Positive media portrayals of obese individuals reduce weight stigma

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(Medical Xpress) -- Presenting obese individuals in a positive, non-stereotypical manner in the media could help reduce weight-biased attitudes held by the public, finds a study from the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at Yale. The study, published online in Health Psychology, investigates the impact on public attitudes and preferences of both stigmatizing and positive portrayals of obese individuals in the media.

Researchers conducted two online experiments in which participants viewed either a stigmatizing or non-stigmatizing photograph of an obese individual. Participants were then asked a series of questions concerning the model featured in the image and their general attitudes toward obese persons.

The study revealed that those who viewed stigmatizing images expressed stronger negative attitudes toward obese individuals than participants who viewed positive images. Not only did the stigmatizing images lead to stronger negative attitudes towards obese individuals, but participants said that they preferred viewing the respectful images instead of the stigmatizing images.

The authors believe that media outlets have the ability to shape public perceptions about health and social issues, and based on this study, they recommend substituting more respectful media portrayals rather than stigmatizing images of obese people. "Stigmatizing images of overweight and obese individuals portrayed as headless figures, not fully clothed, and engaging in stereotypical eating behaviors are common in the media," according to Rebecca Pearl, lead author of the study and a Yale graduate student in psychology. "This study shows that by portraying obese individuals more respectfully, the public's negative attitudes and stereotypes can be significantly reduced."

In order to increase public support for obesity prevention and treatment efforts and reduce societal weight prejudice, the authors suggest that media should make a pledge against perpetuating negative stereotypes and use more respectful portrayals of obese persons.

"Recent anti-obesity campaigns have garnered considerable debate and criticism among parents, health professionals, and citizens about how obese individuals are portrayed in the media," says co-author Rebecca Puhl, the Rudd Center's director of research. "Obese individuals who feel shamed or stigmatized because of their weight are much more likely to engage in harmful health behaviors. The media should give careful consideration to the kinds of images that are disseminated, so that children and adults who are struggling with obesity can be supported in their efforts to become healthier, rather than shamed and stigmatized."

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