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Fat *and* fabulous? Body positivity on the neoliberal screen

The fat female body is culturally understood as excessive, repulsive, and abject (Bordo 1993). However, a recent undercurrent embracing “body positivity” stands in opposition to mainstream ideologies around fatness (Darwin & Miller 2021). In this paper, I analyze the reality television show *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*, featuring Whitney, a 30-year-old white “fat dancer”. Using a combination of corpus analysis and (feminist) critical discourse analysis alongside a multimodal approach, I ask 1) how the fat female body is discursively constructed, and 2) how positive framings of fatness (e.g., as *fabulous*) appear in the makeover genre, which adheres to a neoliberal logic that insists upon individuals’ continual self-improvement towards a cultural ideal (Ouellette & Hay 2008).

Applying corpus techniques to transcriptions of the show’s nine seasons (Bednarek 2015), I focus on the language used to construct Whitney’s body by herself and others. Additionally, I examine discursive themes like fatphobia and fat acceptance, along with post-production choices made in visual representations of Whitney’s body, probing narrative tensions between body positivity and simultaneous rejection of fat bodies. I argue that positive constructions of fatness are tempered by medicalizing discourses and moments of raw emotionality that reveal Whitney’s “authentic self”. While on one level the show seems to present a challenge to normative femininity, it ultimately reinscribes the neoliberal order, recasting Whitney as a good, self-surveilling subject. As a whole, the paper draws together embodied sociolinguistics, language and affect, and feminist critique within a broader project of understanding how the language of neoliberalism circulates throughout pop culture.

References

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