Measuring Up: The Social Marketer and Media Gaze on the Fat Body

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Abstract

This paper critically explores the similarities between social marketing campaigns and ‘shock tactic’ medialisied images of ‘obesity’. We theoretically draw on the concept of representational conventions to explore customary ways of depicting identities that propagate assumptions about people being a particular ‘kind’ or ‘type’ (Schroeder and Borgerson, 2005). A visual discourse analysis was conducted on a sample of five social marketing obesity campaigns from Australia and the US and five images that accompanied mainstream media articles on obesity in Australia. The images analysed were all embedded in social and cultural contexts, namely public spaces and mass media channels. The analysis explored what choices the ‘language of images’ (van Leeuwen, 2000) gives us to depict ‘obese’ subjects, thereby providing insights into the constructive effects of the chosen images. The findings identified three dominant discourses – control, patriarchy and shame – drawn from salient patterns identified in the visual discourse analysis which give rise to particular representational conventions that create body stigmatisation and exclusion. Overall, we contend that both media and social marketing sites draw on the same sets of discourses and utilise similar representational conventions, contributing to a ‘body panic’ that stigmatises and excludes the fat body. This is contrary to the broader agenda of social marketing that aims to create sustainable behaviour change. Stigmatising fat bodies is easily dismissed as ‘unintended consequences’, and this social marketing practice remains oddly unexamined. Given the ongoing failure to eliminate ‘obesity’ and the growing expenditure devoted to it as a ‘problem’, we contend that critical insights are needed to better achieve the overarching objective of ‘doing good’ for societal well-being.

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