Towards a Radical Body Positive: Reading the Online “Body Positive Movement”

Abstract

Under the auspices of the “body positive movement” there has in recent years been a proliferation of websites dedicated to nurturing bodily acceptance. Responding to the barrage of media images reflecting a narrow bodily ideal, the movement and its related sites provide a space to showcase bodies of all shapes and sizes. There has already been significant engagement with the question of whether these sites are helpful or harmful, asking whether they fulfill their mission of combating the very narrow definition of the ideal body with which we are constantly bombarded. Yet this project addresses an aspect of these sites that is less readily interrogated— the kinds of bodily performances actually facilitated. Looking at three US-based “body positive” websites, this work explores how the body is both conceptualized and enacted on these sites and examines how narratives of authenticity, identity and revelation are negotiated when the body is performed and disseminated online. What it finds is that body positivity more closely mirrors than challenges a neoliberal paradigm of bodily compliance. It then proposes a way body positivity might be reimagined as a more radical project than its current state.