

# Obesity stigma prevalent in online news coverage

May 6 2011

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Obese individuals shown in online news images are frequently portrayed in a negative and stigmatizing way, according to a study from the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University. The study is published online in the *Journal of Health Communication*.

Researchers coded and analyzed over 400 images of overweight and obese individuals that accompanied news reports about obesity from five major news websites.

The researchers found that 72% of the images depicted an overweight or [obese person](#) in a negative and stigmatizing way. More than half of obese people were portrayed in images with only their abdomens or lower

bodies shown, whereas non-overweight people were never portrayed in this way.

Compared to thin individuals who were depicted in a flattering manner, obese individuals were more likely to be portrayed as headless, without clothing (e.g., bare stomach), eating and drinking, and portrayed from unflattering side or rear views.

"News photographs degrade and dehumanize obese individuals when they show them with their heads cut out of images, as isolated body parts, or with an unflattering emphasis on [excess weight](#)," said Rebecca Puhl, co-author of the study and Director of Research at the Rudd Center. "They become symbols of an epidemic rather than valued members of society."

The study also found that obese individuals were less likely to be shown wearing professional-looking clothing, and were far less likely to be portrayed as experts, advocates, journalists, or professionals compared to thinner individuals.

Puhl concluded, "The news media has tremendous power to shape the opinion of policy makers and the public, and can play an important role in reducing pervasive societal weight [stigma](#) by changing the visual content of their news reports about obesity."

**More information:** The Rudd Center offers a set of media guidelines and a free image gallery to aid journalists, photo editors, bloggers, advertisers and other influencers in the creation and delivery of fair, unbiased coverage of obesity and weight-related topics on television, in print and online. These comprehensive resources can be found online at [www.yaleruddcenter.org](http://www.yaleruddcenter.org)

Provided by Yale University

Citation: Obesity stigma prevalent in online news coverage (2011, May 6) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-05-obesity-stigma-prevalent-online-news.html>

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