a slender woman's body shows 'self-control and dominance of mind over body, but also the appropriate civilized female behavior' (Alberti, 2021). Ideologies like these perpetuate discourses which equate thin bodies as the 'ideal and morally acceptable body shape' and therefore posits society against plus-size women (Lloyd, 2019).

The second explanation for the marginalization of plus-size women in literature is linked to the idea of the "obesity crisis" which has been spread by the medical world. This so called 'crisis' has correlated poor health with amount of fat on the body. Because societies place high levels of respect and trust into objective medical science and healthcare, the public easily accept their finding that health is determined by BMI. However, scholars like Murray (2007) are working to bring awareness to the inherent subjectivity of all judgements, even those of doctors. In her research, she contests the idea that medical practitioners are completely objective through her claim that medial observations are "never, cannot ever be, neutral, but are always already structured in and through the variety of cultural meanings, specificities, and prejudices that provide a kind of lens through which we perceive others and the world" (pg. 362). The idea that medicine and medical workers are fully objective is what Murray (2007) calls the 'clinical gaze." This gaze can be contribute to the lack of rejection towards medical discourses which inaccurately link health to body size. In her article, she includes a personal example of encountering this discourse during a doctor visit. Murray (2007) remembers being encouraged to lose weight due to being labeled 'medically obese' despite having good results on procedures which actually indicate one's health, such as blood pressure readings, lung capacity tests, and proper functioning of internal organs.

Gailey and Harjunen (2019) initiate a conversation that brought attention to the large scope of women impacted by negative stigmas and stereotypes regarding body size. Their research is a cross cultural examination of the experiences' of plus-size women in North America and Finland. They concluded,

> "Women's stories in both cultures about fatness bear so many similarities that one would not know they were collected in two historically distinct cultures. The same deep-seated feelings of shame, guilt, self-hatred, and embarrassment appear in women's accounts of fatness whether they are Finnish or North American" (pg. 386).

In other words, their study showcases how negative body discourses persists globally and result in deep feelings of internal and external hatred (Gailey & Harjunen, 2019).

However, it is important to address how cultural values about bodies and body size are not static or fixed. Osayomi (2020) discusses this when emphasizing how larger bodies in Nigeria symbolize prosperity and wealth. In other words, thinness in Africa is correlated with poverty, disease and struggling. This example serves as an argument against the idea that plus-size automatically signals poor health, just as a thin body does not symbolize good health. My research presents a similar challenge to thinness culture by examining the experiences of plus-sized solo women travelers. As I will demonstrate, these experiences and the sharing of these experiences in a Facebook group dedicated specifically to plus-sized women travelers, not only creates a sense of community amongst its participants, but can also challenge and resist the negative discourses about body size that confine women around the world. Such resistance is vital as body size norms and values are neither objective nor universal. The hatred and marginalization of plus-size people, particularly women, in western societies is unjustified and in need of critique.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This research will address four questions:

- Who are members and how do they show their right to belong in @Curvy?

- What does influence in @Curvy look like?

- How are members rewarded through being a part of @Curvy?

- How do members establish shared emotional connection in @Curvy?

To address these questions, I utilize a qualitative methodology. Qualitative research, in comparison to quantitative research, primarily focuses on the interpretation of non-numerical data. Qualitative methods contribute to what Mathijssen et al. (2021) call "a better understanding of the complexity and the multifacetedness of the social phenomena under research" (pg. 12). In essence, qualitative research seeks to study dimensions of the human experience that are excluded in quantitative studies.

3.1 Research Study Site

The study site for this project is @Curvy, which is a subgroup of @GirlsLoveTravel. The main group was created in 2015 by Haley Woods. Before creating @GirlsLoveTravel, Woods traveled excessively and found herself getting lonely. To combat loneliness while traveling alone, Woods created a Facebook group for women passionate about traveling. She started the group with 40 of her friends and over the course of six years, the group grew to over a million members around the world (Ongie, 2019). As membership began to grow exponentially, members began requesting subgroups, or a separate space designated for members with particular similarities who wish to connect further. For example, there are subgroups of @GirlsLoveTravel for members who are moms, fitness fanatics, or in the LGBTQ+ community. However, this project focuses on @Curvy, the subgroup for members who identify as plus-size.

Put simply, I chose @Curvy as my study site because membership in the group signals the meeting of the criteria for this study. This study investigates the intertwining of gender and body size identities through plus-size solo women travelers. Therefore, the criteria for inclusion in this study are individuals who identify as women and are active or inspiring travelers. I also chose @Curvy as the study site because since its creation in 2016, the group has grown to 18,775 members. The @Curvy site stores seven years' worth of posts and interactions between thousands of plus-size women travelers. Essentially, this subgroup is a treasure trove of data which contains detailed information pertaining to the lives of plus-size women travelers. By reviewing the interactions of members of @Curvy, I can investigate how body size and gender impact the lived experience of plus-size solo women travelers and their connections to one another.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

As @Curvy contains a large amount of data, I had to first select a timeframe for the study. I needed a large enough sample, but one still feasible with my timeline. I decided to narrow my search to 2017 and 2018, which is the first full year @Curvy was a group and the year after. This allowed me to analyze how a sense of community developed within the first two years. I also had to narrow my search to access the posts relevant to my study. As stated, @Curvy is for members of @GirlsLoveTravel who identify as plus-size. However, not all plus-size travelers travel solo. Therefore, I used the search feature on the home page of @Curvy to gather all posts and the associated comments containing my key word: 'solo.' This resulted in 103 posts.

Once I gathered all posts and associated comments referring to solo travel, I used the advance search tool in Facebook groups to only view posts during my 2017-2018 timeframe.

This search provided me with 19 posts from 2017 and 84 posts from 2018. I then created a table in a Word document and manually copied and pasted each post and its individual date, comments, replies to comments, and number of likes into the table (Table 1). I refrained from collecting members' names to protect their anonymity.

Date	Post	# of Comments	Comments	Replies to comment	# of likes

Table 1: Example table used in data collection

After making a Word document for each post, I created two NVivo projects. One project for the data from 2017, and another for the data from 2018. I uploaded 19 Word documents into the 2017 NVivo project, and 84 Word documents in the 2018 NVivo Project. I then used the NVivo software to conduct the content analysis. NVivo is a powerful tool for qualitative scholars because it allows users to make inferences from their organized data. The first step in NVivo is open coding each post. This is when the researcher goes through their texts line by line and assign codes to different words or groups of words. For example, on 11/27/2017 a member posted the following: "Hey ladies! Where could this curvy girl go for a solo trip on January? — looking for recommendations." This post was coded for its date, how many likes it had, the fact that is a question for the group, and the fact that it mentions being (1) curvy, (2) a girl, (3) going on a solo trip, and (4) is looking for recommendations.

Once I open coded all 103 posts, there were 105 codes attached to 2017 data and 132 codes for the 2018 data. Utilizing NVivo to deductively organize my data according to the SOC framework I then sorted the 237 codes created during open coding into one of the four elements

of SOC framework: (1) membership, (2) influence, (3) integration and fulfillment of needs, and

(4) shared emotional connection. To do this, I created a Word document containing the gist of

each element in the framework (Figure 3). I used the document as a guide when deductively

sorting the codes. As a result of sorting, I was better able to investigate the data for elements of

SOC using the codes in each category (Figure 4).

Membership:

A sense of belonging, personal relatedness, investment of the self, feeling the right to belong, being a part of the community, boundaries including identifying people who belong and people who don't belong, emotional safety (through belonging), feelings of acceptance, willingness to sacrifice for the group, identification with the group, sharing common symbols, and personal investment.

Influence:

Mattering, individual members making a difference to the group and the group having an influence on its members, conformity, members having a say in what happens in the group, consensual validation, closeness.

Integration & Fulfillment of Needs:

Feeling that members' needs will be met by resources of the group and through membership, reinforcement, rewarding to members, status of membership, group success, group and individual competence, "person-environment fit," serve individual's needs by belonging, shared values, members are able and willing to help one another and receive help in return.

Shared Emotional Connection:

The commitment and belief that the community has (and will continue to share) a history, common places, shared events, time together, and similar experiences; positive experiences among group members; relationships and bonds between members; completed tasks; shared importance of events/tasks; investment (time, money, intimacy); emotional risk between members; honors, rewards and humiliation by the community have an impact on members; spiritual bonds.

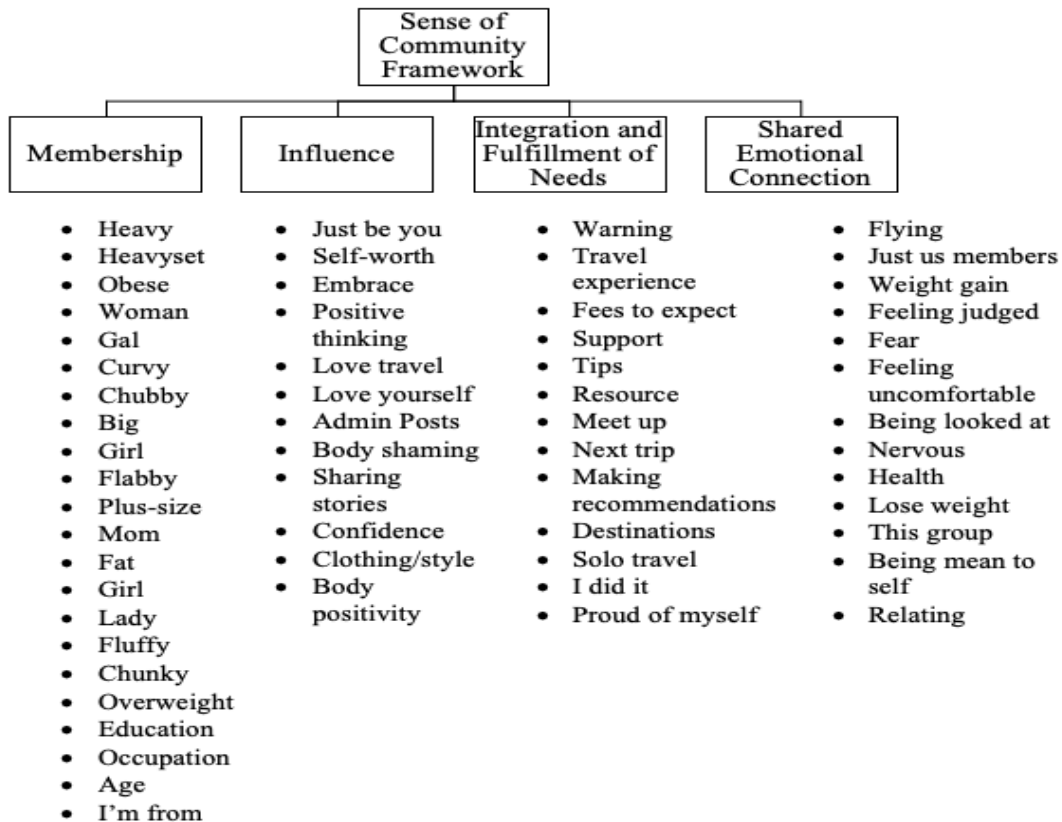Figure 3: Aide for deductive categorizing

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                          ┌──────────────┐
                          │   Sense of   │
                          │  Community   │
                          │  Framework   │
                          └──────────────┘
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  ┌───────────┐  ┌───────────┐  ┌──────────────┐  ┌──────────────┐
  │Membership │  │ Influence │  │Integration and│  │   Shared     │
  │           │  │           │  │Fulfillment of │  │  Emotional   │
  │           │  │           │  │    Needs      │  │  Connection  │
  └───────────┘  └───────────┘  └──────────────┘  └──────────────┘
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Membership	Influence	Integration and Fulfillment of Needs	Shared Emotional Connection
• Heavy	• Just be you	• Warning	• Flying
• Heavyset	• Self-worth	• Travel experience	• Just us members
• Obese	• Embrace	• Fees to expect	• Weight gain
• Woman	• Positive thinking	• Support	• Feeling judged
• Gal	• Love travel	• Tips	• Fear
• Curvy	• Love yourself	• Resource	• Feeling uncomfortable
• Chubby	• Admin Posts	• Meet up	• Being looked at
• Big	• Body shaming	• Next trip	• Nervous
• Girl	• Sharing stories	• Making recommendations	• Health
• Flabby	• Confidence	• Destinations	• Lose weight
• Plus-size	• Clothing/style	• Solo travel	• This group
• Mom	• Body positivity	• I did it	• Being mean to self
• Fat		• Proud of myself	• Relating
• Girl			
• Lady			
• Fluffy			
• Chunky			
• Overweight			
• Education			
• Occupation			
• Age			
• I'm from			

Figure 4: Example of some codes being categorized into one of the four elements of SOC in no particular order

3.3 Research Credibility

Dallimore (2000) contends that objectivity has been put on a pedestal in academia, and subjectively based knowledge has been seen as separated from 'real' science. As a result, the validity of feminist qualitative research is often questioned. Dallimore (2000) argues that "critics should not discredit feminist research by claiming it fails to meet traditional standards of validity and objectivity when, in reality, these critics may simply be uncomfortable with the goals of feminism generally and feminist researchers more particularly" (pg. 162).

Some scholars suggest that research validity can be achieved through 'trustworthiness' with the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stewart, 1994; and Taylor, 1994). In other words, validity can be achieved in feminist qualitative research if there is confidence in the researcher,

or trust that findings are factual and meet the goals of the feminist research. Cosgrove and McHugh (2002) describe the goal of feminist research as something that

"…puts gender at the center of one's inquiry. Specifically feminist research examines the gendered context of women's lives, exposes gender inequalities, empowers women, advocates for social change, and/or improves the status or material reality of women's lives" (pg. 23).

The results chapter will demonstrate how my project works to achieve the goals of feminist research. First, my study discusses inequality in content of gender and plus-size bodies by emphasizing how women are unequally impacted by thinness culture compared to men. Second, my project promotes social change by encouraging others to rethink restrictive body norms that reproduce stigmas and hatred towards primarily plus-size women.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussions

Utilizing McMillan and Chavis' (1986) framework, I present the findings of my research in four sections. One for each element of the SOC: (1) Membership, (2) Influence, (3) Integration and the Fulfillment of Needs, and (4) Shared emotional connection. This framework not only provided structure for this research, but it also afforded me two things. First, it allowed me to focus my investigation of the data fully for signs of each element of the SOC framework. Second, this focus allows for a detailed report of each element of SOC I found within the dataset.

4.1 <u>Findings of Membership</u>

(RQ-1) Who are members and how do they show their right to belong in @Curvy?

To answer the question of who members are, I relied on codes I developed to categorize the demographic data shared within the posts I gathered. This includes members' ages, occupations, locations, and education. Often times, but not always, members disclosed this type of information in introduction-like posts when joining the group. The following example highlights how members introduce themselves and disclose information used to answer the question: Who are the members of @Curvy?

Example 1:

> "Hi beautiful ladies! I was born and raised in NY but I've been living here in Los Angeles for 21 years. I'm a curvy girl (just turned 43) who was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis as a teenager. I somehow made it to the bottom and back to the top of Iguazu Falls on the border of Argentina and Brazil. In a span of less than 8 months starting in September 2016, I was diagnosed with congestive heart failure, had surgery to implant a CRT-D (pacemaker/defibrillator combo), and lost both of my parents. I went to one of

my favorite cities in the world (Sydney, Australia) to try and start to heal. This September

I'm going to Fiji solo!"

Using posts like these, I created a created a chart containing the number of members in my

sample who disclosed demographic information (Table 2).

	2017	2018
Age:	58	16
Occupation:	34	7
Nationality:	143	20
Education:	10	1

Table 2: Demographic data from sample

There were 74 members who included their age in their posts. Members who disclosed

this information were mostly in their 20's to 40's. However, the oldest member who shared her

age was 66, and the youngest member to identify age was 18. This age range speaks to how

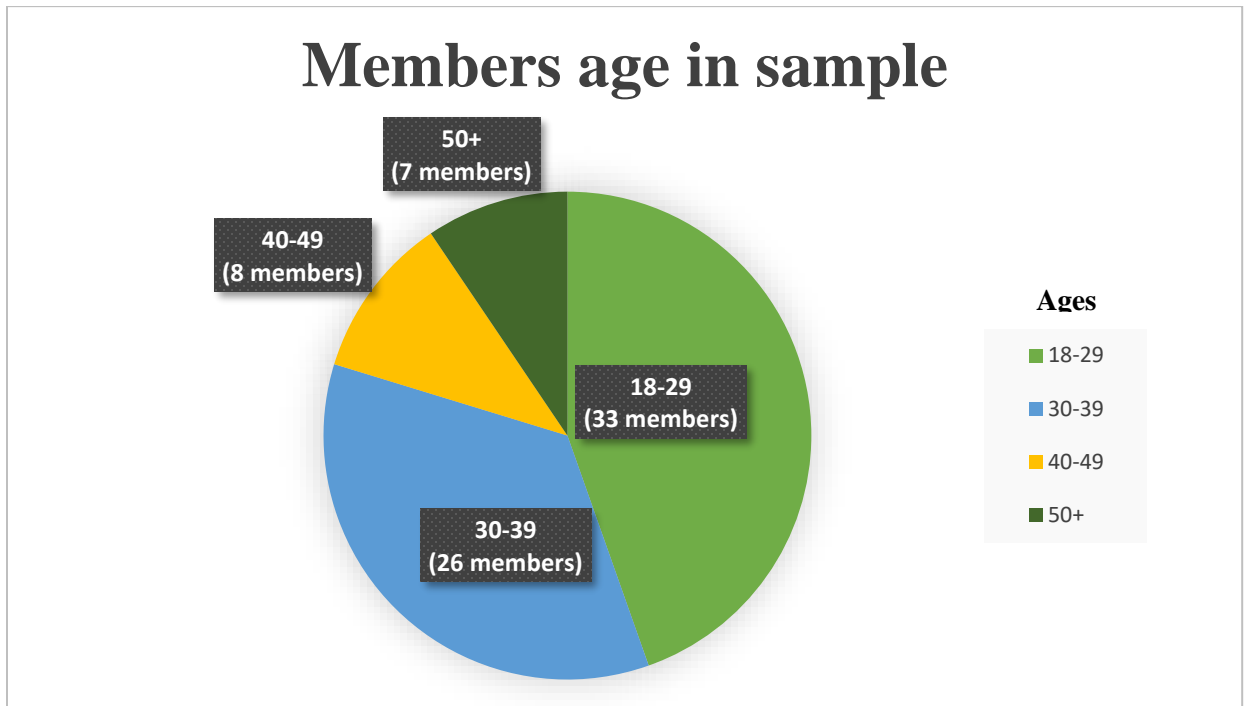members of @Curvy represent all different age groups.

Figure 5: A graph of members who disclosed their age in posts with the dataset

Of the posts that contained demographic data, 41 members mentioned their occupation. Members' jobs varied dramatically, some worked in healthcare, others in retail. However, the most common job held within my sample of @Curvy members is an educator. Of the 41 members who listed their job, 11 were teachers of some sort. There was a Zumba teacher, theater teacher, and a middle school teacher. The second most common jobs within the sample were in the tourism industry. This includes flight attendants, cruise ship workers, and tour leaders. However, the sample also included an artist, an entrepreneur, an engineer and even a ninja (Table 3)

Teachers	11
Tourism industry	8
Healthcare workers	7
Students	3
Management	3
Artist	1
Lawyer	1
Ninja	1
Writer	1
Live events producer	1
Library assistant	1
Retail	1
Engineer	1
Personal assistant	1

Table 3: Chart of members who disclosed their occupation within the sample

A review of members who shared their nationality in their post spotlight how they are globally positioned. There were 160 members who included their nationality in a post within my dataset. Although there were members in South America (2), Africa (8), Asia (6), the Middle East (1), and Australia (9), a majority of members were from the global north- the United States (89), Europe (34), and Canada (11).
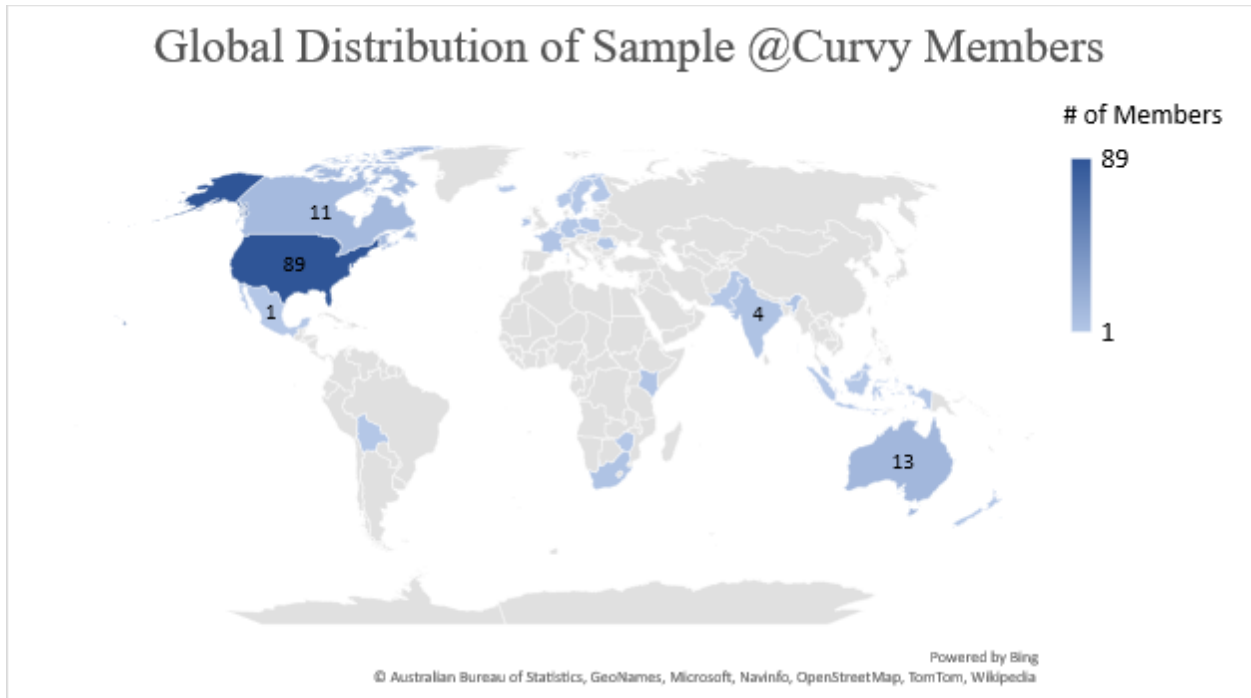

Figure 6: Nationality of members of @Curvy who shared where they are from with the dataset

In terms of education, it was a demographic that was rarely disclosed. Only 11 members discussed the level of education they received. There was one member with a law degree, two members with bachelor's degrees, and seven members with master's degrees. There was also a member working on the TEFL certificate which certifies people to teach English as a foreign language.

Degree type	Number of members in sample with degree
Law	1
Masters	7
Bachelor	2
Certificate	1

Table 4: Education levels of some @Curvy members

To summarize, my analysis of the demographic data in the @Curvy sample concludes four major things. First, a majority of members are aged between 20 and 40, however, members' ages do vary. Second, most members in @Curvy work in service careers or in education. Third, although some members are from South America, Africa, and Asia, most are from the global north- Europe, Canada, and the United State. Fourth, members of @Curvy are educated, with master's degrees being the most held degree for members.

The other half of the first research question centers around how members demonstrate their right to belong in the group. According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), members feel as though they have the right to be in the group because they fit the criteria of membership established by the community. Meeting criteria for membership is important, as McMillan and Chavis (1986) put it, "Membership has boundaries; this means that there are people who belong and people who do not." Essentially, for a community to have strong membership, criteria must be defined. A community where all members meet the same requirements creates what McMillan and Chavis (1986) call a sense of emotional safety. They believe emotional safety is "necessary for needs and feelings to be exposed and for intimacy to develop" (pg. 9).

In @Curvy, membership criteria is twofold. First, one must identity as a woman who is an active or aspiring traveler. Second, one must identify as having a larger body size than the norm. Therefore, membersip is dependent upon identifying as a woman and deviating from the

normal body by having a larger size. From my content analysis, I discovered that members achieve membership by self-labeling themselves. Members attach labels that are prescribed to individuals who are biologically female, as well as labels connected with having a larger body. This mechanism for meeting membership criteria can be observed in the following post, "Hi everyone! My name is --! I'm a 28 year old mummy to be from the UK, constantly up and down with my weight but consistently curvy girl with a travel obsession" Therefore, when this member self-identified as a mom and curvy girl, she demonstrates her right to belong in the group by fitting the membership criteria. Although the previous member specifically self-labeled her femme identity, this was not always the case. This can be observed in the following post, "Hi guys! I am a curvy (I usually go straight to "fat", no shame!) traveler, and I am excited to hear everyone's experiences on the road." This post highlights two key ideas. First, there are multiple interchangeable words that can be used to describe larger bodies. Second, not every member's post identifies gender. This explains why there they are a plethora of codes representing labels used to acknowledge their large bodies compared to those for femme identity.
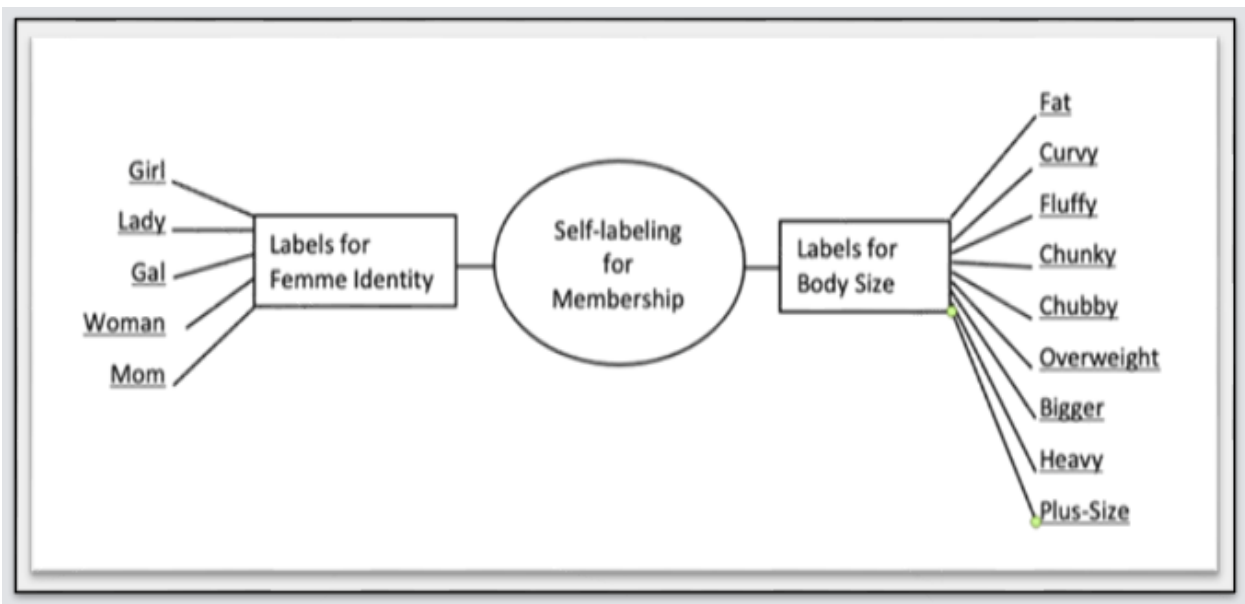

Figure 7: Mind map of labels apply to themselves to demonstrate how they belong

Labels for femme identity		Labels for body size identity	
Girl	15	Curvy	46
Woman	11	Fat	22
Mom	5	Big or Bigger	19
Gal	3	Plus-size	14
Lady	3	Overweight	4
		Chubby	3
		Heavy	2
		Fluffy	2
		Chunky	1
Total	37		113

Table 5: Terms used when self-labeling

4.2 Findings of Influence

(RQ-2) What does influence in @Curvy look like?

McMillan and Chavis (1986) posit influence as a bidirectional concept in their theory of sense of community. One of these directions involve members of a community having influence over the group itself. Whereas the other direction involves the community having influence over its members. This interpretation created a feasible way to analyze @Curvy for the element of influence.
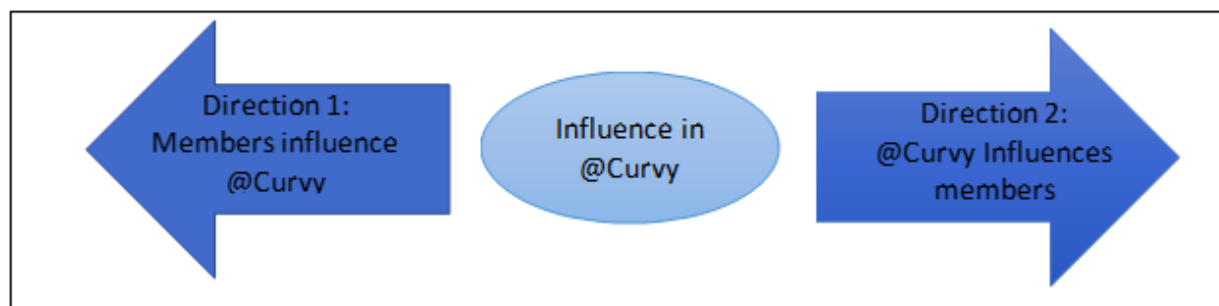

Figure 8: McMillan and Chavis' bidirectional influence concept applied to @Curvy

4.2a Direction One

In this view of influence, members are seen as having an impact on the overall group. With this understanding, I reviewed my dataset while asking, "Are there any signs of individual member impacting the group environment?" I found my answer to this question when reviewing

the content attached to my code "Admin posts.' This code was created for when group moderators posted or responded to a member's post. My analysis suggests that a member of @Curvy can influence the group through becoming a moderator. Moderators are group members who accept new members, promote engagement in the group, and review posts for instance where group rules are broken. To explain further, I will showcase an instance where a moderator removed a member for unkind remarks.

For context, the conversation used to visualize the influence of moderators takes place in the comments section of a post. The post is from a member sharing her disappointed after a recent photo shoot in Rome while traveling solo. 77 members commented on her post with mostly an outpour of love and support toward the member struggling to see beauty in herself because of her body size. 10 of the members commented along the lines of "you are gorgeous/pretty" Another 13 members responded with "you look amazing/stunning/great/ beautiful/ fabulous. 11 other members commented saying they liked/loved the photos shared by the original poster. However, one comment was not received well by others-

> "Either own the fact that you are overweight & ok with that fact, or lose weight. Don't blame anyone or anything for your own insecurities. I think you look gorgeous BTW - I wouldn't even classify you as overweight. Clearly you have your own mental struggles - I hope you can learn to love yourself. Do you travel to obsess about your looks or to have new experiences? Get out there and live, laugh, love - life is too short to waste"

Figure 9 visualizes the replies to the comment above. The interaction illustrates how members can influence @Curvy by being a moderator- someone who reinforces rules that foster an open and safe environment.

(1) Oh wow, you're pretty terrible.

(2) girl please- grow up.

(3) while I understand that you're being blunt, what you're saying can be pretty hurtful, especially with such directness.

(4) Dont shoot the messenger - please tell me you have a shred of intelligence and are not a 1 dimention character. Learn to accept reality- its actually where freedom lives. Dont bind yourself with your own BS.

(5) This isn't the place for that type of comment girl. Show your #gltrespect and use

6) She's clearly very unhappy. Original Poster should just disregard.

(7) I hope she does! Every other comment on this post has been great! Let's focus on those from now on!!

(8) -- and --, thank you for your support. -- you're entitled to your own opinion. However, saying to people that surely they have a "shred of intelligence" because they don't agree with you is incredibly disrespectful. Secondly, whether or not I'm overweight has precisely zero to do with how hard I work to keep fit. You're not my doctor. So don't presume to tell someone to "just lose weight". Accepting yourself and being confident is not a once-off decision that someone makes. You have no idea of my circumstances or the hard work I've done to be happy with myself over a number of years. I'm a happy, healthy and confident person. And I'm not perfect. So, some days, I struggle with the way that I feel about myself. And that's when I turn to this group - because it's a safe place to express concerns, and relate to others who have felt the same. Don't make it a less safe space with your negativity. Because it's not welcome here.
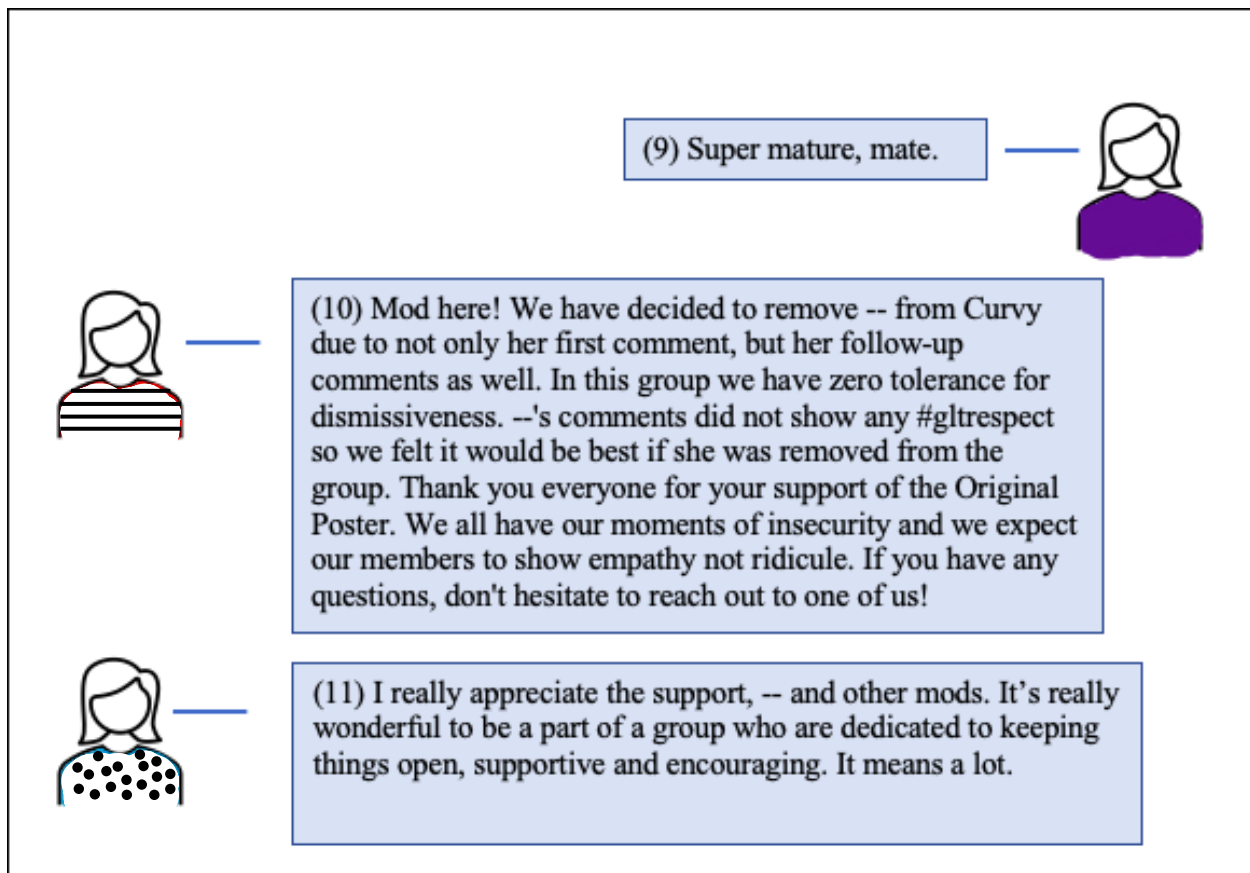
Figure 9: Showcasing a moderator influencing @Curvy by removing a non-compliant member

As shown above, five members, represented with the colorless women icons, voiced their disapproval of the harsh response. The member with the mean comment, on the right side, responded to a couple of these concerned members. The member who originally posted also responds to the comment considered to be insensitive, she is represented with dots. The significant take away from this illustration being the comment in stripes, highlighting how members can influence @Curvy. The moderator's comment speaks to how they influence @Curvy through reinforcing rules which create an environment that provides 'emotional safety' for members. The final comment speaks to how members value the work done by the moderator to protect the group's intimacy.

Although there is only one instance within my dataset where a moderator removes a member, it clearly displays the level of influence members can have when volunteering as a

moderator. This level of influence is also displayed when reviewing the number of likes and comments on each post received. Essentially, I reviewed each post to see which had the most engagement through the number of likes and comments it received. I observed post by moderators received by far the most amount of engagement. For example, in October of 2017 a moderator posted the following to ignite engagement in the group-

WELCOME TO CURVY! Please read the guidelines posted below and introduce yourselves in the comments. We look forward to getting to know everyone and making this an amazing community of love and support! *** GUIDELINES OF CURVY****

1. This group is geared towards Curvy ladies but welcomes women of all shapes and sizes, including allies. Curvy has a zero tolerance policy for dismissiveness. We are all different shapes and sizes and dismissiveness will get you muted for a period of time, removed from Curvy and/or removed from Girls LOVE Travel completely.

2. The purpose of this group is to empower and provide a safe haven for ladies of the Curvy community when it comes to travel and anything else us Curvy ladies may encounter through life. All posts must be Curvy-related. Posts are not required to be travel-related but must somehow incorporate the Curvy lifestyle.

3. Shaming of any kind is NOT allowed. Please remain respectful to each other. This also means no shaming of anything happening in the main group. Remember, Curvy is a part of GLT and shaming will get you removed.

4. Medical advice is not allowed in Curvy. Additionally, Curvy does not encourage weight loss surgery however we do realize that our members do deserve a platform to share and express their experiences. Please remember medical advice is against guidelines and will be removed.

5. Editing your post after it has been approved to include promotional information such as Instagram, Twitter, etc. handles is against guidelines. If you edit your post to include these items, your post will be deleted and you may be removed from Curvy. Promoting yourself is only allowed in Monday's Whatcha Doin' dedicated post.

6. We encourage positivity and advice for a healthy lifestyle. When a member requests advice about a healthy lifestyle, it's expected that all members provide love and support to the community.

7. Everyone's struggle is different so please be open minded and respectful when engaging in conversation. Some topics may be sensitive and we expect all members to be respectful when engaging in these posts. Invalidating a member's feelings will result in you being either muted for a period of time or removal from Curvy.

8. No blocking of Moderators or Admins. This will result in your removal from Curvy.

9. This is not a place to promote weight loss remedies, products or solutions. We support all members in their journeys but do not allow promoting weight loss. This will result in your removal from Curvy and possibly from the main group.

10. Please come to Curvy with the intention to be active and engaged. We want to get to know you! Thus, we can and will be removing any "lurkers" in the group. Lurking is identified as anyone who looks but never touches ("touching" can include: reacting to posts, commenting on posts, and starting conversations).

11. This is an official subgroup of Girls LOVE Travel® - all guidelines from the main group must be adhered to even if they have not been mentioned here. Our inboxes are always open so please come to us with concerns, suggestions, and #gltLOVE! You can also email us gltcurvy@gmail.com

The moderators are: --, -- and --. The admin is --.

Thank you!

- Mod team

This lengthy post from an admin was posted nearly a year after the group was created. It is essentially a recap of @Curvy's rules, but it also encourages members to introduce themselves. There were 813 comments to this post and 340 likes. Of the 19 posts collected in 2017, there were only three posts with more than 50 likes. Of the three, two were posts from moderators encouraging group engagement. Therefore, the analysis of number of likes and comments further explain how group members serving as moderators directly influence the group as a whole through their posts which receive the most attention and interaction.

4.2b <u>Direction Two</u>

In this direction, instead of members impacting the group, it is members being impacted by the group. To explore how @Curvy impact's its members, I reviewed the content attached to the 'this group' code. I created this code to contain context of how members talk about the group. I noticed three themes when reviewing the contents of the 'this group' code. The first being general influence of happiness from the groups' existence. The second being the influence on levels of hopefulness thanks to the group. The last being the influence @Curvy has on its member's individual actions.

Of the 58 instances where 'This group' was coded, 36 of those times were expressing member's love and gratitude for the creation of the group. For examples, the following posts fall within this category; (1) "I'm in GLT for a year and so but and always missed that safe space where I can share particular experiences from a big girl as ask for seat belts extension or avoid harassment. So happy to have found **this group**" And (2) "I'm so happy there is a **group** for us

curvy girls and I'm so so so so happy to be here!!" These examples speak to how @Curvy, just through its creation, influences member's general level of happiness.

After removing the 36 posts corelated with members being happy about the group, there were 22 codes remaining. Of the remaining, I observed that members discussed hopefulness stemming from @Curvy. Most of the hopes were connected to the idea of getting something out of their membership that could help them in one way or another. For example, (1) "Heya, my name is -- and I'm from Hampshire, England. I'm not very empowered, I've been in California for 4 weeks and I've spent it all covered up, **hoping** some positivity on **this group** will get me into the bikini I packed! thanks for having me" In this post, the member is hoping she will be influenced by the positive content in @Curvy to wear the bikini she packed. (2) "…being apart of **this group I hope** I gain inspiration on destinations, tips, suggestions and motivation to explore!" In this example, the member is hopeful that she will be influenced to explore by @Curvy's inspiration and motivation. (3) "I'm holding myself back from dream trips because of anxiety **and I'm hoping this group** will help me alleviate some of those concerns" In this post, the member has hopes of @Curvy influencing her by alleviating concerns that hold her back traveling. These examples represent how @Curvy influences some members in terms of hopefulness.

Once I removed the posts pertaining to general happiness and feelings of hopefulness, there were fewer than ten posts. A few of the remaining posts did not speak to influence, such as one which said, "I am new to this group!" Since this post and a few others were not helpful when reviewing for how @Curvy influences it's members, I removed them from the analysis. What remained were posts which described how @Curvy influenced its members' personal actions. (1) "Hey ladies!! I just got back from my very first trip abroad-and I did it SOLO!!! Encouragement

from this group helped me realize I am capable of making my dreams of travel come true!" In this post, the member acknowledges how encouragement from @Curvy's community impacted her actions. She realized that she could make her travel dreams come true, which appeared to be solo traveling. This was not the only post of its kind. There was an additional post along the same lines, (2) "You inspired me to go on my first solo trip ever. Thank you! I love this group so much!" This post is less wordy, but essentially says the same thing: @Curvy influenced me to travel solo. These two examples speak to how @Curvy influences members' personal decision-making and actions.

To summarize, by using a code used to store how members talk about the group, I discovered three contexts which can illustrate how members are impacted by the group. First, @Curvy influences members' happiness by being a safe space for plus-size women travelers. Second, @Curvy influences members by giving them hope through inspiration and motivation. Third, @Curvy influences members actions as shown in my examples.

4.3 <u>Findings of Fulfillment of Needs</u>

(RQ-3)- How are members rewarded through being a part of @Curvy?

This element of SOC corresponds with members feeling rewarded through membership by having their needs met. McMillan and Chavis (1986) identified multiple forces in groups that cater to the needs of members, referring to them as reinforcers. The first reinforcer is status. Because they did not specify, I interpreted this as members feeling that they have a standing in the group. The second reinforcer is competence. This corresponds with believing the skills and competence of other members can be used for your own benefit. The third reinforcer is shared values. This is the satisfaction that results from involvement with individuals who share the same personal values.

Of the reinforcers listed, I found that the second and third examples were the most noteworthy within @Curvy. However, this does not infer that status is not shown within @Curvy, rather my study did not capture it. I do not believe this reflects inadequacy in my study, but instead points to the intricate nature of this topic. As stated by McMillan and Chavis (1986), "given the complexity of individuals and groups, … it has been impossible to determine all of the reinforcements that bind people together into a close community, although several reinforcers have been identified" (pg.12) Here the authors acknowledge how not all reinforcements can be identified or comprehended. Therefore, the sections below showcase the two prominent reinforcers that work to fulfill the needs of members within @Curvy.

4.3a Competence in @Curvy

The results of the coding process uncovered large numbers of members seeking advice, recommendations, and tips. Of the 103 posts in my dataset, 39 were coded as 'questions' for the group. The chart below displays how the questions-based posts fell into two categories, (1) asking for suggestions and resources or (2) asking personal questions related to body size.

Asking for Suggestions or Resources		Asking about Personal Topics	
Activities	6	Relating	12
Destinations	4	Logistics	5
Clothing	4	Romance	1
Online Resources	3	Meeting up	1
Public Transportation	1		
Photography	1		
General	1		
Total	= 20		= 19

Table 6: Types of questions asked in @Curvy

The multitude of questions asked in @Curvy is suggestive of how members use one another as resources. A better example of this can be observed in the comments of this post-

"… as a bigger woman, it is hard to find real advice that is relevant to me. I recently got my passport and have figured out where I want to go (SE Asia on a G adventures tour) but have done nothing else. My questions for you fellow travelers are: 1. Do I have time to get everything done in order to leave by Dec 24th? I am worried about vaccinations and other things I don't know I should be doing. 2. Are there resources that give me a checklist of how to prepare for an international trip? Do you have lists or resources that you use to prepare for international travel? 3. The trip I want to go on is with G adventures and is a trip to Southeast Asia. Anyone had any experiences (good or bad) with G adventures? 4. How do I decide what to pack? Are there good websites to help me? 5. Anything else I need to know as a big girl?"

In response to this post filled with questions, some members respond with resources to check out, like online packing lists. However, one member responded with, "We did Vietnam with G Adventures and absolutely LOVED it. After 30 countries, it's still the best vacation we ever did. I'll be happy to answer some of your questions and give you some insight" This comment speaks to how members can connect with others who can help them through membership in @Curvy.

4.3b Shared values in @Curvy

While discussing the second reinforcer, McMillan and Chavis (1986) say, "when people who share values come together, they find that they have similar needs, priorities, and goals, thus fostering the belief that in joining together they might be better able to satisfy these needs and obtain the reinforcement they seek" Therefore, to analyze the shared values in the group, I looked at evidence of shared goals, priorities, and needs.

Figure 10: Parts of Shared Values according to McMillan and Chavis (1986)

In the 'need' portion of shared values, I assumed the following assumption to be true: people behave in ways that meet their needs. Therefore, when reviewing codes, I asked myself, "What are members doing in @Curvy?" When reviewing my codes I determined members were mostly sharing and discussing personal experiences, emotions, and thoughts which displayed how intertwining gender and body size identities are. For example,
"I love that this subgroup exists because when it comes to traveling many of my concerns and questions are related to my being curvy. I am 37 and I love this group already because your posts are so inspiring, interesting and informative"

This example speaks to the simple need for a space where members can discuss and share their travel experiences shaped by gender and body size to an audience that can relate. The second portion of shared values are priorities. Priority has two meanings in the English language. The first involves precedence, or the order to which something can be obtained. The second use

is for regarding something as being of the upmost importance. This discussion is situated within the latter definition. Therefore, while reviewing content for shared priorities I asked myself, "what concepts appears to be of significance for members?" When doing so, the following post stood out; "I'm a big person and sometimes it's rough living in a world that caters better for small people. **But I refuse to let anything stop me** from doing what I want to do and being the person I want to be." The use of the word 'refuse' felt significant and important in this post. I felt this because of the seriousness attached to what it means to refuse. One definition describes a refusal as when you absolutely will not do something. Therefore, I believe this member made it a priority to not allow her size to stop her from doing as she wants despite "living in a world that caters better for small people," as she says. This sentiment was also echoed by others, like the member who posted the following-

> "my first solo trip was to Australia! i was always very worried going to the beach as i was (still am) extremely self-conscious but now looking back at pictures i can tell how genuinely happy I was just actually being there .. **don't ever let your size/insecurities stop you** because the experiences traveling are worth so much more than that horrible voice in your head telling you that you aren't good enough"

And also, the member who said,

> "My first trip i actually took my tax refund, book a group tour leaving in two weeks to London and Paris and never looked back. That was 2010 and since then I've been to 23 countries. Don't let your weight stop you. I finally just went for and have thoroughly enjoyed myself and aware of what i can and can't do and what to avoid. Like i avoid tiny chairs at outdoor euro cafes, i use seat guru to check out the seat map on my flight so i can be comfortable, etc"

In essence, these examples speak to a priority shared by members to not allow body size to restrict one's life. I argue this priority exists because of the restrictive body norms and values which prevent plus-size women from living life how they want because of how their body size is received by others. Therefore, when members make it a priority to not let their body size rule their life, they disrupt and challenge stigmas which restrict plus-size women.

The last component of shared values are goals, which are things people strive to achieve. To accomplishing goals, people must take steps to progress. Therefore, when reviewing the codes for evidence of goals I investigated what members were working on or towards. With this in mind, I took a closer look at the code created to file discussions of self-acceptance and loving oneself. The 'Love myself' code contained ten instances where members talked about self-love. As a result, I concluded that members share a goal of practicing self-love and acceptance. The findings that support this claim are represented in Table 7.

Theme	Post
Love myself despite gaining weight	"Being more health conscious...I haven't been taking care of myself and gained all the weight I had lost and then some. **I've been trying to find beauty in myself since gaining weight** and trying not to correlate my self worth with my weight, but it's hard; especially when I'm not feeling confident and I have to keep buying bigger clothes. It's not a matter of being "skinny" I will literally never be skinny and I don't want to be; I want to be healthy and confident with self love."
Struggling with self-love	"This past year has been my heaviest and I'm the same I will never be a skinny girl and I don't want to be! **I had a hard time with self love** and being confident but it all came back after a few changes."
Learning to love myself	"My year brought some firsts, first time flying in a plane and seeing a ton of snow. I got a new nephew too! **I've learned to love myself a little bit more.** I can't wait to see what 2018 has in store for me"
	"I kayaked for the first time , on the ocean, went on a mountain bike tour and hiked a small mountain . **I learned to love myself there.** Now off to new adventures in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam ! Life is good !"
	"I've recently started on a journey of self-acceptance by starting a 30 before 30 list. But the truth is, all this **learning to love myself** and my body began the first time I wore a bikini in public at the age of 27 and the dress size of 20, and no one batted a single eye. After that, I got passionate about my curves in ways I never thought possible, and started dreaming things I never thought possible."
Changing from hating body to loving body	"I've been getting into body positivity after going to a body posi event this past spring. I've been on the journey of **learning to love my body** after hating it my whole life. I've been trying to read books that are about embracing all types of bodies (I'm open to suggestions!)."
Growing in self-love	"I wish I would have found this group a long time ago. Being a curvy woman in Vietnam has been challenging to say the least, and I have had some of my worst body image issues while here. But, with the help of some positive thinking, positive affirmations from my loved ones and finding other resources online (have you seen Kellie Anne Drinkwater's TED talk? Go watch it right now) **I've grown to a level of self love** that I hadn't really reached before."
	"Hey! -- here from Asheville NC An empowering moment for me is empowering women to be confident and **love their bodies as much as I have grown to do with mine!**"
Trying to love myself	"I'm still **trying to love myself** and shut out the harmful voices I've always heard. And in doing so, I've chosen to surround myself as much as I can by others who carry the empowerment torch to light the way."
	"My most empowering moments are always when I meet new people who love me just the way I am the same **way I try to love myself everyday.**"

Table 7: Goal of practicing self-love in @Curvy

The shared goal I've identified amongst members in @Curvy, loving and accepting

yourself, also works to challenge societal norms. As discussed in the section about skinny

culture, plus-size women in western societies are seen as less than because of their body size. Therefore, there is a notion that plus-size women are supposed to be 'working on themselves' or in other words, lose weight. This notion promotes the idea that plus-size women ought to conform to skinny culture and its preferable smaller body size. However, when members work to practice self-love and acceptance they reframe from conforming to skinny culture. By doing so, plus-size women challenge the skinny culture notion that all women must be thin to be healthy and beautiful.

To summarize, the fulfillment of needs element involves members being satisfied through their membership. My study shows two ways members gain satisfaction through @Curvy. First, there is a sense that members benefit from the group and its members and secondly, members enjoy having shared values with others in the group. Shared values are important because it creates the belief that by coming together, there is satisfaction in being with those who have similarities. As suggested by McMillan and Chavis (1986), the similarities which establish shared values involve needs, priorities and goals. My study provides insight into the shared values of @Curvy members. I found that members share the need of having a space where they can open up about their body size as an active or aspiring woman traveler. I also determined that members make it a priority to not allow their size to interfere with their lives or travel aspirations. Finally, I discovered how members have a goal of practicing self-love and acceptance.

4.4 <u>Findings of Shared Emotional Connection</u>

(RQ- 4) How do members establish shared emotional connection in @Curvy?

The final element of SOC can be viewed as a strand capable of connecting members despite all differences. McMillan and Chavis' (1986) equate the strand to one's shared history. The following source speaks to the multidimensional nature of shared history;

> "There is no fixed definition of shared history and the concept has been used in many different contexts. Any situation where shared history is possible therefore requires its own definition and its specific empirical conditions. Shared history emerge through dialogue and critical reflection (sharedhistory.eu)."

For the purposes of this study, shared history is defined as a connecting force that allows members to identify with one another based on similar lived experiences.

To identify shared history in @Curvy, I used various connecting codes which represented the connections between members. In doing this, I was able to make inferences about shared emotional connections between members. My analysis uncovered that the type of emotions typically shared between members are based in fear and anxiety. In most scholarship pertaining to the fear of solo female travelers, the work centers around the feelings of being unsafe (Thomas & Mura, 2018). However, my analysis for shared emotional connection in my dataset suggests that plus-size solo women travelers experience more constraints regarding their body size than they do of their fear for their safety. This likely stems from the fear they have of not fitting in spaces not designed with larger bodies in mind, or their fear of being stared at or harassed because of their body size. These two fears are highlighted in two key situations discussed in @Curvy. First, members can relate based on the intense feelings while flying as a plus-size

woman. Second, members express high levels of relating when opening up about the emotional experience that is wearing a bathing suit in public as a plus-size woman.
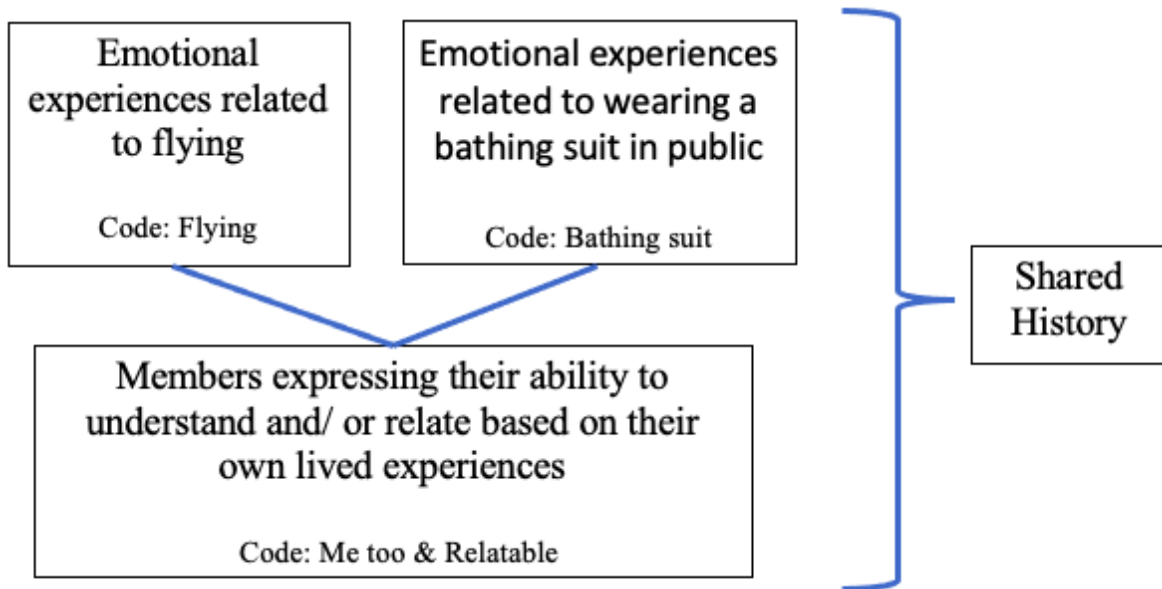

Figure 11: A visual of shared history within the dataset

4.4a <u>**Shared Emotional Connection in Flying**</u>

The intense emotional feelings felt by plus-size travelers while flying can best be seen in the following post,

> "I'm currently heading back from visiting family. Had to ask for a seat belt extender and honestly more discouraged than I've been in a very very long time. Has anyone else been here? It's terribly embarrassing and frustrating. I have trip planned to Hawaii in December and I hope not to be in the same position, ever again. But regardless, I'm so happy there is a group for us curvy girls and I'm so so so so happy to be here!!"

This post showcases the difficult emotions felt when a member needed a seatbelt extender while flying. Another member responded to this post by saying, "This happened to me for the first time in April. I think I cried but I was more comfortable with the extender than I have been on almost any flight." This interaction captures what is meant by shared emotional connection. In the

example provided, the women were not on the same plane, nor did they ask for seatbelt extenders together. Therefore, their experiences happened independently of each other. Nevertheless, they were still able to connect emotionally because of their own similar situation which produced the same feelings. In other words, despite not having experienced their feelings of anxiousness simultaneously, they can still identify with each other.

To explain why members have shared history in terms of flying, lets review the following post:

> "Took my first solo international trip & enjoyed every minute of it. Now I'm on the plane headed back to the states & the guy next to me keeps huffing & puffing & adjusting himself in the seat BUT I'm not even like spilling over into his seat! Has this been an issue for any of you?"

Here the member shares about a male passenger beside her who is using non-verbal body language to signal his dissatisfaction. This example speaks to why plus-size women feel anxious and scared when flying. Put simply, their body is seen as an inconvenience for others because of limited available space on planes. In response to this post, a member comments:

> "Once on a flight a year or 2 ago a dad with his preteen literally told me I was ruining his flight by taking up his space. Arm rest was down, and I was in no way in his space. I ignored him, but to this day I regret not telling him off"

This reply signals how negative experiences when flying as a plus-size women are not isolated occurrences, rather something that had happened to multiple members. Therefore, members can relate to one another in the context of flying as a plus-size woman because of the similar lived experiences they share.

4.4b <u>Shared Emotional Connection with Bathing Suits</u>

The second situation in which members of @Curvy share an emotional connection involves wearing a bathing suit as a plus-size women. As discussed, plus-size women are subjected to harsh stigmas because of their size. This often results in what Gailey and Harjunen (2019) refer to as 'internalized hatred.' In other words, plus-size members embody the negative stigmas and allow them to restrict their lives. An example of this is shown in the following post:

> "So, I'm going on a cruise by myself next month. I found a few cute swimsuits however, they're two pieces and well, I don't have a "bikini body" I need some words of encouragement that as long as I'm confident and happy it doesn't matter right?! I was originally going to cancel this vacation because of how I look right now; but life's too short"

Here the member is struggling with the idea of wearing a two-piece bathing suit because she does not have the 'right' type of body for a bikini. The example displays how members, aware of social norms, lack confidence to do things they want as plus-size women because of fear from others, including wearing a bathing suit. Other members echo this paranoia in conversations of wearing a bathing suit. For example:

> "…So many times I get discouraged about going places because I think that I won't fit in, that no one wants to see me in a swimsuit, or that I'll just hold back a tour group by being so slow… I'm heading to China in November, which I am really worried about, not just because it's the furthest I've ever been, but because I've heard that they can be quite cruel to bigger people"

The paranoia in this post regarding bathing suits stems from the fear of others not wanting to see her plus-size body and the negative attention she might get. In response to this post, a member commented:

"I truly admire your courage! Every time I put on a bikini I'm a little nervous, but the more I do it, the more I've come to realize that people really don't think about me as much as I thought they would. And if someone ever does happen to say something to you, just give them the finger. All of us have the right to exist in this space! Keep on keeping on!"

This comment illustrates two things. First, members can relate to one another about the anxiety of wearing a bathing suit as a plus-size woman. Second, members offer support and encourage one another by sharing how they navigate being in the same emotionally--supportive situation as someone who has shared the same experience.

In essence, members establish shared emotional connection in @Curvy when they respond to a member voicing how they can relate based on similar shared experiences that produce strong emotions. My analysis uncovered two situations that were especially emotional for members: (1) flying as a plus-size woman and (2) wearing a bathing suit as a plus-size woman. I came to this conclusion after noticing obvious connections between codes. The connecting codes were emotion-based (fear and anxiety) and the codes used to represent instance of talking about flying and wearing a bathing suit.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This research project investigated a Facebook group for plus-size women travelers to explore how body size and gender influence women as they move across social, cultural, and national borders. To facilitate my research, I relied on a theoretical framework which utilized feminist geography literature and methods combined with McMillan and Chavis' (1986) SOC framework. The results of my study provide insights into the sense of community created within @Curvy and the experiences of plus-size solo women travelers.

In terms of membership in @Curvy, I found that members vary in age, nationality, occupations, and education levels. This vast variety in members speaks to the global scale at which fat stigma is experienced. As shown in Figure 7, members of @Curvy are located in North and South America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Therefore, this my study speaks to how women around the world are impacted by body size norms and values. For example, a member of @Curvy posted the following,

> "A local host in Vietnam flirted me and thought he was doing me favor as I never felt
> the love of a guy because of my body shape.... He considers me the same as
> Vietnam ladies, which being curvy is not an option. No guy will marry a curvy
> girl.."

In this example, the member is flirted with out of pity because of her size by a Vietnamese man. His actions suggest that he only flirted with her because he assumed others do not because of her body size. In other words, plus-size women in Vietnam are viewed as unattractive and unmarriable because of their size. This is yet another example of the discrimination and hatred of plus-size women which persists globally. This finding is similar to that of Gailey and Harjunen (2019) who determined that women in the US and Finland are both confined by negative

stereotypes linked to body size. However, because my findings are primarily based off western women, literature suggests that differing values and norms pertaining to body size are unaccounted for. For example, Batnitzky (2011) emphasizes how Muslim traditions in north Africa influence both body size and the attitudes Moroccans have towards plus-size women. Her work illustrates how body size values and norms are socially shaped, rather than objective fact. This is echoed by Ziraba et al. (2009) who address how large bodies can symbolize wealth and prosperity in regions stricken with poverty and starvation (Ziraba et al. 2009). This is similar to the past values western countries had before we knew advancement and surplus that reduced food shortages and increased the average weight of both women and men (Krems et al. 2022).

My study also emphasizes how Facebook groups can influence individuals in the real world. Through a discussion of influence in @Curvy, I found that members do in fact influence @Curvy, but the group also influences its members. As I discussed in my results, this is best shown in the post where a group member contributes her decision to travel solo to being a member of @Curvy. She says, "Hey ladies!! I just got back from my very first trip abroad-and I did it SOLO!!! Encouragement from this group helped me realize I am capable of making my dreams of travel come true!" This example highlights how the positive environment fostered within @Curvy influences members to do things they previous felt incapable of doing, including traveling solo as a plus-size woman. This is important because there is in essence a trickle-down effect which takes material shape through changed behaviors and viewpoints. According to Wo et al. (2019) the "Trickle-down effects thus refers to the flow of perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors." (pg. 2264) My research suggests that the creation of online safe spaces not only provides a sanctuary for marginalized groups but also results in social influence.

This research also explored how members' needs were met through their membership in @Curvy. From my analysis, it was apparent that the primary need for members was a space where body size is understood as an identity with stigmas attached to it, especially for women. I came to this conclusion after realizing how members' conversations intertwined travel topics with restrictions associated with body size. Members needs are met by @Curvy by being a space specifically for plus-size women travelers. This is of value because through an analysis of the group, I discovered that plus-size women travelers differ from those with smaller body sizes. For example, plus-size solo travelers worry about how they will be received by others because of the shape of their body. This is especially the case in Asian countries because people there are much smaller in stature than people from western countries. Therefore, plus-size women are more visible there than in other areas around the world. These findings contrast with studies of non-plus-size solo women travelers whose fears are tied to concerns of safety (Karagoz et al., 2021). My study instead suggests that the concerns for plus-sized women traveling alone revolve around their body size and its implications. In other words, plus-size women travelers are more concerned with their body size than issues of safety. While my data does not point to a clear explanation, I hypothesize that the absence of discussions of safety in my research is perhaps because plus-size women travelers feel less like targets because of how their body size is viewed as being undesirable and unattractive.

My project also concludes that plus-size solo women travelers have shared emotional connections. These connections are essentially 'shared history' or the connecting force that allows members to identify with one another based on similar lived experiences. In my dataset, I discovered members could especially relate to one another in two emotionally charged situations. The first is the fear and anxiety felt while being a plus-size woman on a plane. The second being

the act of wearing a bathing suit as a plus-size woman. My findings of shared emotional connection illiterates how members share personal stories and other members relate to the stories because of similar lived experiences based on body size. Not only does this speak to how plus-size solo women travelers face reoccurring discrimination, but also how trust is built within @Curvy. Stefancic et al. (2019) suggests that when members respond to negative stories involving body size with a form of 'I have been there' they form "credibility used to establish trust" (pg. 909).

However, a major takeaway I hope people get from my research is the fact that despite fears and concerns associated with body size and gender, plus-size solo women travelers continue to explore the world. My study reveals how plus-size solo women travelers are aware of the stigmas they face; however, they choose to not allow such stigmas to stop them from traveling or doing the things they love. This is significant because their decision to live life on their terms works to disrupt notions which will otherwise continue to restrict the lives of plus-size women.

The value of studying @Curvy is being able to report the following: plus-size women travelers share both their good and bad times as travelers in @Curvy. They brag about amazing trips they took which resulted in feelings of empowerment and self-development. They also confide in the group about their struggles while traveling to receive support and encouragement. As a result, other members are provided with both inspiration and examples of real-life hurdles that can be expected which help future travelers be more prepared. All of these facets combine to create a sense of community within @Curvy. This group then serves as a safe space where members can share their experiences so that others might find the courage to achieve their dream

of traveling solo. This simultaneous provides opportunities to challenge and disrupt the stigmas that currently affect plus-size women around the world.

5.1 <u>Research limitations</u>

Although I am confident that I completed this study with as much detail as possible, I realize that there is naturally more that can be uncovered. Given the limited time I had to design and complete this project, I was not able to add other methods outside of my qualitative content analysis. If I was not constrained by time, I would have liked to gather more data from the group's content for the analysis as well as conduct interviews with both group members and moderators. I believe interviews and a larger data sample would have produced even more intriguing findings which would result in further interest in conversations about gender and body size in the context of plus-size solo women travelers.

Therefore, for future research I would encourage actual interaction with plus-size solo female travelers. This would allow for an analysis of the lived experiences of plus-size solo female travelers in a real time conversation rather than online interactions where the researcher cannot ask members questions or prompt members to expand on interesting topics, such as the ones I have uncovered in this project. Essentially, my project has continued a conversation in feminist geography involving body size and gender through the study of plus-size solo female travelers. It is my hope that others will expand upon my findings to result in further insight into how body size and gender interact to shape the experiences of plus-size women while traveling.

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APPENDIX

IRB Approval

EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** ·
rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: Miranda Lee
CC: Beth Bee
Date: 8/2/2021
Re: UMCIRB 21-001544
          Social Media as a Tool for Understanding Curvy Solo Female Travelers (2)

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 7/30/2021. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 4b.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
Concept Paper(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Example (0.01)	Data Collection Sheet
Info paper about my work(0.01)	Information Sheet

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

IRB00000705 East Carolina U IRB #1 (Biomedical) IORG0000418
IRB00003781 East Carolina U IRB #2 (Behavioral/SS) IORG0000418