

'I didn't feel insulted, I felt seen.' Is Taylor Swift's new video fatphobic?

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Taylor Swift caused a stir on social media last week when she released her music video for the song "Anti-Hero."

In the video, Swift stands on a bathroom scale and looks down. But instead of showing a number, the scale just says "FAT."

The scene has divided fans on [social media](#). Swift has been open in the past about her struggles with an [eating disorder](#), so some claim the scene is an expression of Swift's anxieties. Others have called the scene fatphobic for using the term "fat" in a negative way.

But experts argue that the situation is more complex than the two sides might suggest. What's more, instead of vilifying Swift in this way, they say, it's more useful to use the video as a springboard for a larger discussion about how people of a certain size are treated in the United States.

"My worry with the discussion around this is always that it ends up being about Taylor Swift," says Rachel Rodgers, associate professor at Northeastern's Bouvé College of Health Sciences, "when we should be ensuring that the conversation is around the systemic side of things."

Swift's video is just one of a few recent instances that have sparked discussion about fatphobia. The new film "The Whale," a story about a 600-pound man who has health issues and is unhappy with his size, has been called fatphobic, and a video depicting a man apparently rejecting blind dates based on the person's size has over 12 million views on Twitter.

For Swift, much of the flack comes from her use of the word "fat." While Rodgers says she prefers to say "people who live in a larger body" instead of "fat," she says some activists have reappropriated the word. Those who do use the word use it as a descriptor, without any positive or negative connotations.

Swift's usage, however, is unequivocally negative. "She's not using it in

that reappropriated neutral way," Rodgers says.

This negative connotation didn't sit well with some. "Fat people don't need to have it reiterated yet again that it's everyone's worst nightmare to look like us," wrote one Twitter user. Using the word in this way could be particularly harmful to [young people](#) who already struggle with body image issues: According to the National Eating Disorders Association, [40% to 60% of girls ages 6 to 12](#) are concerned about their weight or about "getting too fat." And, according to NEDA, "the sociocultural idealization of thinness" is a big risk factor for developing eating disorders.

Others have come to Swift's defense, arguing that she is simply using the video as a medium to comment on unrealistic body standards, and that, as a woman who has what Rodgers calls "a body that has all of the characteristics that we are socialized to understand as being valuable," talking about her struggles can validate others who feel the same way.

"The message Taylor is very clearly promoting is that society teaches girls and women to fear being fat, and that this is something that has been very harmful to her [mental health](#)," wrote one Twitter user. "As a fat person who has dealt with an ED for most of my life ... I didn't feel insulted, I felt seen," said another.

Serena Nangia, marketing and communications manager at [Project HEAL](#), a U.S.-based nonprofit that helps people access eating disorder treatment for free, says it's important to validate feelings like Swift's when people express them. "If we immediately judge someone for admitting that becoming fat is a fear of theirs (a common symptom of some eating disorders), then we risk alienating people who need help," she says.

But others say her pathology and the potential positive effects don't

excuse the content of the video. "Having an eating disorder doesn't excuse fatphobia," wrote a Twitter user. "It's not hard to say, 'I'm struggling with my body image today' instead of 'I'm a fat, disgusting pig.'"

Christine Clark, a dietitian at Northeastern University Health and Counseling Services, agrees that Swift's anxiety could have been expressed in a healthier way. "The messaging could have been different and still got the point across about her struggles," Clark says.

Regardless of Swift's word choice, the image of a popular recording artist worrying about her weight could have a negative impact by itself. Rodgers worries that the video reinforces that weight is important and that young people should be worried about it—especially if someone like Swift is worrying about it, too. Swift should "hold an awareness of the impact" her image has, says Nangia.

What's most important, however, is that the music video starts a conversation around size and prejudice, Rodgers says. Weight bias, she says, can negatively impact people's lives in tangible ways; larger people are less likely to get loans or have access to effective health care, including treatment for eating disorders. According to NEDA, stigma can be a huge threat to a person's health, and can lead to mental [health issues](#) like depression. Some have argued that the stigma against having a larger body may be more harmful than any threats that a higher weight could have on a person's health.

Lauren Smolar, a [vice president](#) at NEDA, agrees that the [music video](#) should be seen as an "opportunity." "Fatphobia is pervasive in our society," they said. "Taylor's video provides an important opportunity to discuss how bodies are portrayed, society's relationship with fatness and the effect it can have on individuals' experiences with their bodies, including as it relates to eating disorders and disordered eating."

In short, the issue is much bigger than Taylor Swift. "We need to be thinking about the systems level rather than pushing the burden on individuals to be spokespersons for body acceptance or challenging fat bias," Rodgers says. "What are we doing to change the society we live in such that this is no longer such an inflammatory topic?"

Provided by Northeastern University

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