

News sites continue to stigmatize people's weight, study suggests

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Credit: Miguel Á. Padriñán from Pexels

The largest U.S. and U.K. news sites are continuing to stigmatize people's weight with the images they use, suggests a new peer-reviewed study [published](#) in the *Journal of Health Communication*.

Assessing 445 stories about obesity over the course of a year, researchers from the University of Connecticut and the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health found that "stigmatizing" images were used 70% of the time when the articles were focused on people of higher weight.

Women were also demonstrated to be "significantly" more likely than men to be featured in images accompanying obesity-focused news.

Calling for "broader systemic efforts" from the [news media](#) industry, lead author of the new study Aditi Rao, from the Department of Communication at the University of Connecticut, states the team's findings highlight that news media need to "be mindful of the images included in obesity and [health news](#)."

"Even if [news articles](#) report on [societal issues](#) and policies related to health, these stories can inadvertently communicate [weight stigma](#) when the accompanying image negatively stereotypes individuals with higher weight," says Rao, a Ph.D. Student and Graduate Assistant.

"By using appropriate and respectful depictions, news images can be a tool for eliminating negative societal perceptions of persons with larger body sizes."

The latest research on this topic area, the research assessed articles from CNN; HuffPost US; Fox News; and The New York Times, in the U.S., and in the U.K.: the BBC; the Guardian; Sky News; and HuffPost UK.

Across these eight news sites, news articles were searched using the following terms: "overweight," "obesity," and "obese."

An image was classed as "stigmatizing" if it demonstrated one of five features such as "disproportionately emphasizing" the abdomen/lower body of a higher-weight individual, portraying the higher-weight

individual without clothes, and showing the individual to be engaged in a stereotypical activity, such as consuming fast food or sitting on a couch watching TV.

The findings show U.K. [news sites](#) were 2.5 times more likely to contain stigmatizing images than U.S. news.

The BBC had the highest number of stigmatizing depictions across all eight news sources, followed by Sky News.

In the U.S., 54% of people of higher weight were depicted in a stigmatizing manner. This is lower compared to studies conducted a decade ago, which suggests an improvement. However, "the majority of the depictions continue to be negative and stigmatizing," says co-author Dr. Rebecca Puhl, a professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences and Deputy Director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health, both at the University of Connecticut.

Political leaning of the news source also influenced findings; conservative news sources were "significantly more likely" to depict higher-weight individuals in a stigmatizing manner than liberal [news sources](#).

Further, the prevalence of stigmatizing images was almost twice as high in articles addressing consequences of obesity than in those addressing contributors to obesity.

The issue may relate to stock imagery problems, the authors suggest, with journalists and the stock imagery photographers potentially being "unaware of weight bias or insensitive to respectful representations of persons with higher weight."

Fellow co-author Dr. Kirstie Farrar, a professor in the Department of Communication, University of Connecticut, adds, "This stigma in news images is still a persistent problem that needs to be addressed."

"While suppliers of stock images offer a variety of creative and vivid visuals produced by professionals, the visuals don't appear to be screened for weight-stigmatizing content."

Moving forward, the authors suggest future research should examine visual representations of stigma related to not just obesity, but other sensitive health issues such as mental health as well.

This study has "several limitations" the authors state. One being that it only focused on [images](#). They recommend a visio-textual analysis assessing [news](#) articles in its entirety along with the effects of multiple narratives could offer more insights especially with respect to potential effects of the article topic.

More information: Aditi Rao et al, Weight Stigma in Online News Images: A Visual Content Analysis of Stigma Communication in the Depictions of Individuals with Obesity in U.S. and U.K. News, *Journal of Health Communication* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/10810730.2023.2286512](#)

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