

FLATTERING

YOU KEEP USING THAT WORD.
I DO NOT THINK IT MEANS WHAT
YOU THINK IT MEANS.¹

¹ The title of this paper is a quote from the 1987 film *The Princess Bride* which has become a common way in popular culture to challenge misused terms

LEILA KELLEHER

Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada

leila.kelleher@torontomu.ca

Orcid: 0000-0001-7054-1791

SHANNON FLAHERTY

Earlham College, USA

flahesh@earlham.edu

Orcid: 0009-0009-1702-6841

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Abstract

The word “flattering” is defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “helping to enhance attractiveness,” however we argue that the usage has shifted to almost exclusively being used to create the illusion of slimness. Through popular media discourse analysis, this Fashion Lexigraphy examines the way that flattering is in fact a tool of anti-fat bias through books, magazines, and popular television shows that give fashion advice to women. Although this remains the dominant discourse, there have recently been movements that push against the paradigm of slimness being superior to fatness beginning in blogs and then moving into more mainstream discussion.

Keywords: *Fashion discourse; Fat fashion; Anti-fat bias; Fat liberation; Fat studies.*

Within a fashion context, *flattering* may be defined as “helping to enhance attractiveness,” according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

In 2024, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) added a fashion reference to the definition of *flattering*: “Of clothing, style, etc.: that shows one to the best advantage; that enhances one's appearance; becoming.” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2026) The Cambridge Dictionary is even more explicit: “making someone look or seem better or more attractive than usual.” In earlier examples of usage, such as “Miss Frances Daley..wore a flattering gown of blue net,” from 1935, the focus is more generalized with respect to appearance.

However in the more recent examples, we can

see the focus change toward concealing societally undesirable features (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). For example, in 1993, the OED added the example “High-waisted or empire-line dresses are very flattering for pear shapes”, and in Merriam-Webster's recent example, we see “The mid-rise baggy jeans are quite roomy in the leg, which is very on-trend, but have a flattering fit around the waist to give you some shape.”

While flattering may still be used to reference complimentary or respectful attitudes towards someone's personality or actions, today its use is mainly limited to a fashion and body context. Merriam-Webster lists thirty recent examples, from 2023-2025, of which twenty-four sentences use flattering to mean enhancing attractiveness

in fashion (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2025).

While “flattering” may still be used to describe the clothing that highlights a person’s “best” features (such as through the use of particular colors), our critical media discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 2015) of fashion self-help culture demonstrates that its predominant use today is tied to achieving a socially-accepted body morphology by highlighting or creating the visual illusion of slimness. Fashion self-help culture is media designed to help readers or viewers “improve” their style and presentation of dress.

This includes women’s and fashion magazines, reality television series, and books.

May Friedman, professor in the schools of Fashion and Social Work at Toronto Metropolitan University, notes that “First and foremost, ‘flattering’ will always be a euphemism for thinness,” identifying the way this once-broader term has narrowed into a synonym for slimming (Lautens, 2025).

In this way, cultural messaging around “flattering” clothing plays a part in broader systems of fatphobia by associating fatness and larger body size with undesirable appearances and unfashionable dressing.

Large-bodied people are subjected to fatphobia through health discrimination, social fatphobia, and other forms of systemic discrimination (Friedman, 2025, pp. 32–33). It is acceptable to - and even lauded - for smaller-bodied actors to don fat suits to portray larger-bodied people, as is discussed in Roxanne Gay’s commentary on *The Whale* in the New York Times (2022). Brendan Fraser won ‘Best Actor’ at the 2023 Academy Awards for his portrayal of a fat man in the movie using a prosthetic body suit, though similar portrayal of other marginalized groups would be socially unacceptable.

For example, Mickey Rooney’s “yellowface” in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* is now, rightly, regarded as racist (Fuller & Gunning, 2010), however the spectacle of fat persists as an acceptable form of discrimination, ridicule, and marginalization.

In this lexigraphy, we perform a discourse analysis examining the contemporary usage of the word “flattering” becoming synonymous with slimming, contextualized within the broader epistemology of Fat Liberation.

We analyze the use of “flattering” in English-speaking popular culture fashion advice from the

past three decades, considering how the fashion self-help genre promotes the goal of visually slimming the body through garment selection and styling. Earlier work has examined concepts of “flattering” in historical stoutwear, the plus-size fashion of the early-twentieth century (Peters, 2019), however we are specifically interested in contemporary popular media and usage.

The Fat Liberation movement is centred around NAAFA (National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance), which was founded in the United States in 1969 to challenge discrimination against fat people. A civil rights organization, NAAFA has worked to transform social attitudes toward fatness and equal rights including a bill in 2022 that outlawed height and weight discrimination in employment and housing in New York City. By highlighting the ways that fat people are discriminated against in different situations, NAAFA makes visible the systemic nature of weight-based oppression and challenges the normalization of anti-fat bias. Racism also plays a role in anti-fat bias. In *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origin of Fatphobia* (2019), Sabrina Strings argues that today’s beauty ideals were formed within the context of anti-black racism from the “Enlightenment” to the present.

In the Euro-centric worldview of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Black people were viewed as morally and corporeally unrestrained and therefore Europeans formed ideals of beauty that were in opposition to that - slimmer, with smaller busts, bottoms, and hips. This has created the standards that persist within the fashion industry and society at large. Both Fat oppression and racism has contributed to the anti-fat bias that is perpetuated in the use of the word “flattering.” For example, in the 1990s and early 2000s saw an explosion of media aimed at helping women dress to “flatter” their figures. Analysis of their advice reveals how “flattering” clothing is that which makes the body look slimmer, taller, and adhering to this Euro-centric standard of proportion and beauty.

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“What Not to Wear” ran from 2001-2007 as a UK reality TV show that featured wardrobe makeovers for women whose family and friends nominated them as being unstylish (Barrass, 2001-2007).

The show was then re-produced in the USA by The Learning Channel (TLC) and ran from 2003 and 2013 (Hakami, 2003-2013).

For many women in the early 2000s in the US

and UK, these shows were arbiters of dress and respectability (Oak & Petrov, 2020, p. 314). The acerbic critiques given by their respective hosts were positioned as the necessary, brutally honest takes that would allow their makeover subjects to finally come to terms with their bodies and fashion. The companion book to the UK version of the show advises readers to be “honest and [come] to terms with the fact that some parts of your body aren’t great” and “[understand] that certain clothing only serves to exacerbate these problem areas” (Woodall & Constantine, 2003, p. 6). Throughout the book, the UK hosts, Trinny Woodall and Susannah Constantine, make clear that “problem areas” are generally those places where fat accumulates: large breasts that risk “tak[ing] on a lumpy quality like badly made custard,” (Woodall & Constantine, 2003, p. 16) “arms that are “gargantuan mass[es] of flesh,” (Woodall & Constantine, 2003, p. 46) and hips whose “saddlebags” are a “physical catastrophe” (Woodall & Constantine, 2003, p. 115). In the US version, Stacy London and Clinton Kelly gave advice to “rescue the frumpy and dumpy” by re-styling their wardrobes (Watch What Not to Wear | Netflix, n.d.). In both versions, the hosts’ wardrobe tips are tools to obscure fatness and offer slimming optical illusions, fashion goals which are presented as the path to more professional, age-appropriate, and flattering public images for their previously frumpy subjects.

Women’s magazines have long reinforced beauty standards of slimness. In the 2000s, many magazines offered their own contributions to the fashion self-help book genre. Glamour’s Big Book of Dos and Don’ts (2006) enumerates 10 “Rules for Flattery”, all of which focus on minimizing the figure. The most important rule is “Don’t go too baggy - big shapes make you look bigger” (Leive & Glamour, 2006, pp. 18–19). These rules explicitly use flattering as a synonym for slimming, showing that “flattering” garments are those that create the illusion of slimness. In 2014, Marie Claire published Dress Skinny which included specific chapters entitled “Dressing to Flatter...” subtitled with specific body parts. For example, in the chapter on arms, the book warns to highlight “only your leanest bits” to camouflage the parts of the arm that are less desirable, such as “bingo wings,” loose and hanging soft tissue of the upper arm (Corrigan

et al., 2014, p. 37). The book demonstrates that flattering the body is predicated on creating “optical illusions” to make the body appear to conform more closely to a specific, slim body type. The 2018 revamp of the Queer Eye franchise saw ‘style guru’ Tan France emerge as the leading advisor on women’s dress practice in popular culture. The revamp of the show, which was originally focused on men’s fashion in the 00s, rebranded as being for all genders. However, the focus on slimming clothing persisted. On the fashion blog ‘Who What Where’, Tan comments on jeans, “...I think boot-cut is one of the most universally unflattering [styles]. They make your legs look wider than they are... I love a jean that is tapered at the bottom—it’ll make you look taller and leaner” (Nichols, 2018). Although the show purports to be more inclusive with respect to body acceptance, the advice given conforms to the dominant messaging that women’s bodies should be smaller and that thinness is superior to fatness.

These examples demonstrate the way that “flattering” is used as a synonym for slimming in popular culture. In earlier definitions of “flattering”, there was a connotation of deception and insincerity, such as flattering someone through obsequious and exaggerated compliments¹. Although this isn’t regularly the case in current usage, our observations using discourse analysis suggest that when applied to fatness/slimness, that root of the word seems to persist in advice to create optical illusions that camouflage the appearance of fatness. Fatness is treated as a problem to be solved by strategic dressing, with larger, less desirable parts of the body obscured and smaller areas highlighted. For slimmer audience members, too, the specter of appearing larger than one’s actual size looms large.

Sociologists have documented fashion as a social practice that establishes identity through interactions in everyday life because it articulates social and group norms as well as resistance against them (Aspers & Godart, 2013). Therefore, the marginalization of fat people through clothing and dress affects social interactions, and

¹ See for example OED’s “Of a person, his or her actions, utterances, etc.: That flatters or tries to please by praise, generally insincere; adulatory” and “Suggesting pleasurable (usually, delusive) anticipations or beliefs. Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Flattering, adj., additional sense.

therefore lack of adherence to dressing to “flatter” or slim the body, is viewed as an aberration.

Recently, fat liberation social movements have emerged to resist this discourse. Prominent fat activist Lesley Kinzel, in her 2012 book *Two Whole Cakes: How to Stop Dieting and Learn to Love Your Body*, illuminated the way “flattering” is used as a coded, more polite way to say that the fat body is adequately disguised. She writes, “when we say something is unflattering, we’re often trying to deliver bad news in a polite way, by deflecting blame from the body to the garment, in spite of the fact that most of us are going to secretly blame the body anyway” (Kinzel, 2012, p. 17).

The discourse of flattering, she argues, gives a veneer of politeness to the critique and marginalization of fat bodies. In 2015, alternative women’s magazine *Bustle* argued that we should stop using the word, stating that “the word “flattering” is really just body policing wrapped in the illusion of a compliment” (Layne, 2015). The argument built upon the work of fat activists, citing Lesley Kinzel’s book as inspiration.

Fat fashion blogger and clothing designer Alysse D’Alessandro also wrote against the connotations of flattering in 2016, stating “There’s a level of manipulation behind the word flattering when applied to clothing that says: how you look is not okay but this garment will make you look better” (D’Alessandro, 2016).

She further elucidates the connection between “flattering” discourse and consumerism, stating, “This manipulation relies on people’s insecurities yet it’s a part of the retailer-consumer relationship that people will defend vehemently without thinking about it” (D’Alessandro, 2016).

Building on this work, a 2019 blog post by one of this paper’s authors (Flaherty), argues that flattering was not just a backhanded compliment, but a weapon used to reinforce the marginalization of fat bodies and deny fat people full creative agency in fashion. And this movement continues; in 2020, *The Guardian* reported that “for generation Z – roughly speaking, those born between 1995 and 2010 – “flattering” is becoming a new F-word” (Cartner-Morley, 2020).

In academic scholarship, recent work has analyzed the “fuck flattering” movement as a method for resisting the marginalization of fatness and forced invisibility of fat bodies. For instance, Cheryl Frazier argues that through a rejection of concepts of flattering, “fat people are able to challenge their

status as hyper(in)visible, demanding visibility in ways that force others to address and consider their own antifatness” (Frazier, 2023, p. 233).

This Lexigraphy, has discussed the evolution of the term “flattering” as it became a weapon of anti-fat bias using discourse analysis of popular media, TV spin-off books, and style advice.

Our findings reveal changing usage and offer a starting point for more comprehensive study in the future. We are currently at an inflection point, as new discussions on the impact of anti-fat bias emerge into the broader community, where we see broader adoption of the use of the word fat as a neutral descriptor of body size.

As mainstream conversation is shifting to include eliminating flattering as a form of praise, we see attention moving away from achieving a “flattering” silhouette and towards fashion that provides joy, comfort, or makes a statement.

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