

THE MEDIA EMPATHY REPORT:

SPOTLIGHT ON WEIGHT STIGMA

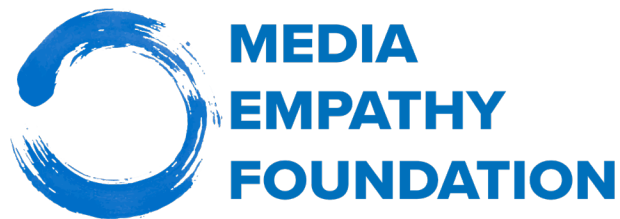


**MEDIA
EMPATHY
FOUNDATION**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report identifies and summarizes the prevalent forms of weight stigma across all major media channels, including entertainment film and television, news media, advertising, magazines, and social media. Specifically, we ask: *What does weight stigma look like in popular media content and where do we see it?* We conducted a systematic review of academic research published in the last two decades examining the *content* and *prevalence* of weight stigma in popular media. Our final sample consisted of 91 peer-reviewed academic studies: 18 quantitative and 73 qualitative. Relevant findings from the quantitative studies have been highlighted and summarized in the attached infographic and further detailed in Section 1 of the report. This quantitative evidence provides a snapshot of the prevalence and source of weight-stigmatizing content. Findings from the qualitative studies were collated and synthesized by conducting a thematic analysis of the material. Eleven common themes were identified across the literature and have been subdivided into four categories: stigmatization in the portrayal of *people*, stigmatization in the portrayal of *bodies*, stigmatization in the portrayal of *social roles*, and finally, *stigma's lasting hold* on more positive portrayals of people with a higher body weight. These themes are outlined in the attached infographic and described in detail in Section 2.

There are five key takeaways that we have summarized from the findings of this report. **(1)** The pervasiveness of weight-stigmatizing content identified by quantitative studies across entertainment, news, and social media is unacceptable. Nearly three quarters of children's programming has consistently been found to portray characters with a higher body weight as evil, unattractive, unfriendly, or cruel. What is worse is that the percentage of characters with a higher body weight that are portrayed as being less active, making fewer friends, or being treated negatively by others *doubled* since the 1990s. During this same period of time, there was a [rise in children's average body weight](#) in the United States. The drastic increase in negative portrayals of people with a higher body weight speaks to persistent societal blame towards a growing proportion of the population. **(2)** The stereotypical portrayal of people with a higher body weight as lazy, undisciplined, and over-indulgent continues to reinforce societal weight stigma, with even positive portrayals falling into these time-worn reductive traps. **(3)** The dehumanization of people with a higher body weight can be seen across all layers of weight stigma and across all media channels – from 'fat jokes' and dehumanizing graphics to operating room exposés and headless close-ups. These portrayals strip people with a higher body weight of their humanity and dignity and make it acceptable to treat them with contempt. **(4)** Although social media has provided new avenues for a diverse range of perspectives to be shared and heard, when these views are not reflected in mainstream media, their voices remain marginalized, discredited, and hindered in their ability to extend their reach to the public at large. And **(5)**, while we are seeing an increase in more positive portrayals of people with a higher body weight, most of these portrayals continue to reinforce a narrative that only *some* bodies are acceptable, having to prove their worth along gendered, classed, and racial lines.

Our Call-to-Action: We need more stories. Stories that are inclusive, fair, representative, and nuanced. Stories that go beyond the limitations of characters being defined or limited by their body weight or size. In entertainment film and TV, we need stories that portray people of a higher body weight as multi-dimensional human beings living multi-faceted lives. In news media, we need stories that reflect the complexity of obesity

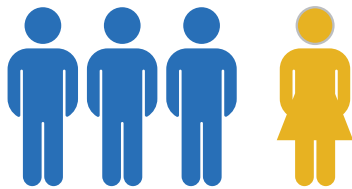
and avoid sensationalized headlines, soundbites, and visuals that only act to further marginalize and stigmatize the very people being affected by obesity. Our children, the bridge to future generations, need us to shape a different kind of culture for their future, one that is not filled with disgust and disdain for an entire segment of the population. This begins with the world views that are presented to them across all media. The stories we each see shape our attitudes and beliefs. They need to depict a more layered and complex view of people with a higher body weight across the spectrum of gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability.

Building on the findings of this report and the input of our expert panel, our goal is to create a catalyst for more content creators to recognize and prioritize the need for accurate, inclusive, non-stigmatizing, and empathetic portrayals of people of all sizes across all media channels. We need to stop the narrative of weight stigma and build a new version of this world that sees people of all body weights and sizes as worthy of full stories and happy endings.

IT'S TIME TO CHANGE THE SCRIPT.

WHAT DOES WEIGHT STIGMA LOOK LIKE IN POPULAR MEDIA CONTENT AND WHERE DO WE SEE IT?

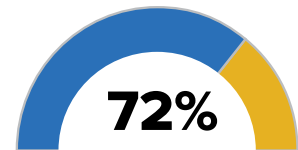
In **entertainment film and TV**, people with a higher body weight are underrepresented, more likely to be teased or ridiculed about their weight, and portrayed in a disparaging manner.



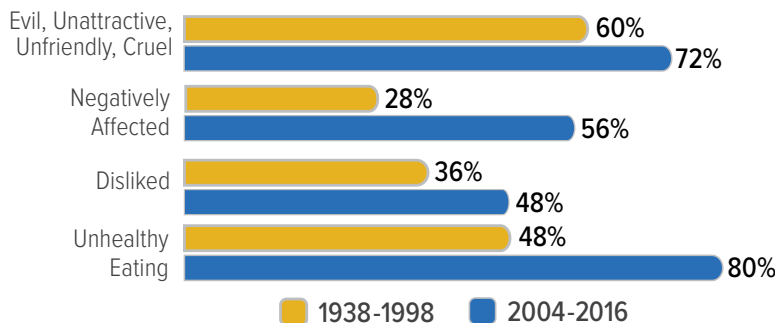
Male characters have consistently been found to be 3x more likely to be the instigator of weight-related teasing or ridicule.



The proportion of characters with a higher body weight in television programming drastically reduced between 2000 and 2013.



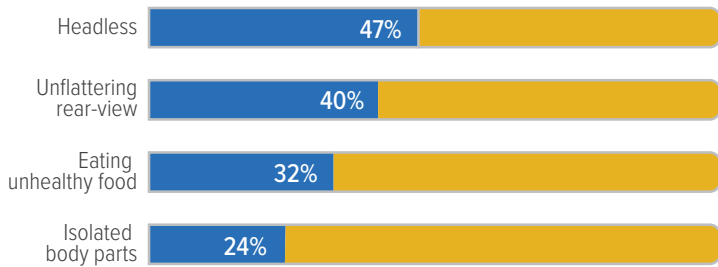
18 of the top 25 most popular TV shows for teens included incidents of weight-related teasing.



Youth targeted films have become increasingly stigmatizing of characters with a higher body weight.

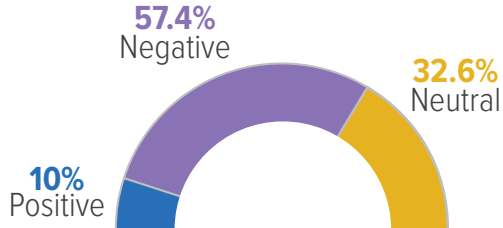
WHAT DOES WEIGHT STIGMA LOOK LIKE IN POPULAR MEDIA CONTENT AND WHERE DO WE SEE IT?

In **news media**, people with a higher body weight are often dehumanized in visual images, portrayed as symbols of an obesity epidemic, and stripped of dignity and respect.

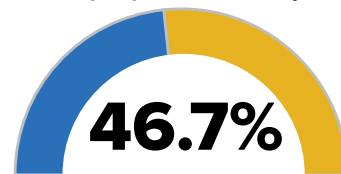


Images and b-roll videos accompanying online news reports covering the topic of obesity frequently dehumanize and stigmatize people with a higher body weight in their use of visuals.

On **social media**, weight-stigmatizing content is prevalent.



Over half of Tweets containing the word ‘fat’ were found to be negative.



Nearly half of user-generated YouTube videos with the keyword ‘obese’ or ‘obesity’ were found to include incidents of weight-based teasing.

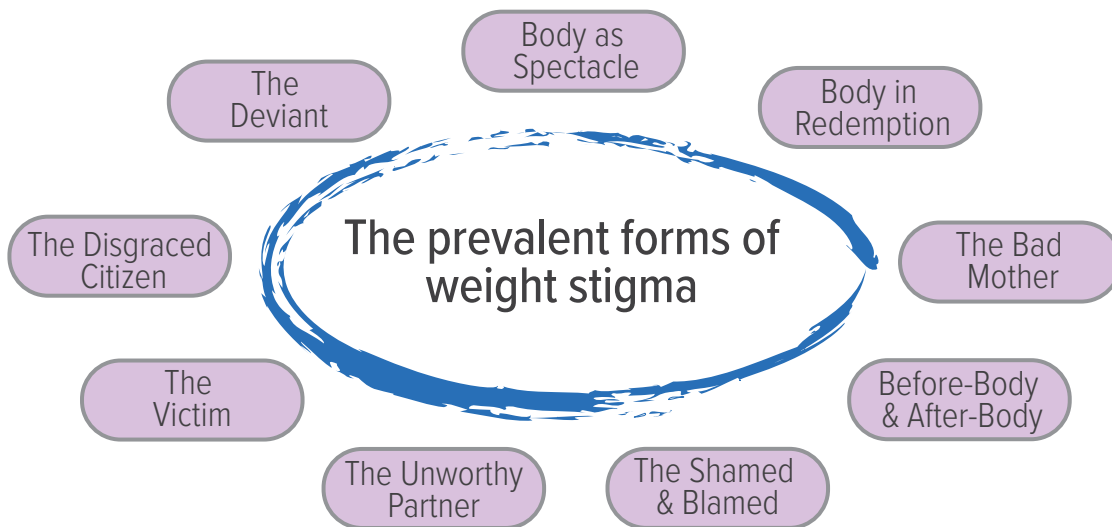
In **weight loss advertising**, White bodies are overrepresented as successful dieters, further marginalizing and stigmatizing bodies of color.



Most weight loss advertisements found in popular print magazines were found to feature a White weight loss subject, regardless of publication audience demographics.

WHAT DOES WEIGHT STIGMA LOOK LIKE IN POPULAR MEDIA CONTENT AND WHERE DO WE SEE IT?

Across all media channels, the prevalent forms of weight stigma take on multiple, intersecting layers in the portrayal of people with a higher body weight.



It's time to break the mold of weight stigma and build a new version of this world that portrays people of all weights and sizes as worthy of full stories and happy endings.



IT'S TIME TO CHANGE THE SCRIPT.

What does weight stigma look like in popular media content and where do we see it?

v

INTRODUCTION

Weight stigma broadly refers to societal devaluation of people based on their body weight or body size and can manifest in many ways, including stereotyping, shaming, bullying, victimization, prejudice, unfair treatment, and discrimination of people because of their weight.^{1,2} It has been described as one of the last socially acceptable forms of discrimination, persisting across all levels of society, including family and peer relations, the workplace, education, healthcare settings, and popular culture.^{1,3} Common stereotypes cast people with a higher body weight as lazy, gluttonous, irresponsible, reckless, unhealthy, out of control, and animalistic, deserving of public ridicule, torment, shame, and marginalization.⁴⁻⁶ The harm, pervasiveness, and influence of weight stigma has been well documented for decades, and yet the problem persists.^{3,7-17} A recent international consensus statement published in *Nature* and signed by more than 100 medical and scientific organizations worldwide argues that a new public narrative is necessary to eliminate societal weight stigma.³ Experts specifically call upon the media to shift current harmful narratives and instead produce fair, accurate, and non-stigmatizing portrayals of people with a higher body weight. Thus, mainstream media needs to play a pivotal role in this change.

With a mission to drive a change in culture, conversations, and perceptions that stigmatize people based on their perceived health status, the Media Empathy Foundation has responded to this call by bringing experts in weight stigma and bias together with industry leaders in film, broadcast media, fashion, and advertising to propose actionable next steps to address this problem. Building on the findings of this report and the input of our expert panel, our goal is to create a catalyst for more content creators to recognize and prioritize the need for accurate, inclusive, and empathetic portrayals of people of all sizes across all media channels.

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THE REPORT:

To fully understand the underlying narratives that drive weight stigma content, the goal of this report is to identify the prevalent forms of weight stigma across all major media channels. Specifically, we ask: *What does weight stigma look like in popular media content and where do we see it?* To answer this question, we conducted a systematic review of academic research published between 2000 and 2022 that examines the *content* and *prevalence* of weight stigma in entertainment film and television, news media, magazines, advertising, and social media. This involved a database search via seven social sciences and humanities databases: Academic Search Complete, JSTOR, SocIndex, Communication & Mass Media, Science Direct, Taylor & Francis CRKN, and LGBTQ2+. The following search terms were used: *obesity, overweight, weight, fat, portrayal,*

representation, depiction, stigma, bias, stereotype, media, and popular culture. Sources were scanned for relevancy using the title, abstract, and keywords. Studies that examined the *effect* of or *response* to stigmatizing media content were excluded as were studies that focused solely on coverage of the obesity epidemic if they did not provide an analysis of the stigmatizing portrayal of individuals. We also excluded studies that concentrated on public health campaigns and initiatives. The initial search yielded 133 sources, excluding duplicates; this list was further refined through a close reading of the content in full. We further excluded 68 sources based on our selection criteria. An additional 27 sources were identified through peer review and reference searches to ensure our list was as comprehensive as possible.

The final sample includes a total of 91 academic sources: 79 research articles, 10 book chapters, and three books.^{4-6,14,18-103} Of these, 18 are quantitative studies and 73 are qualitative studies. Relevant findings from the quantitative studies have been highlighted and summarized in Section 1, providing a summary of the prevalence and sources of stigmatizing content. Findings from the qualitative studies were collated and synthesized by conducting a thematic analysis of the material.¹⁰⁴ We identified 11 persistent themes that have been noted across all media channels. These themes have been outlined in Section 2. Section 3 concludes with our key takeaways and a call-to-action, which provides the foundation of our panel discussion. It should be noted that the content discussed in this report is limited to content that has been studied by academics. While there may be more recent or illustrative examples relevant to this discussion, the findings from this report are meant to be used as a reference point for much broader conversations about weight stigma in popular media and solutions to bring about change.

“Challenging and changing widespread, deep-rooted beliefs, longstanding preconceptions, and prevailing mindsets requires a new public narrative.”

Rubino, F. et al. Joint international consensus statement for ending stigma of obesity. *Nat Med* 26, 485–497 (2020): p.486

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE:

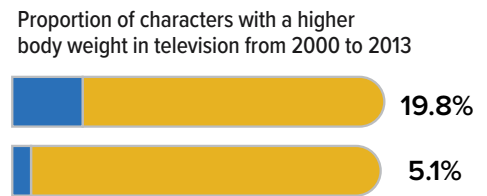
As we recognize that there are diverse perspectives when it comes to the language we use about weight, we are defaulting to neutral language in this report to try to be as respectful as possible. When quoting our sources directly, we use their chosen terminology to reflect their preferences. We encourage people to use whatever language and terminology they feel most comfortable with when referring to their own experiences.

SECTION 1: THE PREVALENCE AND SOURCE OF WEIGHT STIGMA IN POPULAR MEDIA CONTENT

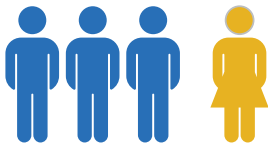
Drawing on 18 quantitative studies that examine the prevalence and nature of weight stigma content in popular media, we have outlined a number of key findings that provide insights about the prevalence and sources of weight-stigmatizing content across media channels.

ENTERTAINMENT FILM & TV

On screen, people with a higher body weight are underrepresented, more likely to be teased or ridiculed about their weight and portrayed in a disparaging manner. Underrepresentation of people with a higher body weight in the media has been problematic for decades. In 2000, out of 1018 major characters portrayed across 56 fictional network television programs, only 144 were of a higher body weight (19.8%).⁴³ These characters were less likely to be portrayed as attractive, display physical affection, or interact with romantic partners and were more likely to be shown eating and the objects of humor. Over a decade later, in a study examining 89 prime-time scripted and reality television programs across nine major broadcast and cable networks, that number reduced to just over 5%.⁶⁴ These characters were also most often portrayed as unattractive, unintelligent, less articulate, unlikeable, and the target of ridicule.



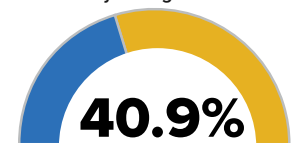
Male characters have consistently been found to be 3x more likely to be the instigator of weight-related teasing or ridicule.



In a sample of 135 weight-stigmatizing vignettes from 25 films and television programs, researchers found that men were three times (74%) more likely to be the instigator of weight-stigmatizing commentary *and* were more likely to direct their commentary towards an individual man (30%) or woman (29%).⁴

Another study found similar results: male characters were more likely to be both the initiator (72.7%) and target (63.6%) of weight stigma content and that almost half of the incidents they examined were accompanied by an audience laugh-track (40.9%).³⁴ This study looked specifically at content from the top 10 television shows ranked by teens. They found at least one incident of weight stigma content in half of the episodes. The same study found at least one incident per episode of weight-related teasing in 18 of the top 25 television shows ranked by teens.¹⁴

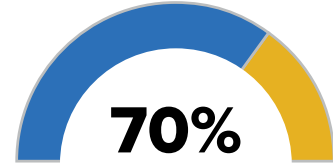
Weight stigmatizing incidents in television shows accompanied by a laugh-track



Weight stigma in entertainment is not unique to content targeting adults and adolescents. Youth are just as likely to be exposed to this kind of disparaging content. Between 2006 and 2010, 70% of the top four grossing PG and G-rated films included at least one instance of weight-related stigma targeting characters with a

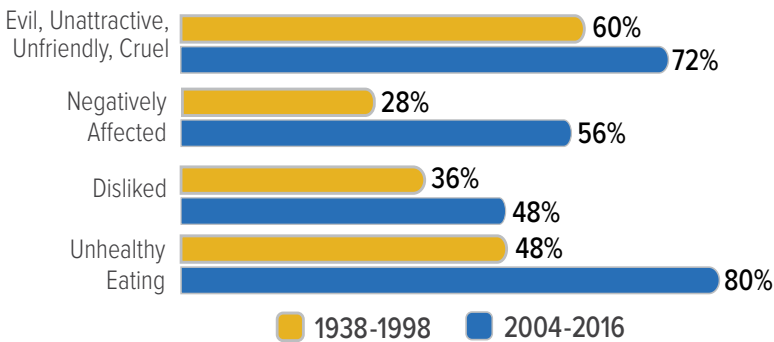
higher body weight.⁹² The bigger story is that youth-targeted content has become *worse* over time. Between 1938 and 1998, 60% of popular children’s films depicted a character with a higher body weight as being evil, unattractive, unfriendly or cruel; this number *increased* to 72% in the top grossing children’s animated films released between 2004-2016.^{47,98} Furthermore, the portrayal of a character being negatively affected by their a higher body weight (e.g., engaging in less activities, making fewer friends, or being treated negatively by others) *doubled*, rising from 28% of films between 1938-1998 to 56% from 2004-2016. The portrayal of a character with a higher body weight being disliked by others increased from 36% to 48%, and the depiction of a character with a higher body weight

Instances of weight-related stigma in top four grossing PG- and G-rated films.



eating unhealthy food or being portrayed in a setting related to food nearly doubled once again, from 48% to 80%.

Increases in the proportion of negative portrayals of characters with a higher body weight in children’s film



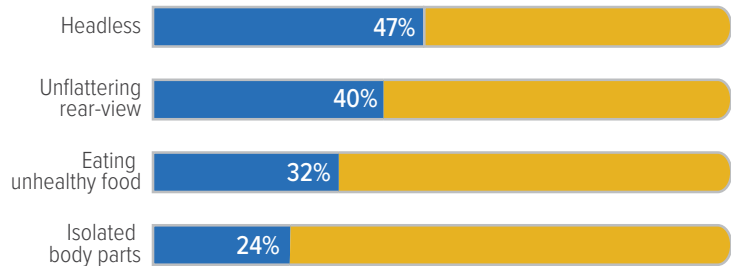
In terms of representation, in a study examining non-animated children’s sitcoms broadcast on Nickelodeon, the Disney Channel, and Discovery Kids, researchers found that while the percentage of young characters (9-18 years old) with a higher body weight were only slightly less than the national averages at the time, young white female characters were underrepresented in this weight category and

young black female characters were overrepresented.⁸³ While most character traits did not differ by weight category, characters with a higher body weight were more likely to be shown as having only a few friends or none at all.

NEWS MEDIA

The visual portrayal of people with a higher body weight in news media content is regularly stigmatizing. Not only are they persistently dehumanized in visual news media content, but their images are employed “as symbols of an obesity epidemic, rather than valued members of society who deserve respect and dignity.”^{5(p697)} In online video footage used to cover the topic of obesity featured on the news websites of ABC, CBS, FOX, and MSNBC, nearly half (47%) of the videos featured people with a higher body weight as headless, 40% from an

Proportion of stigmatizing visual content in online news footage

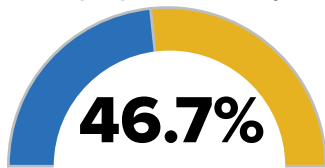


unflattering rear-view, 32% eating unhealthy food, and nearly a quarter (24%) of the videos depicted isolated body parts (e.g., abdomen).⁵ Photos featured in news articles did not fare any better: 59% featured people with a higher body weight as headless, 40% were shown from an unflattering rear or side angle, 52% showed only the abdomen or lower body. Another study found that across broadcast and cable networks, 27% of news stories covering the topic of obesity included images of isolated body parts.⁹⁴ Findings from experimental studies have shown that exposure to these kinds of images accompanying news content increases weight bias and the dislike of people with obesity, and further perpetuates damaging stereotypes about people with a higher body weight.⁹

SOCIAL MEDIA

Online, a study examining the portrayal of people with obesity on YouTube found that nearly half of the videos with the keywords ‘obese’ or ‘obesity’ were found to include incidents of weight-based teasing (46.7%) and most included stereotypical portrayals of people with obesity engaging in sedentary behavior and an unhealthy diet.¹⁰⁰ On Twitter, researchers analyzing tweet content found that more than half of tweets containing the word ‘fat’ were negative, with 48% relating a heavier body weight to gluttony, 25.14% to unattractiveness, 13.8% to sedentary behavior, 5.86% to laziness, 4.16% to stupidity, and 2.65% to sexual undesirability.⁶¹ In a recent study examining the visual content of Instagram posts with the Health At Every Size® (HAES®) hashtags (#healthateverysize/#haes), 28% included fat-shaming content, a concerning finding given the central tenets of this movement encourage the appreciation of a full range of body sizes, the elimination of weight stigma, and the adoption of a weight-neutral approach to health.⁹⁶ Fat-shaming content was defined in this study as content with an overt intention to shame or stigmatize people with a higher body weight and/or content that included degrading visual depictions of people with a higher body weight as animals or engaging in stereotypical behaviors, such as being inactive or consuming large quantities of unhealthy food.

Proportion of weight-based teasing on YouTube videos of people with obesity



ADVERTISING

Although no quantitative studies from the sample examine the stigmatizing *content* of weight loss advertising, researchers have found that the use of ‘before and after’ images contributes to weight stigma and reinforces negative stereotypes associated with people with a higher body weight.¹⁰⁵ This finding is reflected in the qualitative studies and discussed further in Section 2. In terms of representation in weight loss advertising, one study found that 80% of advertisements published in ten prominent American magazines featured White weight loss subjects, regardless of the publication audience.⁶⁸ The researchers note that the overrepresentation of White bodies in weight loss advertising reflects “the racial and cultural ideology that sees White bodies as controllable, desirable, and beautiful and Black bodies as uncontrollable and deviant, and thus White bodies are presented as the symbols and model of success and successful dieters.”^{68(p13)} This finding is reflected in many of the qualitative studies that will be discussed in Section 2.

“By over representing White bodies, weight-loss advertisers continue to circulate and reinforce cultural attitudes and beliefs about stereotypes attached to body and race.”

Mishra, S. & Kern, R. Persuading the Public to Lose Weight: An Analysis of a Decade (2001-2011) of Magazine Advertisements. *Journal of Magazine & New Media Research* 16, 1–21 (2015): p. 13.

SECTION 2: THE PREVALENT FORMS OF WEIGHT STIGMA CONTENT ACROSS MEDIA CHANNELS

Drawing on 73 qualitative studies, we identified 11 prevalent themes in the stigmatizing portrayal of people with higher a body weight. These themes were identified through a thematic analysis of the key findings of each study.¹⁰⁴ This was done by first extracting key quotes from each text that describe the stigmatizing elements of the content being examined. Themes were identified through a repetitive process of comparative sorting, grouping together similar expressions of stigma across the sample. These themes were then subdivided and refined into four categories relating to the portrayal of *people*, *bodies*, *social roles*, and *the lasting hold of stigma*. It should be noted that these themes can be expressed in a range of ways, and often intersect with one another in a single representation. While this list is representative of the academic literature, it does not reflect all forms of weight stigma in popular media that exist. Instead, these themes are meant to act as signposts and conversation starters as we navigate the many ways popular media content contributes to the stigmatization of people with higher a body weight.

PEOPLE

THE SHAMED AND BLAMED

The most frequent and familiar characterization of people with a higher body weight is that they are lazy, gluttonous, and lack the willpower and self-restraint to engage in healthy behaviors. These stereotypes are most evident in the kinds and quantities of foods they are portrayed as eating and their overall sedentary lifestyle or disdain for exercise. Weight-based reality television shows are notorious for their use of visuals depicting hidden stashes of unhealthy food and food wrappers in drawers, cupboards, or cars, used as evidence of unhealthy eating and overconsumption, as well as frequent scenes of individuals with a higher body weight eating these foods.^{26,27,74,80,81,84} Similar stereotypes are common in fictional portrayals of characters with a higher body weight.^{36,66,77} Of surprising note are shows like *Drop Dead Diva* (2009–2014), *Weeds* (2005–2012), *Huge* (2010), *This Is Us* (2016–2022), and *Sweet Magnolias* (2020–present), where even in their overall positive portrayal of characters with a higher body weight, the stereotype that they overconsume unhealthy foods and refuse to exercise persists in these representations.^{24,30,39,57,57,93}

“Weight-loss reality shows not only harm the participants by humiliating them and equating normative bodies with lovability and worthiness; they normalize the prejudice many heavier people experience.”

Roost, A. C. Losing It: The Construction and Stigmatization of Obesity on Reality Television in the United States. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 49, 174–195 (2016): p. 188.

As one study notes, while not intentionally negative, the use of these tropes “reinforce[s] a judgemental view of the fat female lifestyle: a diet of unhealthy foods, consumed in a disordered way and a lack of exercise.”^{30(p189)} This is not unique to entertainment media. The characterization of people with a higher body weight as lacking willpower and restraint with respect to activity and diet has been repeatedly found to be the default explanation of obesity in mainstream news coverage.^{22,25,41,78,95} In online forums, researchers found that dominant representations of people with a higher body weight reflect views that they are lazy, unintelligent, lacking control and willpower, overindulgent, and unworthy of sympathy, with many comments describing disgust in experiences of being close to them.³³ In the same forums, counter-stigmatizing posts were framed as belonging to the opinions of people with a higher body weight and therefore discredited as being untrustworthy, uninformed, and biased. Extreme examples of weight stigma in online forums have at times gone viral. As an example, a viral tweet by Professor George Miller in 2013 called out graduate students with a higher body weight, stating that if they don’t have the willpower to stop eating carbohydrates then they won’t have the willpower or self-control to complete a dissertation.²³ On the political stage, associations with greed, laziness, insatiability, and animalism are common in the public commentary on politicians’ a higher body weight.^{6,20,37,53}

“Humiliation and mockery were deemed appropriate for those who failed to adhere to social standards for body condition [including] self-mockery.”

De Brún, A., McCarthy, M., McKenzie, K. & McGloin, A. Weight stigma and narrative resistance evident in online discussions of obesity. *Appetite* 72, 73–81 (2014).

A corresponding assumption in many of these portrayals is that people with a higher body weight are irresponsible and reckless with their health, that they are uncaring about the damage they are causing to their own bodies, and that they are thus unworthy of respect or empathy for how they may be treated because of their weight. At the extreme, public humiliation and shaming are framed as justifiable and even virtuous in the name of their ‘health,’ forcing individuals with a higher body weight to lose weight by any means necessary. We see this most notably in reality television weight loss shows, such as TLC’s *The Biggest Loser* (2004–present), with public weigh-ins, verbal abuse, and unflattering camera angles, zooming in on isolated body parts exposed in inappropriately sized clothing.^{44,65,69,85} Public shame is rationalized and encouraged as a matter of health and the shamers are celebrated as heroes.

Overall, the portrayal of people with a higher body weight as slothful and gluttonous casts them as deserving of both shame and blame. They are held personally responsible for their current weight status and for all negative consequences they may experience as a result.

THE VICTIM

Having a higher body weight is also viewed by society as a symptom of emotional dysfunction or damage, often tied to an underlying psychological or physical trauma that acts as the catalyst in the development of an ‘unhealthy’ or ‘toxic’ relationship to food and/or avoidance of exercise. In these cases, people with a higher body weight are absolved of blame and viewed as victims in need of saving. While not inherently stigmatizing, this approach becomes problematic when liberation and empowerment are equated with successful weight loss. We see this most often in reality television shows like *My 600lb Life* (2012-present), and *Big Medicine* (2007-2009), which highlight the underlying emotional, sexual, or physical trauma experienced by their featured subjects.^{27,41,51}

We even see this in *The Biggest Loser* (2004-present), which blends themes of laziness and lack of control with psychological dysfunction and lack of self-worth.⁸⁷ *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1986-2011) is another notable example where weight loss is a means of self-empowerment through self-knowledge, admitting that you have a problem, and finding the help needed to address it.⁸⁷ As one scholar notes, assumptions of laziness, greed, or lack of control are “displaced by therapeutic discourses that locate the cause of excess in addiction or identifiable emotional wounds,” evoking a tone of paternal benevolence by the intervention experts.^{80(p161)} Much like addiction, the victim model posits that people with a higher body weight must take ownership of their actions by admitting that they have a problem, seeking help, and taking control of their weight. Weight loss through diet and exercise is seen as a form of self-empowerment, self-care, and self-knowledge.⁹³ Unconditional self-love, as one study notes, is only possible by committing oneself to be thin.⁸⁵ Although these depictions often evoke sympathy and support for those with a higher body weight, weight is still seen as a problem that needs to be fixed. Failure to take control of their weight is seen as giving in and giving up, as not caring enough to pull themselves out of their own spiral of despair. As the author of one study notes, “pity does not advance the status of fat people nor does it challenge anti-fat sentiments;” rather, it functions to maintain social hierarchies that devalue people with a higher body weight.²⁷

“[T]he solution to obesity in this contemporary narrative . . . demonstrates a significant shift . . . insofar as individual agency and opportunity supersede individual responsibility [. . .] consciousness is the only barrier between oppression and liberation.”

Shugart, Helene A. Shifting the Balance: The Contemporary Narrative of Obesity. *Health Communication* 26, 37–47 (2011): p. 43-44

In these cases, people with a higher body weight are not blamed for their past transgressions but are still held accountable and personally responsible for their actions in the present and future, and ultimately, for ridding themselves of their stigmatizing feature.

THE DEVIANT

People with a higher body weight are also frequently portrayed as abrasive, loud, defiant, out of control, and unconventional, as breaking the rules – be they legal or social – and not caring whom they offend. They are not only portrayed as a danger to themselves but a danger to others. A classic example of this portrayal is the kind of character Melissa McCarthy or Rebel Wilson are often cast to play – the rebellious, in-your-face character whose humor allows the audience to vicariously let loose, yet still, watch from a safe distance. Noted examples include *Bridesmaids* (2011), *The Heat* (2013), *Identity Thief* (2013), and *Pitch Perfect* (2012).^{66,67,77} These excesses, as one author notes, “reflect the ability of the transgressive body to make a mockery of socially acceptable behavior and celebrate the destruction of class norms.”⁶⁷⁽¹⁴⁶⁾ Although recognizably extreme, these characterizations still function to reinforce the stereotypes they exaggerate, however outlandish they may be, and do nothing to actually change the status quo against which the bodies and actions of those being portrayed are being judged.

“The transgression of thinness in media is often accentuated by excesses of violence, sexuality, and gluttony . . . These excesses reflect the ability of the transgressive body to make a mockery of socially acceptable behavior and celebrate the destruction of class norms.”

Meeuf, R. Class, corpulence, and neoliberal citizenship: Melissa McCarthy on *Saturday Night Live*. *Celebrity Studies* 7, 137–153 (2016): p. 146.

The out-of-control and monstrous deviant as a *villain* is another trope that can be found in the portrayal of people with a higher body weight. The children’s animated film, *Monster House* (2006), is one example. In this case, it is the ghost of a deceased woman with a higher body weight that wreaks havoc on the neighborhood children in the form of a haunted house, literally trying to eat them.⁷²

Other portrayals of the deviant can be more subtle, like in *Huge* (2010), where, on the one hand, the female protagonist is celebrated for her rejection of the ideals of the weight loss camp she is forced to attend, yet, on the other, her behavior and identity are continuously marginalized as rebellious and transgressive.⁵⁷ As the authors of this study note, “*Huge* falls short as a body-positive critique of the camp’s guiding logic that fat bodies are non-normative and unhealthy, and that fat teens need and should want to change. Attempts to normalize fatness and locate desire across fat teen bodies falter because the show’s narrative hinges on the premise that thinner and fitter bodies are more desirable and valuable for girls and boys, respectively.”^{57(p195)} A similar argument has been made about *Schriell* (2019–2021) and *Dietland* (2018), two programs that have been widely acclaimed as challenging stereotypes associated with a higher body weight.²⁴ Whether these portrayals are making fun of the negative stereotypes or confronting them head-on, the status quo remains unchanged, further entrenching the view of a higher body weight as a mark of difference, otherness, and marginality.

BODIES

THE BODY AS SPECTACLE

The reduction of people and their bodies to the visible display of weight is one of the most dehumanizing expressions of weight stigma. Often referred to as representing the body as a ‘spectacle’ to be looked at, visual content that puts the body on display in this way has been likened to the modern-day ‘freak show,’ drawing on colonial and racist traditions of displaying and dissecting marginalized bodies in order to ‘demonstrate’ their bodily inferiorities or anomalies, marking them as worthy of discrimination and inhumane treatment.^{21,27,38,51,85,101} Reality television shows and documentaries that feature operating table footage of gastric bypass surgery are the most extreme examples, from the unflattering close-ups of partly dressed patients to the visual dissection of the interiors of their bodies, and the public display of the excavated fat for all to see.^{27,85} The television documentary, *Obesity: The Post Mortem* (2016), is another notable example, where the entire life of the cadaver is reduced to the damage that fat has done to her body.³⁸ As the author of this study notes, weight, pathology, and lifestyle are collapsed into one: a higher body weight leads to poor health, and people with a higher body weight are that way because they are lazy and undisciplined.

“The stylized display of corporeal eccentricities, which in this case is ‘super fatness’, simultaneously spectacularizes visual distinctions while reinscribing race, gender, and disability as foundational attributes of illegitimate bodily variations.”

Justin, T. Fear, freaks, and fat phobia: an examination of how *My 600 Lbs Life* displays “Fat” Black women. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1–14 (2021): p. 2.

“The fat body is constructed as something only to be seen in certain places in society. If visible elsewhere, the fat body becomes offensive and repugnant . . . Constructing fat visibility as a social affront confers a moral judgment on the fat body that renders it repulsive, unacceptable and something that should be hidden.”

Previte, J. & Gurrieri, L. Who Is the Biggest Loser? Fat News Coverage Is a Barrier to Healthy Lifestyle Promotion. *Health Marketing Quarterly* 32, 330–349 (2015): p. 341.

As evidenced in quantitative studies, images and video footage of individuals with a higher body weight as headless or made up of isolated body parts is common in news media. The reduction of people to their weight or a body part has also been noted in the kinds of ‘fat jokes’ or slurs that have been normalized in popular media, comparing body parts to inanimate objects and individuals to animals.^{6,20,33,37,53} Name-calling through reference to non-human objects functions to both stigmatize and dehumanize, reducing individuals from complex human beings to one-dimensional objects of tragedy, disgust, and/or ridicule.

Thus, weight stigma is perpetuated in these representations through the ‘enfreakment’ of people with a higher body weight, visually chronicling the ways that their bodies do not ‘fit’ into ‘normal’ life situations – bathing, dressing, driving, socializing – and thus do

not *belong* in these situations either.^{27,41,51,101} The display of bodies of a higher weight in these ways is also mobilized as a cautionary tale in both news and entertainment media: evidence of what can happen if you lose control.^{51,103} Their bodies are reduced to a *symbol* of the obesity epidemic, rather than belonging to whole people, people who are more than their weight, and people who are as deserving of respect and dignity as anyone else.⁷⁸

THE BODY IN REDEMPTION

Working in tandem with the portrayal of people with a higher body weight as lazy, gluttonous, and lacking the willpower to take control of their weight, the weight loss narrative is a prevalent perpetrator of weight stigmatizing content. Weight loss narratives are visible across all media channels, including entertainment film and television, news media, advertising, health and fitness magazines, and social media. In these representations, bodies are presented as *in transition*, a work in progress requiring strength, determination, self-restraint, resilience, a strong work ethic, and, in many portrayals, pain and suffering.^{25,38,44,58,74,78} Weight loss is framed as not just a matter of transforming the body, but about transforming the self.⁶⁰ Exercise and diet are cast as penance for previous bodily transgressions, a virtuous endeavor to become worthy of respect, love, happiness, and health. Whether weight gain is framed because of poor choices (shamed and blamed) or some underlying psychological dysfunction or trauma (victim), in order for people with bodies of a higher weight to be granted the respect and dignity of a valued member of society, they must first prove their worth by demonstrating that they deserve it. As one scholar notes, in reality weight loss shows, it is the confession of past transgressions that acts as the tipping point on their path to redemption, marking a shift in the narrative from inactivity to activity.⁸⁰ One advertising example that illustrates this theme is a 2012 Canadian Nike advertisement.³⁵ The ad, titled “Find Your Greatness,” features a young boy with a higher body weight, jogging along an empty road. It is only through determination, perseverance, and literal perspiration that this boy will be able to achieve his full potential, to *find his greatness*. He is granted visibility in the world of Nike fashion only because he is demonstrating his potential worth.

“[B]odies are, quite literally, put on trial to ascertain if they can be induced to become fully participant consuming subjects in the neoliberal economy: empowered, employable, consuming citizens with ‘proper’ conduct, instrumental value, and self worth.”

Silk, M. L., Francombe, J. & Bachelor, F. The Biggest Loser: The discursive constitution of fatness. *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture* 1, 369–389 (2009): p. 10.

To fail to lose weight is cast as a *personal* failure and a sign of a weak character.^{69,78,89} To lose weight any other way – i.e., through medical intervention – is considered to be cheating, taking the easy way out, a reward without the work, and thus undeserving of redemption. In examples where bariatric surgery, weight loss medication, or weight-related medication are being promoted, diet and exercise are still framed as the pillar of weight loss, with patients needing to prove themselves as ideal, cooperative, and *worthy* recipients of care.^{21,22,41}

THE BEFORE-BODY AND AFTER-BODY

A key element of the body in redemption is the movement from a ‘before’ body to an ‘after’ body, with the before/after image comparison marking the successful transition.⁸⁵ Depicted in these images are not just two sizes of bodies, but two kinds of people, where “[s]elfhood can only be achieved through and as the (transformed) after-body because before-bodies are as a rule shown as lacking the valid quality of the self.”⁸² This extends beyond the individual(s) depicted in the before/after images; marking all bodies of a higher weight as ‘before-bodies’ needing to be rejected in search for the ‘true’ self buried beneath.^{60,63,70} In other cases, the before/after images are employed as means of highlighting an individual’s weight *gain*, rather than weight loss, pointing to the existence of the true self trapped inside this new body, robbing the individual of their future.^{26,84} Both cases are built upon a shift not just in weight but in selfhood, where the thin body represents the true, authentic self, only attainable through the redemptive and self-affirming ‘journey’ of weight loss. Consequently, as one scholar notes, “the fat subject is constructed as liminal, an incomplete subject eternally in the process of ‘becoming’ thin, and the assumption that weight loss, and exiting the ‘fat’ category, is possible, is perpetuated.”^{63(p91)}

The use of fat suits in entertainment media to portray the before- and after-bodies of a fictional character has received considerable attention in academic literature. There are two important elements to the fat suit that confound the before/after dyad. For one, the presence of a fat suit is always defined in relation to its corresponding thin body, reinforcing the narrative that inside every body of a higher weight there is the thinner body (and self) trying to escape.^{45,59} Secondly, the inauthenticity and inanimate composition of the before-body via the fat suit only works to heighten the dehumanization and marginalization of bodies of a higher weight, further transforming the character into an object of ridicule/or disgust.⁴⁵

“In the confession that is the center of diet discourse, the newly thin person announces that she has found the ‘new me.’ Crystallized in the ‘before’ and ‘after’ photograph that accompanies such confessions, the fat person is made into the ‘before’ to the glorious ‘after’ of the (precariously) thin person. In this, the fat person is imagined to be all that we do not want to be: lazy, gluttonous, unsexy, and unhappy.”

Levy-Navarro, E. I’m the New Me: Compelled Confession in Diet Discourse. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45, 340–356 (2012): p. 340.

“Fat Monica’s body is represented as fake, illegitimate, unreal, and not completely human. The laughter directed at Fat Monica is centered on the spectacle and disdain of her (non-)body. It is important that the audience does not relate to Fat Monica or see themselves reflected in her in order to evoke the comedic potential of her body.”

Gullage, A. Fat Monica, Fat Suits, and Friends. *Feminist Media Studies* 14, 178–189 (2014): p. 186

SOCIAL ROLES

THE BAD MOTHER AND FAILED CHILD

Fears of childhood obesity have placed an insurmountable burden on the shoulders of mothers across all media channels – from fictional portrayals to news stories. On the one hand, mothers with a higher body weight are portrayed as being poor role models for their children, with the underlying rationale that if they are unable or unwilling to keep their own bodies and lifestyles in check, they could not possibly help their children do so.^{24,51,80,85} This also extends to the child in utero, where the mother’s pregnant body is cast as an unhealthy and obesogenic environment for her unborn child, in need of constant surveillance and immediate intervention.^{75,78} And in cases where the mother is not necessarily of a higher body weight, it is the child’s weight that is cast as a symptom of her own neglectful, enabling, or overbearing parenting style.^{81,93} In this case, it is the child’s body weight that stands as a status symbol of her success or failure as a mother.^{75,103} These representations also significantly intersect with race, where women of color, particularly Black women, are chastised for the “cultural” foods that they serve their children, needing a benevolent (White) expert to come in and teach them how to become better mothers.^{22,75,91} In reference to news coverage of childhood obesity, one scholar illustrates this point when she says: “In this sense, culture is ethnic; and eating standardized, low and nonfat ‘greenlight’ foods prepared within the context of the American nuclear family comes to be seen as the natural and healthy way to eat. *Ethnic food* is an obstacle. Ethnicity is something to overcome; reaching children and mothers first is the way to do it.”^{22(p53)} The intersections of race and class can also be seen in the kinds of images used in parenting magazines promoting healthy habits in the prevention of childhood obesity, depicting mostly White, middle-class heteronormative families, with parents engaging in physically active leisure activities with their children and serving them a home-cooked meal.^{62,79} This model furthermore implies that the mother should be home, closely monitoring her children and modeling good behavior by engaging in *active* leisure activities, in addition to being able to access, afford, and prepare the designated greenlit foods.¹⁰³

“Implicit in this critique of American culture is a blame placed on working mothers for children watching too much television, for children not having their eating habits more closely monitored, and for mothers relying on convenience foods for meals.”

Boero, N. All the News That’s Fat to Print. in *Killer Fat* 40–58 (Rutgers University Press, 2012): p. 52.

THE DISGRACED CITIZEN

The social embarrassment and shame of populational weight gain as a symptom of a broader societal ill is another common theme in the media, most notable in news coverage of the obesity epidemic. When the weight of the population is translated to the weight of the individual, people with a higher body weight are signaled out as being selfish, irresponsible, and a disgrace to the rest of the population, causing other people

to pay for the consequences of their reckless behavior.^{22,25,27,38,50,50,74,78,95,97} Obesity is framed as a national crisis that hinges on the choices of the individual, casting weight loss as a civic duty and bodies of higher weight symbols of failed citizenship.^{22,41,99} A popular and particularly troubling visual trope that accompanies such narratives is the parodic graphic of modern hu(man)’s evolutionary ‘march of progress,’ which includes one to two figures at the end with increasingly heavier body weights and sloping postures.⁹⁷ Not only does this addition create a visual peak and *decline*, but the added figures are often depicted standing as opposed to walking, carrying stereotypical props such as a fast-food beverage container or game controller, and wearing clothing that is too small. In the most offensive version of this [graphic](#), a pig is depicted at the very end, insinuating that people with a higher body weight are dragging humanity backward, from ape to man to swine, cementing the dehumanization of people with a higher body weight in one visual blow. This image is used to demonstrate that the plight of humanity rests on the shoulders of the individual to fight off the dangerous allures of an obesogenic environment. Those who fail to do so are presented as weak, irresponsible, selfish, and undeserving of the label human.

THE UNWORTHY PARTNER

Most portrayals of people with a higher body weight in entertainment films and TV express an underlying assumption that they are not desirable as they are. In some cases, the search for love and romance is cast as a trade-off, where either the person with a higher body weight has something exceptional to offer – usually in terms of status or wealth – or the average-body-weight partner is depicted as equally ‘damaged’ or ‘undesirable’.^{18,39,77} In other cases, it is only through extreme beauty work, high-end fashion, or significant weight loss that a body of a higher weight can be deemed beautiful and desirable, and that true love can be found.^{30,42,44,59,80,82,84,85} For the most part, these depictions fall along gendered lines, suggesting that women are only deserving of love if they achieve thinness. As one study notes, “[s]itcom couples on American television often feature men who are ineffectual but funny slobs, married to determined, fit women who are mainly homemakers, and in fact, responsible for the proper functioning of the family, and consequentially, society.”^{73(np)} Women, on the

“WALL-E exists within a cultural context that not only abhors fatness and the fat person as a sign of degeneracy, but also one that has made the degradation of fat people a media ritual.”

Farrell, A. E. *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*. (NYU Press, 2011): p. 119. American Culture. (NYU Press, 2011): p. 119.

“[90 Day Fiancé] takes for granted that fat people are unlovable, both because of their grotesque aesthetic, but also by alluding to stereotypes such as the laziness, gluttony, and lack of self control of fat people. . . Unable to perform as lovable people, the fat American members of these couples must provide stability, financial support, and access to an American life . . .to offset their unappealing bodies.”

Abdillahi, I. & Friedman, M. Lessons Learned from Fat Women on Television in *Body Stories* (eds. Friedman, M. & Andrew, J.) 165–172 (Demeter Press, 2020): p. 167-168.

other hand, “are on a quest both for love and weight loss, and the implication is those deep-seated insecurities are connected to both weight gain, as well as failures in love, and that only a resolution of these insecurities will lead to weight loss, which will further lead to success in love.”^{73(np)}

When people with a higher body weight are depicted as sexually active, their sexuality tends to be framed as deviant, transgressive, or *hyper*-sexual, often featuring take-charge aggressive women “whose sexual tastes tend towards the bizarre.”^{67(p146)} For the most part, however, bodies of a higher weight are marked as undesirable or they are desexualized completely.^{40,45,58,59,77,78,84}

STIGMA’S LASTING HOLD

CONDITIONALLY ACCEPTABLE

A common thread running through the literature is the observation that while we are seeing positive changes in the portrayal of people with a higher body weight across media channels, positive visibility is limited to a privileged few, relegating the negative associations with a higher body weight to other deviant bodies who fail to make the cut. Privilege is most often performed in these cases in terms of race, class, ability, and sexuality, where wealthy, highly educated, able-bodied, and cis-gendered White women are most often cast in these roles.^{18,24,26,30,74}

Even in these portrayals, their worth is supported by their visible commitment to a healthy lifestyle, conventional beauty work, and/or feminine fashion.^{24,30} It has

“[F]at bodies in body-positive reality television do not deconstruct or fully reject fat stigma, but rather dictate instances where fatness may be permitted.”

Cameron, L. The “good fatty” is a dancing fatty: Fat archetypes in reality television. *Fat Studies* 8, 259–278 (2019): p. 261.

“Whitney [Thore]’s white skin and uncontested access to class privilege, as well as her overall health and ability, positions her as a very specific fat woman who can escape from the intersections that racism, ableism, and classism may inject into a fat phobia.”

Abdillahi, I. & Friedman, M. Lessons Learned from Fat Women on Television. in *Body Stories* (eds. Friedman, M. & Andrew, J.) 165–172 ([Demeter Press, 2020](#)). [doi:10.2307/j.ctv19prp3.26](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv19prp3.26): p. 167.

also been noted that stereotypical portrayals of White women with a higher body weight intersect with lower-class stereotypes, drawing a line between upper-class respectability and lower class vulgarity, delineating along class lines “what kinds of bodies are dangerous and must be reshaped (literally) in order to embody responsible citizenship and what kinds of bodies are appropriate as sites of self-confidence and ‘inner beauty.’”^{67(p140)}

In another study, the portrayal of the dieting Black woman is taken up as another delineating marker between the good subject and the deviant subject, where “Black women who are physically active, on

diets, undergo gastric bypass surgery, or publicly announce a weight loss strategy are increasingly deemed . . . to embody a rationality and self-discipline (read: Whiteness) that those who are fat (and poor) lack.”^{91(p805)} In popular media, poor and working class Black women with a higher body weight continue to shoulder the brunt of racialized and weight-stigmatizing stereotypes.

WEIGHT AS MASTER STATUS

Another key point raised in the literature is that while characters with a higher body weight are being given more central roles with complex storylines, these storylines still hinge on their weight in some way, whether in the form of weight loss narratives or experiences of weight-based discrimination and bullying.^{24,93,102} Rarely do we see examples in entertainment media where the weight of these characters is not addressed in some way. Even in cases like *Huge* (2010), *Shrill* (2019-2021) and *Dietland* (2018), where systemic discrimination or disparaging stereotypes are confronted head-on, the storylines of their protagonists still center on their weight as the defining trait – their master status.^{24,57} As one study states, the “relegation of fat characters to roles that highlight the tragedy of fatness contributes to the reproduction of thin privilege and fat marginalization.”²⁴ Where we are taking steps, they continue, “we should be leaping. Fat characters deserve a happy ending.”²⁴

“We need to tell not The story, but stories in their multiplicity and alterity, stories that emerge from the situated, emplaced, and embodied context of individuals . . . where a range of voices are heard and diversity of stories are told, in the hopes that such multiplicity, otherness, and complexity will ultimately prevent one, overarching truth discourse from crystallizing.”

Normal, M. E., Rail, G. & Jette, S. Screening the Un-Scene: Deconstructing the (Bio) politics of Story Telling in a Canadian Reality Makeover Weight Loss Series. in *Obesity in Canada* (eds. Ellison, J., McPhail, D. & Mitchinson, W.) 272–290 (University of Toronto Press, 2016): p. 363.

SECTION 3: WHAT DID WE LEARN AND WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

OUR KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- 1.** The pervasiveness of weight-stigmatizing content identified by quantitative studies across entertainment, news, and social media is unacceptable. Nearly three quarters of children’s programming has consistently been found to portray characters with a higher body weight as evil, unattractive, unfriendly, or cruel. What’s worse is that the percentage of characters with a higher body weight that are portrayed as being less active, making fewer friends, or being treated negatively by others *doubled* since the 1990s. During this same period of time, there was a [rise in children’s average body weight](#) in the United States. The drastic increase in negative portrayals of people with a higher body weight speaks to persistent societal blame towards a growing proportion of the population.
- 2.** The stereotypical portrayal of people with a higher body weight as lazy, undisciplined, and over-indulgent continues to reinforce societal weight stigma, with even positive portrayals falling into these time-worn reductive traps.
- 3.** The dehumanization of people with a higher body weight can be seen across all layers of weight stigma and across all media channels – from ‘fat jokes’ and dehumanizing graphics to operating room exposés and headless close-ups. These portrayals strip people with a higher body weight of their humanity and their dignity, and make it acceptable to treat them with contempt.
- 4.** Although social media has provided new avenues for a diverse range of perspectives to be shared and heard, when these views are not reflected in mainstream media, their voices remain marginalized, discredited, and hindered in their ability to extend their reach to the public at large.
- 5.** While we are seeing an increase in more positive portrayals of people with a higher body weight, most of these portrayals continue to reinforce a narrative that only *some* bodies are acceptable, having to prove their worth along gendered, classed, and racial lines.

OUR CALL-TO-ACTION:

We need more stories. Stories that are inclusive, fair, representative, and nuanced. Stories that go beyond the limitations of characters being defined or limited by their body weight or size. In entertainment film and TV, we need stories that portray people of a higher body weight as multi-dimensional human beings living multi-faceted lives. In news media, we need stories that reflect the complexity of obesity and avoid sensationalized headlines, soundbites, and visuals that only act to further marginalize and stigmatize the very people being affected by obesity. Our children, the bridge to future generations, need us to shape a different kind of culture for their future, one that is not filled with disgust and disdain for an entire segment of the population. This begins with the world views that are presented to them across all media. The stories we each see shape our attitudes and beliefs. They need to depict a more layered and complex view of people with a higher body weight across the spectrum of gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability.

Building on the findings of this report and the input of our expert panel, our goal is to create a catalyst for more content creators to recognize and prioritize the need for accurate, inclusive, non-stigmatizing, and empathetic portrayals of people of all sizes across all media channels. We need to stop the narrative of weight stigma and build a new version of this world that sees people of all body weights and sizes as worthy of full stories and happy endings.

IT'S TIME TO CHANGE THE SCRIPT.

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