

Headless, Hungry, and Unhealthy:

A Video Content Analysis of Obese Persons Portrayed in Online News Media.

Rebecca Puhl, PhD
Jamie Lee Peterson, MA
Jenny DePierre, BA
Joerg Luedicke, MS

The news media has substantial power to shape public perceptions of social and health issues. Obesity has become a frequent topic of discussion in the media, but portrayals of obese persons are frequently stigmatizing. This study conducted a comprehensive video content analysis to examine portrayals of obese persons in online news reports. News videos about obesity (N = 371) were downloaded from five popular news websites, and visual portrayals of obese and non-obese adults and youth in these videos were systematically coded. Sixty-five percent of overweight/obese individuals were significantly more likely than non-overweight individuals to be portrayed as headless, with an unflattering emphasis on isolated body parts, from an unflattering rear view of their excess weight, eating unhealthy foods, engaging in sedentary behavior, and dressed in inappropriate fitting clothing. Non-overweight individuals were significantly more likely to be portrayed in a flattering and positive manner. These findings have important implications for public perceptions of obesity and obese persons, and may reinforce negative societal weight bias. Implications of these findings for public perceptions of obese individuals will be discussed. The manner in which stigmatizing visual content in obesity news can adversely influence public health policy and community efforts to address obesity will be explained. Suggestions for changes in news media portrayals of obesity will be proposed, and it will be explained how these changes can play an important role in reducing weight-based stigmatization and inequalities.

Puhl R, Peterson JL, DePierre J, Luedicke J. Headless, hungry, and unhealthy: A video content analysis of obese persons portrayed in online news media. In Press. *J Health Commun*.