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**The Politics of Fat Representation and Digital Media
Discourse in Kate Stayman-London's *One to Watch*:
A Review Article**

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Abstract. This review article examines the representation of fatness and digital media discourse in Kate Stayman-London's novel *One to Watch* (2020). The study synthesises existing research on fat representation in media, digital body surveillance, and affective economies to explore how contemporary fiction engages with and critiques the stigmatisation of plus-size bodies in a media-saturated world. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a methodological framework, the review identifies four recurring media frames within the novel: medicalisation of fatness, sexual objectification, moral condemnation, and spectacular disgust. The analysis demonstrates that Stayman-London's multimodal narrative – incorporating tweets, blog posts, online headlines, and comments – not only reproduces real-world digital harassment but also constructs counter-discourses of vulnerability and resilience. The review concludes that *One to Watch* serves as a transformative cultural artefact that archives contemporary bodily autonomy and offers a literary intervention into media-driven body politics. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions in media studies, cultural journalism, and Fat Studies by showing how fictional narratives can illuminate the mechanisms of online stigmatisation and resistance.

Keywords: media frames, embodiment, stigmatisation, cultural journalism, critical discourse analysis, online communication, digital harassment

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Политика репрезентации полноты и дискурс цифровых медиа в романе Кейт Стейман-Лондон *One to Watch*: обзорная статья

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Аннотация. Рассмотрены репрезентация полноты и дискурс цифровых медиа в романе Кейт Стейман-Лондон *One to Watch* (2020). Исследование синтезирует имеющиеся научные работы об изображении полноты в медиа, в экономике переживаний, в цифровом наблюдении за телом, чтобы выяснить, как современная художественная литература осмысляет и критикует стигматизацию грузных людей в медиатизированном мире. В качестве методологической рамки используется критический дискурс-анализ. В романе выделены четыре повторяющихся медийных фрейма: медиализация полноты, сексуальная объективация, моральное осуждение и эстетическое отвращение. Анализ показывает, что мультимодальное повествование Стейман-Лондон, включающее твиты, посты в блогах, заголовки онлайн-СМИ и комментарии, не только воспроизводит реальные практики цифрового преследования, но и конструирует контр-дискурсы уязвимости и устойчивости. Сделан вывод о том, что *One to Watch* выступает в качестве трансформативного культурного артефакта, который архивирует современную телесную автономию и предлагает литературное вмешательство в политику тела, распространяемую в медиапространстве. Полученные результаты вносят вклад в текущие дискуссии в области медиаисследований, культурной журналистики и фэт-стадис (Fat Studies), демонстрируя, как художественные нарративы могут прояснять механизмы онлайн-стигматизации и сопротивления.

Ключевые слова: медийные фреймы, телесность, стигматизация, культурная журналистика, критический анализ дискурса, онлайн-коммуникация, цифровое преследование

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Introduction

The representation of fat bodies in Western media has historically been characterised by negative stereotypes, invisibility, or stigmatisation (Afful, Ricciardelli, 2015; Cohen et al., 2019). In recent years, digital platforms – from fashion blogs to reality TV recaps and social media comments – have intensified the scrutiny of body size, framing thinness as an ideal while positioning fatness as a site of moral failure, public health concern, or grotesque spectacle (Aubrey et al., 2024; Möri et al., 2022). Cultural journalism and entertainment media often amplify these frames, turning individual bodies into objects of surveillance and commodification (Kristensen, 2019; Kristensen, From, 2018).

Simultaneously, a growing body of literary fiction has begun to engage with fat representation not merely as a topic but as a narrative and discursive problem. Kate Stayman-London's *One to Watch* (2020) is a notable example: a contemporary adult novel that blends romantic comedy with a multi-platform digital narrative (tweets, blog posts, emails, Instagram content, online comments). The novel tells the story of Bea Schumacher, a plus-size fashion blogger who becomes the first fat lead on a reality dating show called “Main Squeeze”, and who must navigate online harassment, media sensationalism, and her own journey toward self-acceptance.

This review article has three objectives:

1. To synthesise existing interdisciplinary literature on fat representation in media, digital body surveillance, and affective economies, identifying key theoretical concepts and research gaps.
2. To analyse how *One to Watch* constructs and critiques digital media discourse around fatness, using critical discourse analysis to examine four recurrent frames.
3. To assess the novel's contribution as a cultural artefact that mediates between literary storytelling and media studies, offering insights into online stigmatisation and resilience.

The review is intended for an audience of media scholars, literary critics, and journalism researchers. Unlike empirical studies of real-world media content, this review takes a literary text as its primary source, arguing that fiction can serve as a valid and valuable site for examining media discourses – a position increasingly recognised in cultural and critical media studies (Couldry, 2012; Kristensen, 2019).

Literature Review

The literature on fat representation, digital media, and body surveillance can be grouped into three thematic clusters.

Fat representation in media. Early research established that mainstream media (television, magazines, advertising) overwhelmingly present thinness as desirable

and fatness as deviant (Fouts, Burggraf, 1999; Grabe et al., 2008; Levine, Murnen, 2009). Reality television, in particular, was shown to normalise criticism of bodies, often framing weight as a moral failing (Fouts, Burggraf, 1999). More recent studies have examined digital platforms: R. Cohen et al. (2019) analysed body-positive Instagram accounts, finding that while they challenge mainstream beauty norms, they also risk commodifying empowerment. J.S. Aubrey et al. (2024) compared body positivity and body neutrality on TikTok, concluding that identity politics and emotional tone significantly affect how fat individuals experience digital spaces. However, none of these studies analyse fictional narratives as data sources – a gap this review addresses by treating *One to Watch* as a simulated archive of media discourse.

Digital media and body surveillance. With the rise of social media, body surveillance has become more pervasive and personalised. M. Möri et al. (2022) found that internalised body standards, perpetuated by both mass and social media, predict body dissatisfaction through self-discrepancy mechanisms. V.U. Wanniarachchi et al. (2022) conducted a text analysis of social media content (Twitter, YouTube, Reddit), revealing systematic linguistic patterns of fat stigma and body objectification. A.M. Jiménez-García et al. (2025) showed that body-positive social media can alleviate psychological distress, but the effect depends on content quality and user vulnerability. N.N. Kristensen and U. From (2018) explored how cultural journalists navigate hybrid professional identities on social media, blurring boundaries between journalism and user-generated commentary. These studies confirm that digital environments are key sites of body politics, yet they rarely connect to literary representations. *One to Watch* offers a unique opportunity to examine how these dynamics are artistically refracted.

Affective economies and fatness. M. Windram-Geddes (2013) introduced the concept of ‘affective economics’ to describe how emotions of fear, disgust, and shame circulate around fat bodies, commodifying them in spaces like gyms, clinics, and media. M.D. Jones et al. (2014) conducted a naturalistic study of ‘fat talk’ – everyday conversations about weight – and found that such talk increases shame and behavioural consequences independent of actual body size. These studies suggest that fatness is not merely a physical attribute but an affective and discursive category. However, existing research focuses on real-world interactions; the question of how fiction *mediatises* affective economies remains underexplored. This review argues that Stayman-London’s novel makes a specific contribution by embedding affective dynamics within journalistic headlines and online comments, showing how they operate as performative public shaming.

Research gap and review contribution. In summary, while substantial research exists on fat representation, digital surveillance, and affective economics, there is limited academic work that analyses contemporary fiction as a *simulation* of media discourse. Most studies either examine actual media content or treat fiction as a source of themes rather than as a formal discourse system. This review fills that gap by using critical discourse analysis to examine how *One to Watch* organises and

critiques media frames, and by arguing that the novel functions as an analytical review of its own – a literary artefact that archives and interrogates real-world digital practices.

Materials and Methods

The primary source for this review is Kate Stayman-London's *One to Watch* (The Dial Press, 2020), specifically all multimodal media artefacts embedded in the novel: fictional tweets, blog posts, online headlines, Instagram content, emails, and entertainment recaps. These artefacts constitute approximately 45 discrete items that simulate real-world digital journalism and user-generated content.

The novel was selected because:

- It explicitly thematises media discourse (reality TV, online comments, fashion blogs) as a central plot device.
- It has received critical attention but limited systematic academic analysis from a Media Studies perspective.
- It offers a rich dataset of simulated digital texts that mirror actual online harassment patterns documented in existing research (Jones et al., 2014; Wanniarachchi et al., 2022).

Following Fairclough's three-dimensional model (1995), this review applies critical discourse analysis to examine:

- Text dimension: linguistic features (word choice, metaphors, modality, transitivity) in the novel's embedded media excerpts.
- Discursive practice: how these texts simulate production (e.g., byline, publication platform) and consumption (implied audience reactions).
- Social practice: how the novel's discourse about fatness connects to broader societal power relations, including healthism, neoliberal beauty standards, and online misogyny.

The analysis is qualitative and interpretative, organised around four recurrent frames identified through iterative reading:

1. Medicalisation (fatness as public health threat).
2. Sexual objectification (fat body as sexual spectacle).
3. Moral condemnation (fatness as anti-feminist or irresponsible).
4. Spectacular disgust (fatness as grotesque apocalypse).

Each frame is illustrated with one or two representative excerpts, followed by a discursive analysis that links back to the theoretical literature.

The literature review (Section 3) synthesises peer-reviewed studies from media studies, body image research, cultural journalism, and Fat Studies. Sources were selected based on relevance, recency (2015–2025), and methodological rigour. The synthesis is organised thematically, not chronologically, to highlight convergences and gaps.

In Kate Stayman-London's novel *One to Watch* (2020), the author employs a specific literary device: she attributes invented headlines, articles, and commentary

to real-world media outlets, including but not limited to *Jezebel*, *TeenVogue*, *TheCut.com*, and *healthywomen.com*. It must be explicitly stated that all such headlines, texts, and bylined pieces are entirely fictional creations of the author. The real-world publications named in the novel have not published, endorsed, or in any way been associated with the quoted materials.

This device is a deliberate artistic strategy aimed at enhancing narrative verisimilitude – that is, lending the fictional media environment the texture and credibility of actual journalistic platforms. By invoking recognisable media brands, Stayman-London invites readers to map the novel’s critique of fat stigmatisation onto real discourses circulating in digital journalism, feminist commentary, and lifestyle media. The use of authentic outlet names serves a critical function: it sharpens the novel’s satire of media sensationalism and underscores the universality of the stigmatising frames analysed in this review.

Consequently, in the present review article, all excerpts taken from such sources are explicitly identified as *fictional headlines* or as *invented by Stayman-London*. No claim is made that the quoted texts exist outside the novel’s fictional universe. This clarification is essential for maintaining academic rigour and avoiding any potential misunderstanding regarding the empirical status of the analysed material.

Results and Discussion

The analysis identified four recurrent frames in the novel’s embedded media excerpts. Each frame is presented with a representative example and a discursive analysis linking back to the literature.

Medicalisation – fatness as public health threat. Excerpt (fictional headline from *healthywomen.com*):

Let’s look at the facts: Bea Schumacher is obese, and obesity is scientifically linked to more than 60 diseases. At a time when our healthcare system is already overburdened, we should be encouraging Americans to eat healthier and exercise more¹.

The excerpt employs the medicalised term “obese” rather than “fat” or “plus-size”, activating a discourse of risk and individual responsibility. The phrase “overburdened healthcare system” positions Bea’s body as a drain on collective resources – a classic example of neoliberal healthism (affective economics, as per Windram-Geddes, 2013). The implied solution (“encouraging Americans to eat healthier”) erases structural factors (poverty, food access, genetics) and locates blame entirely on the individual. This frame replicates findings from V.U. Wanniarachchi et al. (2022) that online fat stigma often employs pseudo-medical language to lend objectivity to moral judgment.

¹ Stayman-London, K. (2020). *One to Watch: A Novel* (p. 68). The Dial Press.

Sexual objectification – the fat body as sexual spectacle. Excerpt (fictional headline):

*I LOVE MY THICK BLOGGER – WOULD YOU BANG A BIG GIRL? According to our new survey, 60 percent of men say they’d sleep with Bea Schumacher*².

This headline reduces Bea to a sexual object. The colloquial “bang” and the label “big girl” strip her of agency, while the survey format pretends to offer neutral data. Transitivity analysis shows that Bea is not a grammatical subject but an object of male desire (“would you bang” – passive recipient). This frame echoes findings from G. Fouts and K.K. Burggraf (1999) and S. Grabe et al. (2008) that reality TV and entertainment media commodify female bodies through sexualised humour. The novel uses this exaggerated example to critique how digital journalism prioritises sensationalism over respectful representation.

Moral condemnation – fatness as anti-feminist. Excerpt (fictional headline from *Jezebel*):

*BEA SCHUMACHER IS SETTING FEMINISM BACK FIFTY YEARS*³, with the article arguing that fat activists face prejudice and that Bea’s visibility distracts from #MeToo goals.

This frame co-opts feminist language to police body size. The hyperbolic “setting feminism back fifty years” implies that only thin, conventionally respectable bodies deserve equality – a classic intra-feminist exclusion discussed by R. Cohen et al. (2019) in their analysis of “acceptable fatness” in body-positive media. Discursively, the headline creates a moral panic: Bea is not just a bad role model but a threat to the entire feminist project. The novel here exposes how progressive language can be weaponised against marginalised groups, revealing tensions between bodily autonomy and respectability politics.

Spectacular disgust – the “fatpocalypse”. Excerpt (fictional headline from *MondayMorningQB.com*):

*THE FATPOCALYPSE IS UPON US... If you’ve never seen her, picture a barnyard animal that gave up on itself at birth and still thinks it can wear a crop top*⁴.

The neologism “fatpocalypse” combines “fat” with “apocalypse”, framing fat visibility as a catastrophic event. The dehumanising comparison to a “barnyard animal” removes Bea’s personhood entirely – this is symbolic violence, not critique. This frame aligns with Kristensen’s (2019) observation that cultural journalism sometimes slides into sensationalism when covering “deviant” bodies. The novel’s inclusion of such extreme discourse serves to highlight the actual viciousness of online comments that fat public figures receive daily (see Wanniarachchi et al., 2022, on linguistic patterns of fat dehumanisation).

² Stayman-London, K. (2020). *One to Watch: A Novel* (p. 36).

³ Stayman-London, K. (2020). *One to Watch: A Novel* (p. 69).

⁴ Stayman-London, K. (2020). *One to Watch: A Novel* (p. 67).

Counter-discourse: Resilience and reappropriation. Importantly, the novel does not merely reproduce oppressive frames. Bea's responses provide counter-discourses of resilience. For example, when incels send her hundreds of SlimFast cases, she donates them to a food bank, quipping: *They're the exact same thing as Soylent, you misogynist turds*⁵. This rhetorical reversal – returning the shaming gift as aid – reframes the fat body from passive victim to active agent. Additionally, Bea's internal monologues explicitly articulate the politics of self-acceptance:

*That I can't change my body type (and don't even want to!), that thin women are no more happy than I am, that these insecurities are seeded and tended in my brain by the weight loss industry*⁶. Such moments illustrate the novel's contribution: it reimagines digital aggression as a site of both vulnerability and resilience.

The four frames identified above correspond closely to empirically documented patterns of online fat stigma (Jones et al., 2014; Wanniarachchi et al., 2022). This convergence suggests that Stayman-London's novel functions as a cultural archive – a literary simulation that captures and critiques real-world media practices. Unlike a social scientific content analysis, which would quantify the prevalence of such frames in actual media, the novel offers a concentrated, artistic representation that makes the mechanisms of stigmatisation visible through narrative and character development.

From a media studies perspective, *One to Watch* contributes in three ways:

- It demonstrates how multiple media frames operate simultaneously on a single fat body, creating an intersection of medical, sexual, moral, and spectacular discourses. This complexity is often flattened in empirical studies that isolate one frame at a time.
- It shows the psychological cost of digital surveillance by giving readers access to Bea's interiority. While quantitative studies (Grabe et al., 2008; Möri et al., 2022) establish correlations between media exposure and body dissatisfaction, the novel illustrates the temporal, emotional process of internalising and resisting media messages.
- It offers a model of counter-discourse that is neither naive optimism nor cynical defeat. Bea's resilience is partial, hard-won, and accompanied by relapses – a realistic portrayal that aligns with A.M. Jiménez-García et al.'s (2025) finding that body-positive content works best when it acknowledges difficulty.
- Nevertheless, the novel is not without its ideological limitations. Bea's journey toward self-acceptance, while emotionally resonant, risks romanticising individual resilience at the expense of structural critique. By foregrounding a relatively privileged protagonist – medium-fat, financially comfortable, able-bodied, and conventionally attractive by plus-size standards – Stayman-London may inadvertently reproduce intra-community hierarchies that marginalise larger, queer, or disabled fat bodies. Furthermore, the novel's commercially satisfying ending (Bea finds romantic love and professional success) raises the

⁵ Stayman-London, K. (2020). *One to Watch: A Novel* (p. 36).

⁶ Stayman-London, K. (2020). *One to Watch: A Novel* (p. 28).

question of whether self-worth is implicitly tied to external validation – a conservative trope that softens the radical implications of fat activism. These limitations do not invalidate the novel’s achievements but suggest that its politics remain entangled with the very media logics it seeks to critique.

Limitations

This review has several limitations. First, it analyses only one literary text; generalising to other novels or media forms requires further research. Second, the analysis is interpretative and qualitative; no inter-coder reliability was calculated. Third, while the review synthesises existing literature, it does not conduct a systematic quantitative meta-analysis. Fourth, the review focuses on Anglophone media contexts; cross-cultural comparisons are absent. Future reviews could expand the corpus to include non-Western fat representation narratives or compare fictional and journalistic treatments of plus-size celebrities.

Conclusion

This review article has examined the politics of fat representation and digital media discourse in Kate Stayman-London’s *One to Watch*. By synthesising existing research on media frames, body surveillance, and affective economies, and by applying critical discourse analysis to the novel’s embedded digital artefacts, the review identified four dominant frames – medicalisation, sexual objectification, moral condemnation, and spectacular disgust – as well as counter-discourses of resilience.

The novel serves as a transformative cultural artefact that archives contemporary bodily autonomy. It illustrates how literary fiction can engage with and critique media practices, offering a narrative space where the psychological toll of online harassment is made tangible. For media scholars and journalism researchers, *One to Watch* provides a rich case study of how digital discourse is simulated, stigmatised, and resisted in popular culture. Future research might compare this novel with other fat-positive fiction (e.g., Julie Murphy’s *Dumplin’*, Jess Baker’s *Things I Have Learned About My Body*) or examine how real-life plus-size influencers navigate similar media frames.

The article concludes that interdisciplinary approaches – combining literary analysis, critical discourse analysis, and media studies – are essential for understanding the full complexity of fat representation in the digital age.

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