

Obesity coverage in black newspapers is mostly negative, study finds

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Obesity rates have increased dramatically in the last few decades. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, while African Americans are only 13 percent of the total population, 82 percent of black women are overweight or obese compared to nearly 60 percent of white women, and more than 70 percent of black males are classified as overweight or obese. A new study from the University of Missouri School of Journalism shows that American newspapers, and specifically newspapers geared toward an African-American audience, frame stories on obesity in a negative way. Hyunmin Lee, who performed her research while a doctoral student at MU, says this negative framing could have damaging effects on African Americans looking to lose weight.

"Previous research has shown that African Americans do not respond positively to negative news stories about obesity and health issues," said Lee, who is now an assistant professor at St. Louis University. "Our study shows that the majority of obesity news stories are written in a negative tone, mainly attributing individual responsibilities to overcome obesity, which means many African Americans in need of weight loss could be discouraged by what they are reading in newspapers, instead of being inspired by positive success stories about overcoming obesity or other health problems."

Lee and Maria Len-Rios, an associate professor in the MU School of Journalism, examined 35 newspapers, 23 of them African-American newspapers, and analyzed nearly 400 news stories about obesity. They found that nearly all of those stories were written with negative tones

emphasizing individual responsibilities for overcoming obesity. News stories with negative tones include stories about high [obesity rates](#) among African Americans and health issues that are caused by obesity.

"The majority of the obesity news stories we analyzed focused on individual responsibilities and solutions that may not be achievable for many African Americans," Lee said. "Even the stories that offered advice on ways to fight obesity were framed negatively. That advice was heavily attributed to individual responsibilities such as exercise and diet control, which are messages that are often ineffective at motivating African Americans to be healthy for socio-economic and cultural reasons."

Lee encourages newspapers, particularly ones with primarily African-American audiences, to write health stories with positive tones. Instead of stories about increasing [obesity](#) rates, she says stories promoting promising new research or positive trends in African-American health would be much more effective in motivating [African Americans](#) to make healthier choices.

"Newspapers focused on writing health stories that only emphasize individual responsibilities are missing the bigger picture of social responsibility," Lee said. "To make a constructive impact on the community, health stories that mention societal responsibilities are a necessity while avoiding advice solely focused on individual responsibility. This is because many health news stories do not consider that their audiences may live in food deserts or lack the facilities or ability to exercise safely where they live. Telling someone they have to do things that they physically cannot do to be healthy can have very discouraging and counterproductive effects on an audience that needs as much encouragement as possible."

Lee and Len-Rios' study has been accepted for publication in the *Journal*

of Health Communication.

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