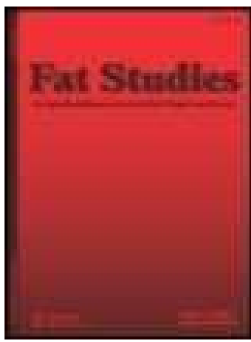

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Fat vegan politics: A survey of fat vegan activists' online experiences with social movement sizeism

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ABSTRACT

The author examines the consequences of stigma strategies in vegan activism as it is experienced by fat vegan activists. The fat politics of veganism in online spaces is examined in data provided by a 2016 qualitative survey of fat-identified vegan activists. Results highlight the subjective experiences of fat vegans, illuminating the meaning of healthism, sizeism, and thin-privilege in vegan social justice spaces. Sizeism is a significant concern for fat vegan activists as respondents report only medium-level feelings of comfort and community, with one in four reporting having experienced fat discrimination in the movement. Most indicate that online vegan spaces feel safer than those offline, but most also perceive vegan online spaces as less inclusive than nonvegan ones. Most activists did not significantly modify their participation in response.

KEYWORDS

Fat-shaming; fat studies; online activism; sizeism; social movements; veganism

As a social justice movement, veganism has been criticized in its failure to embrace multiculturalism to the point of aggravating inequality for many demographics and complicating alliance-building (Harper, 2011; Wrenn & Lutz, 2016). Veganism, a consumption-focused political protest against systematic discrimination against Nonhuman Animals, is most frequently represented primarily by thin, white-identified, middle-class women, and this is thought to overshadow diversity in the vegan community. Because veganism is not only concerned with anti-speciesism awareness, but also with mindful and healthful eating, vegan spaces are potential hotbeds of body-policing and fat-shaming. Protesting, too, tends to render fat[1] bodies invisible, as thin-bodied women predominate in the vegan movement's infamous "I'd Rather Go Naked Than" campaigning. Non-thin bodies are practically nonexistent in high-profile vegan media spaces despite diversity of body types in the ranks (Wrenn & Lutz, 2016).

As a relatively dispersed collective, vegans rely heavily on the internet to communicate, coordinate, and build community, making it a particularly accessible and informative space for researching vegan sizeism. In this article I examine some of these spaces where discourse and meaning construction take place to report on the visibility of fat persons, primarily fat vegans who tend to be

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erased in the narrative. I argue that fat is symbolically and strategically wielded to call in and call out activists and the public, and this sizeism can create intramovement discrimination to the potential detriment of the movement's goal. Farrell (2011) insisted that fat is political; it has cultural meaning that serves hierarchies of power. In this article I examine the impact of the vegan movement's stigma strategy on fat activists. Results of a survey of 61 fat-identified vegans are presented to determine how sizeism is experienced by activists who do not fit into but must coexist with the thin-privileging framework of vegan advocacy.

Literature review

Embodied veganism

Veganism is a political endeavor that seeks to abolish speciesism, which is the structural oppression of Nonhuman Animals (a classification that I respectfully capitalize to denote their shared oppressed identity). In vegan spaces, the personal is very much so the political. Consumption is scrutinized, and nonvegan fat persons become prime targets for vegan campaigning in a thin-privileging society. As a highly stigmatized demographic itself, the vegan movement seeks to overcome stereotypes of weakness and unhealthfulness by highlighting how nutritious and enlivening plant-based eating can be. For instance, vegans and vegetarians utilize a sizeist framework by describing their diet as "light" or "lite," while positioning animal based foods as heavy, loaded, and fatty (Ossipow, 1995). Veganism capitalizes on its potential in a thin-privileging society to reshape bodies as some research finds that abandoning diets heavy in "meat" and "dairy" can reduce weight (Berkow & Barnard, 2006). Bourdieu (1984) suggested that groups in power have the privilege of defining aesthetic tastes, and fat studies support this phenomenon as applicable to fat persons. Kwan and Graves (2013) highlighted framing processes that politicize fat as a reflection of oppressive power structures rather than objective reality, while Lupton (2013) and Stearns (1997) insisted that sizeism is a cultural construct intended for social control. Veganism's sizeism is no different in this regard. Stigma, as Goffman (1963) understood it, can be applied to deviant groups, and these deviant groups can experience shame and alter their behavior accordingly to manage that shame. Vegans engage fat-shaming as a means of protecting veganism as a viable and positive lifestyle, while also promising weight loss and a conventionally attractive body to adherents in hopes of control the attitudes and behaviors of its nonvegan audience.

Vegan sizeism

Ironically, veganism sometimes draws on speciesism to shame or stigmatize fat persons in much the same way as larger society. Take for instance, the "Save the Whales" billboard campaign by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals

(PETA), which advised "Lose the blubber: go vegetarian," and was later replaced after public backlash with an equally sizeist sign, "GONE: Just like all the pounds lost by people who go vegetarian" (Goldstein, 2009). Also consider vegetarian advertisements also produced by PETA in the 1990s that photoshopped a man's face to resemble that of a pig and warns nonvegan audiences: "The meat industry gets rich, all you get is fat."[2]

Zoomorphism is frequently present in sizeist terminology, such as the tendency to refer to fat persons as "lardos," "porkers," "slugs," "manatees," "monsters," "cows," or bearers of "puppy fat." Furthermore, fat persons are sometimes understood as genetically different from normatively-bodied humans, in much the same way as are other animals. Another parallel is seen in the systematic butchering of fat bodies accomplished with weight loss, skin reduction, and plastic surgeries, but also in genetic research intended to manipulate the bodies of future generations. Both Nonhuman Animals and fat persons exist in bodies that are regularly subject to control in an oppressive system. This approach is counterintuitive in that it pulls on speciesism with the supposed intention of challenging speciesism, but it is also troubling given that communities of color and other minorities have historically been animalized to justify their ill treatment. Because many marginalized groups living in the West are more vulnerable to fat stigma (Renzaho, 2004), these animalizing tactics may be grounded in racist, colonialist, and classist frameworks.

Fat-shaming is both systemically and interpersonally wielded to humiliate, abuse, control, and oppress girls and women as well (Royce, 2009; Stearns, 1997). Articles in PETA's *Animal Times*, for instance, emphasize how going vegan or vegetarian can make one slimmer, sexier, or sexually potent. One advertisement, which positions a woman in a bikini opposite to a man's beer gut, reads "I hate men's guts. Don't be a whopper. Go vegetarian." In another, a woman in a bikini holding a string of large sausages states, "I threw a party but the cattlemen couldn't come. Eating meat can cause impotence" (insinuating that a high-fat, meat-based diet prevents male orgasm because it clogs arteries of *all* kinds) (Press, 2000).[3] Farrell (2011) also identified a PETA campaign that depicts the backside of a fat person squeezed unattractively into ill-fitting jeans with the slogan "Obese in the U.S.A.? Go Vegetarian," in a spoof of Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the U.S.A.* album cover. That so many of these images are laden with symbols of patriotism (some of the models described above wore American flag swimsuits) demonstrates how body size is linked to one's right to citizenship, with fat bodies decidedly otherized. Indeed, fatness has historically been applied to immigrants and nonwhite ethnicities in the West to maintain hierarchies of power that privilege native whites and ignore cultural nuance in fat embodiment (de Garine & Pollock, 1995; Farrell, 2011; Hardin, 2015, Kulick & Meneley, 2005; Renzaho, 2004; Sobo, 1997). Fat politics are also highly relevant to transgender communities, as particular body shapes and fat accumulations may be painfully associated with a gender with which one does not identify. Vegan blogger Pax

Ahimsa Gethen (2016) explained, "I cannot see fat on my body as irrelevant. Not as long as curves are associated with being female. [...] displaying a curvy body can put me in unsafe situations, especially in gendered spaces." Fat-shaming, in other words, is neither race-neutral or gender-neutral, and may have especially negative consequences for marginalized groups.

Fat-shaming and size stigma also foster a lowered self-efficacy among those targeted (Puhl & Heuer, 2010). Emery Anne of *Kick Ass Compassion* (a vegan social media project that frequently tackles fat-shaming) puts it bluntly on her YouTube channel: "Veganism is an animal rights movement. [...] You can be fucking four hundred pounds and still be an ethical vegan. [...] The way I look has nothing to do with veganism." Instead of counterbalancing the stereotype of vegans as weak, overly thin, and malnourished, fat vegans have come to symbolize either veganism done wrong or proof that veganism is unhealthy. As with many ingroup/outgroup boundaries, indicators are arbitrarily chosen and meanings attached to justify and maintain power relations, regardless of their objective reality. Fatness and veganism are both constructed as morally problematic, and it could be that the vegan movement has aligned with sizeism and rejected size inclusivity in its attempt to reconstruct veganism as symbolically valuable. Julier (2013) insisted that sizeism grants *status* to thin-privileged persons; it *distinguishes* them. Such a mechanism can be quite valuable to a social movement seeking to be valued, visible, and legitimated.

Veganism is not alone in this disconnect. Most, if not all, social justice movements demonstrate a single-issue focus, or what Crenshaw (2016) would identify as "intersectional failure," to the exclusion of body politics. Social movement sizeism is ethically confused in this respect, but also strategically flawed. Coalition-building is challenged when a movement adopts discrimination as a tactic, but research on fat-shaming also indicates that it is not an effectual mechanism for controlling the eating behaviors of others (Puhl & Heuer, 2010) (presuming that seeking to do such is not a problematic goal in and of itself). Indeed, fat-shaming only aggravates stigma and further disenfranchises fat persons.

Power elites, nonprofits, and the diet industry

There is also a considerable element of self-objectification that is facilitated by a vegan sizeist strategy. This is a concern for collective action because, in addition to the distress it causes, self-objectification also reduces cognitive functioning and motivation (Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003). In other words, *it disempowers*. Research in social media known as "thinspiration" or "fitspiration" (which prominently features plant-based foods) has also identified patterns of self-objectification, lowered body satisfaction, lowered self-esteem, and negative moods among its viewers (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

While perhaps unlikely to motivate viewers in such a way as to challenge speciesism, sizeist tactics do serve the movement in a more fundamental manner. The diet-industrial complex, a pro-capitalist institution that medicalizes and stigmatizes fat to stimulate a persistent and growing market for weight-loss products and schemes (Julier, 2013), is robust in vegan spaces. Much of the empowerment promised by vegan "thinspo" may be motivated by profit rather than altruism. Many vegan personalities and vegan businesses have financial interests in promoting diet and fitness regimes, suggesting that fat-shaming, for them, is less a matter of social justice advocacy than it is brand advocacy. As Cooper (2016a) explained, the diet industry fulfills capitalist requirements for perpetual production and consumption: "Dieting is a perfect product, it fails again and again but the consumer always blames themselves and buys more" (p. 22). Poulton (1997) referred to these corporate-induced thin norms as the "billion-dollar brainwash."

Professionalized anti-speciesist nonprofits demonstrate similar claims-making biases by positioning plant-based eating as a strategy for combating "obesity" and thus protecting the interests of their conservative funders. Highlighting concerns about "obesity" in their rhetoric allows nonprofits to avoid the more contentious political language of veganism and Nonhuman Animal liberation which may alienate elite donors who systematically benefit from speciesism. Furthermore, weight loss and fat-shaming rhetoric also supports the diet-industrial complex that nonprofit donors (both corporate and governmental) may have a strategic interest in facilitating through charity channels. A movement dependent on funding and distracted by weight loss is a considerable benefit to the state and corporate elites hoping to maintain the status quo. West (2016) supposed that it is "easier to mock and deride individual fat people than to fix food deserts" (p. 87), but it is also less expensive and less politically alienating for a market-focused movement.

Internet enclaves

In the midst of socially enforced stigma, social movement politics, and capitalist exploitation, fat vegans may find emerging online communities a safe haven from this discriminatory atmosphere. Social movement scholars Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport (2011) identified internet activism as a successful modernization of protest strategies, which can reduce costs of participation and simplify organization. The internet coalesces the activist diaspora to increase connectedness, and it also helps to mitigate stigmas. Speaking to of her web blogging, for instance, West (2016) explained, "On paper, my butt size couldn't distract from my ideas" (p. 110).

This is not to romanticize online spaces as sanctuaries, because geographic location, ethnicity, poverty, disability, and other barriers can inhibit access.

There is also ever-present “trolling,” a euphemism for targeted and often heavily orchestrated harassment that is notoriously troublesome for feminist activists and other social justice workers. Intramovement balkanization also thrives online, as has been documented in the vegan movement (Wrenn, 2016), the fat acceptance movement (Cooper, 2016b), and others. In these instances, activists themselves can engage in trolling and harassment against one another along faction lines.

For better or for worse, vegans have capitalized on internet access to avoid the stigmatization of veganism in wider society and find community. It is also strategic for networking and alliance-building (Wolf, 2015). In fact, some have argued that online mobilization is vital for the movement’s goal achievement (Waters & Wang, 2011). It has certainly offered a rich source of data to researchers interested in examining anti-speciesist claims-making and movement/countermovement interactions (Herzog, Dinoff, & Page, 1997, Swan & McCarthy, 2003). Others, however, have also identified vegan online spaces as problematic for marginalized groups that advocate inclusivity (Harper, 2011).

Methodology

Whether to the movement’s benefit or detriment, online communities are foundational to vegan activism. This study specifically explores the impact of vegan stigma strategies on fat vegans in an online survey administered in March of 2016. The survey was promoted on several online vegan media spaces known to be interested in intersectional feminist theory: Vegan Feminist Network, The Advocacy of Veganism Society, Vegans United against All Oppression, and my personal author page.[4] This narrow sample source creates a potential bias in data collected, but these channels were chosen on the basis of convenience and gatekeeper access.

A total of 106 participants responded to the anonymous survey, and 61 of these completed it. Anyone who did not identify both as fat and an activist/supporter or a vegan was eliminated. Whether a respondent qualifies as fat was left to their own discretion. As a qualitative researcher, self-identification may be more accurate than medical (and often misleading) measurements of body types such as the body mass index (BMI). The arbitrarily defined BMI, for instance, is often disconnected from a person’s actual health (Ross & Janiszewski, 2008) and may confuse muscle mass with adiposity or discount the impact of age or gender (Lupton, 2013). I did, however, ask respondents to report their height and weight, as it was roughly useful in providing a more objective point of comparison. Almost all respondents did qualify as “overweight” (64%) or “obese” (28%) according to the BMI. In addition to demographic information, I created a measurement inclusive of ten unique indicators of stigma (these measurements are explored below), and then compared it with gender, BMI, and region.

Attempts at logistic regression did not determine significant relationships, which could be due to the small sample size. Subsequently, frequencies and averages are provided only.

Results

Demographics

Sixty-two percent of respondents identified as a Nonhuman Animal rights *activist* and 38% identified as a Nonhuman Animal rights *supporter*, most for five years or more. Activists were rather diverse in their support of particular organizational styles or factions. Thirty-eight percent supported large conservative organizations, 13% supported smaller conservative organizations, 12% supported grassroots intersectional organizations, and 3% supported grassroots direct action groups. All but one respondent identified as a current vegan, and 66% of these were long term vegans of five years or more. Many respondents were regular participants in *offline* vegan activism, but participation was much more frequent *online* (most indicated they participate every single day). In the survey, I defined offline activism as inclusive of participating in potlucks, protesting, meetups, or any other public social events taking place in real life and not online, while I defined online activism as inclusive of engaging in social media dialogue (such as commenting, debating, sharing information), participating in listservs, managing a social media page, sending newsletters, or any other public social events taking place online.

The overwhelming majority (80%) of those who reported their gender identified as a cis-woman or female. This gender disparity very likely reflects the woman-centric audience of the spaces where the survey was advertised (such as Vegan Feminist Network), but it may also reflect the gynocentrism of the Nonhuman Animal rights movement in general, which also consists of approximately 80% female-identified activists (Gaarder, 2011). The overwhelming majority identified as white (90%). Age was skewed toward younger persons, with half under the age of 30. Most respondents reported residency in the United States (57%), followed by Oceania (18%), the United Kingdom (10%), Canada (8%), and mainland Europe (5%).

Fat inclusivity

When asked if respondents felt comfortable participating in the movement regardless of their body type, the average response was a five on a Likert-type scale of 0 (“not comfortable at all”) to 10 (“very comfortable”). When asked if respondents felt that bodies that look like their own were well represented in the movement, the average response was 2 (not well represented). Forty-four percent reported receiving comments on their body type from other activists, 25%

of them claimed these comments were negative and 20% reported both positive and negative. The majority of respondents (79%) reported that they had never been asked to participate in a campaign or some sort of activism specifically because of their fat body type (indicating that campaigns impacting their networks may not be consciously interested in presenting a diversity of body types), but the majority (75%) also reported that they had never been asked *not* to participate because of their body type (indicating that these campaigns were at least not overtly discriminatory). That about a quarter of respondents were asked not to participate because of their body type, however, is significant, as it indicates that one in four have experienced overt discrimination because of their body size.

When asked if they experience a sense of community in the movement, the average response was 5.2, indicating a moderate sense of community. When asked if they were aware of and/or regularly frequent online spaces that are sensitive to their need as a non-thin person, the average answer was a 4.5. Most respondents indicated a positive or neutral experience regarding body consciousness. Likewise, when asked if they were careful about discussing only "healthy" foods in online vegan spaces as a representative of veganism, the average response was just a 3.75 indicating limited concern. In online spaces, respondents reported an average of 4.3 when asked if they were aware of other activists in the cyberspace whose body types were like their own (with 0 as "not aware" and 10 as "very aware"). They also scored an average of 4.6 when asked if they have participated in online veganism because they felt that people with their body type were welcome (with 0 as "declined to participate" and 10 as "frequently participate").

However, the average score of respondents when asked if they felt that participating online was safer or more comfortable because people may not know what they look like was a 6.3, with 10 indicating full agreement. In this vein, 77% of respondents indicated that they received more attention about their weight when they are active in real life versus online. When asked if they avoided vegan spaces online for fear of being harassed, ignored, insulted, mocked, or bullied based on their weight, the average response was a 3.6 on a Likert-type scale of 0 ("never avoid") to 10 ("always avoid"). Finally, when asked if they believed that online vegan spaces were more welcoming to them as a fat person than other nonvegan cyberspaces they frequent, the average response was a four on a Likert-type scale of 0 (full disagreement) to 10 (full agreement).

Navigating the negative

An analysis of open-ended qualitative responses uncovered a number of fears regarding comfort and safety in online spaces. Eleven described the online vegan space as particularly dangerous ("[…] there is a lot of fat-shaming and thinly veiled mockery"). The same number also reported a negative

experience in the movement, be it online, offline, or both. As one respondent put it, "[…] I don't find many places online or in real life […] that are vegan spaces […] [and] that have other people like me in them […]." Five respondents actually indicated that they felt silenced as a fat vegan. Interestingly, this was not just a response to thin vegan aggression ("I sense I am not accepted […] cause of my weight so I mostly stay quiet in order to avoid being attacked" one subject explained), but also from a thin-privileging society that is also ignorant to veganism. One person admitted, "I'm often afraid to reveal I am vegan because I think people might question how it's possible that I am overweight and vegan." In fact, this theme of being viewed as a cheater or an imposter was rather consistent.[5] Said one person, "[…] I feel like I am kind of presenting a bad image […]." Said another, "Sometimes my weight is looked down upon to the extent I have been told I am not a true vegan." In other words, vegans of size are not only penalized and ostracized as activists by other activists, but also by the public as failed representatives.

Fat resistance

Although the responses make clear a systemic problem of stereotypical thinking and interpersonal violence, responses also indicate a commitment to disrupting it. Several respondents insisted that the movement's focus on body shape and physical health distracts from the core meaning of veganism as they understand it, that being a political position against speciesism. A number also demonstrated an intersectional awareness in this regard, noting that their exclusion was more or less moderated according to other identities. For these fat vegans, being fat and vegan mattered, but they also felt hindered by their race, gender, age, or nationality.

Beyond these critical frameworks that fact activists adopt to make sense of their experiences in the movement, other resistance strategies include defiance and pushback. As one respondent explained, "I am not concerned about what others may feel about my body – it is working okay for me." Another offered, "It's all annoying but I do not allow them to define what activism and research that I do on the topic; especially as a woman of color." Nine responses also elaborated on a commitment to seek out or cultivate safer spaces and community. In fact, many respondents actually described online spaces as inclusive in general, allowing activists to be engaged as persons, with their identities as a fat person (and the stigma it solicits) obscured. "Since most people online aren't aware of my weight/size," one participant noted, "they don't have a place to criticize me." Similar to negotiations with internet participation explored in other movements, fat vegans are also consciously strategizing how to engage online activism to maximize benefit, minimize cost, and resist exclusion.

Discussion and conclusion

Given the intensity of obesity stigma in Western culture (Stearns, 1997), the levels perceived and reported by participants were not as high as one might expect. The fat vegans who participated in this study made it clear that their experience with abuse and discrimination is unfair, unnecessary, and often cruel, but certainly not a deterrent from their commitment to activism. Hoping to avoid stigma, amplify resonance, and perhaps, as Goffman (1963) posited, manage any associated shame, most of these activists did alter their behavior slightly by pursuing more activism online than offline. A number were also selective in this behavior, intentionally seeking inclusive internet vegan communities. Furthermore, many resist the negative connotations of fat (de Garine & Pollock, 1995, Kulick & Meneley, 2005), and fat vegan activists are often no different in this regard.

Because this survey was administered online in pre-existing activist networks, the data examined in this study would presumably exclude the experiences of burnt out activists or extremely marginalized activists who may have escaped the sample. It is also likely that activists who possess a high level of self-efficacy and interest in fat politics would be more motivated to complete an unpaid survey on the topic and could bias the results further. Further complicating the findings are the study's limited sample size and the use of intersectionally aware networks as a sample pool. Further studies could extract more fruitful information by targeting mainstream vegan spaces, but also by comparing results with that of other movements, food-centric or not. Although subjects were asked to compare their online and offline experiences to the benefit of offering some comparative information, surveying vegans outside of internet activist spaces or specifically examining their nondigital experiences could improve the generalizability of results. Extending the study's recruitment efforts beyond vegan spaces would be helpful as well, as those overwhelmed by stigma may no longer monitor the movement and would not have been reached by the survey. Finally, although this study focused on stigma as measured by experiences with inclusivity and abusive behavior, some researchers insist that fat stigma exists to ensure that menial tasks and lower status jobs are filled (Julier, 2013). It could be that fat vegans, not invited to participate in highly visible protest, could be reduced to social movement drudgery work. If so, this would support my theory that social movements intentionally exploit fat persons for institutional gains. Additional probing to determine the type of activism that fat vegans are encouraged or allowed to engage in would be useful in this regard.

Due to these many limitations, the findings shared here should be read as only one perspective on a highly complex and multidimensional social movement environment. The results may be less pessimistic than predicted at the onset of the study, but these results should not overshadow the severity

of physical and emotional damage that sizeism can exact on individuals. Nor should it obfuscate the impairments potentially imposed on a social justice movement's ability to thrive and succeed.

Although evidence does not support that sizeism empowers change, this strategy is also problematic by unnecessarily detracting from the anti-speciesist politic of veganism with anthropocentrism. Similar to fat persons, the bodies of Nonhuman Animals have been politicized. Marked as different than and inferior to humans, they become highly vulnerable to oppression. Rather than pitting nonhuman bodies against fat bodies, parallels could be drawn to create a powerful intersectional consciousness (Hardy, 2014). For a movement interested in improving diversity and resonance with its public, this strategy is an avenue worth exploring.

Notes

1. The term *fat* is used here as a form of resistance, but it should be noted that there is some disagreement over appropriate terminology across activists and scholars.
2. I located this campaign in older issues of PETA's *Animal Times*, but I was not able to ascertain the exact publication dates from the material I had available.
3. These examples were discovered in my archival research at the Tom Regan Animal Rights Archive at North Carolina State University. Unfortunately, as they were not central to my research question at the time, I did not document the issue or page numbers of the items described herein. Readers are welcome to contact me by email for copies of these images.
4. These Facebook pages had a combined number of approximately 100,000 "likes" (or subscribers) at the time of the survey. Some users shared the survey further through their own social media channels. I did not ask participants to identify where they learned of the study and cannot be sure of its full reach.
5. Fat vegans also risk being labeled cheaters by the fat acceptance movement. Cooper (2016b), for instance, referred to veganism as a "social justice diet" (p. 67) that allows fat persons to diet discretely under the guise of political fortitude to avoid losing credibility in the fat community.

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Notes on contributor

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