

# An exploration of weight stigma in online discussions of obesity

Dr Aoife De Brún

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# Research objective

- ▶ To qualitatively examine how the issue of overweight/obesity is discussed in online interactions
  - Examine how individuals contextualise, rationalise and debate obesity
  - Norms, values and beliefs regarding overweight/obesity

# Weight stigma

- ▶ Prejudice against obese people widely documented; “last socially acceptable form of discrimination” (Puhl & Heuer, 2009)
- ▶ Stigma links individuals to a negative stereotype that results in others viewing them as tainted or shameful (Goffman, 1963)
- ▶ In Western societies, thin bodies valued; associated with control, virtue and moral worth.  
Overweight/obese bodies are stigmatised, associated with a lack of control, laziness (Gracia-Arnaiz, 2010)

# Weight-based discrimination

- ▶ Discrimination against obese persons: documented in areas of education, healthcare and employment (Puhl & Heuer, 2009)
  - ▶ Can result in a fear of socialising, avoidance of physical activity in public, greater levels of depression, and the development of eating disorders and emotional eating (Vartanian & Shaprow, 2008)
  - ▶ Assessing stigma: IATs vs. explicit measures
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# Method

- ▶ Online/social media research
    - BPS guidelines
    - Ethical considerations
  - ▶ Retrospective analysis of comments on a large multi-topic message board
    - Social desirability bias
    - Deindividuation and disinhibition
  - ▶ Message board selection (Kozinets, 2010)
    - Large number of user comments/interactions
    - Broad appeal of site
    - Searchable archive of old data
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# Thematic Results

Thematic analysis (**inductive** and deductive) conducted on data set ( $n=2872$  comments)

## Theme 1: **Weight-based stigma**

- Reactions and responses to obesity and the obese
  - Diminished status of overweight/obese persons
- ▶ Theme 2: **Narrative resistance to overweight/obese label**

# Theme 1: Reactions and responses

- ▶ Negative portrayal of characteristics associated with obesity : “*grotesque*”, “*repulsive*”, “*unattractive*”
- ▶ Individuals perceived as obese were described as “*slobs*” and “*fatties*”, with “*no self-control or willpower*”
- ▶ Disgust reaction evident
  - “I do find obesity somewhat **disgusting**. I don’t know why, but I suppose that I would consider it caused by a lack of intelligence and awareness”

# Theme 1: Reactions and responses

- “Being obese is just unnatural. The reason you can’t compare overweight and underweight as clinical states is that one requires immense discipline and the other involves a lack of discipline”
- ▶ Reaction to depth of negativity
  - “You talk about overweight people as if they were a different species”
- ▶ Women especially vulnerable: negative comments a woman’s weight described as “the ultimate put down” for a lot of women

# Theme 1: Reactions and responses

- ▶ Pervasive on message boards: incl. mockery, unfavourable judgements, and verbal attacks
- ▶ Bullied about their weight from a young age: “*still haunts*” them.
- ▶ Avoidance of social situations
- “I was in a bar last weekend when a professional, well-dressed man in a large group of other similar men and women shouted at me in front of the whole bar ‘Hey whale, nice blubber’”

# Theme 1: Diminished status

- ▶ Obese persons perceived as biased on issues of weight & food: opinions disregarded
- ▶ Weight accusations made based on POV
  - “I’m assuming you are actually a fat person in denial”
- ▶ Challenges to dominant perspective:
  - “Being overweight is not a crime and ‘fat people’ shouldn’t be outcast. Have a bit of respect. And before anyone asks I’m not overweight”

# Theme 1: Diminished status

- ▶ ‘Default judgement’, often inconsistent self-identity:
    - “I hate how I look and it completely doesn’t suit my character. My training is in design and I don't look like what a designer should look like... my body doesn’t suit my career”
  - ▶ Stress, anxiety, social withdrawal, disordered eating
  - ▶ Implications for self-perception, self-identity, and status in society.
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# Theme 2: Narrative resistance

- ▶ Resistance strategies employed to deny these undesirable labels
- ▶ Interactions negotiated boundary between acceptable and unacceptable weight.
- ▶ Reliance on self-perception “mirror test”
  - “If I look in the mirror I can see I’m fat. When I lose the weight, I’ll look in the mirror and know I’m not”
- ▶ Rejection of biomedical definition of obesity:
  - “I have a BMI of 32 currently. I don’t consider myself obese, I would consider myself slightly overweight. If I got my BMI down to 28, then I’d consider myself normal”

# Summary

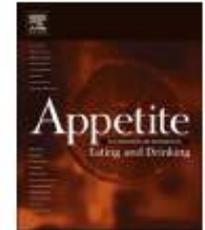
- ▶ Powerful influence of social norms
  - Moral and character judgements are made about obese individuals because of their weight and that they are often the target of humour, abuse and discrimination.
- ▶ Some challenges – these individuals were accused of being overweight /obese, and hence were perceived to have ‘biased’ opinions
- ▶ Boundary being negotiated between the social and medical meanings of obesity.
  - Implications for health communication
- ❖ Value of online research



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## Research report

# Weight stigma and narrative resistance evident in online discussions of obesity <sup>☆</sup>



Aoife De Brún <sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Mary McCarthy <sup>a</sup>, Kenneth McKenzie <sup>b</sup>, Aileen McGloin <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> HRB Centre for Health & Diet Research, Department of Food Business & Development, University College Cork, Western Road, Cork, Ireland

<sup>b</sup> HRB Centre for Health & Diet Research, School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Population Science, University College Dublin, Dublin 4, Ireland

<sup>c</sup> safeFood, Block B, Abbey Court, Lower Abbey Street, Dublin 1, Ireland

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## ABSTRACT

This study sampled 2872 obesity-relevant comments from three years of interest from a multi-topic online message board. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted and three themes were evident: *reactions and responses to obesity and obese bodies, diminished status of overweight/obese persons, and nar-*

**Thank you for your attention**

E-mail: [aoife.debrun@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:aoife.debrun@ncl.ac.uk)