

How perceptions of obesity are constructed through modern social media in Western culture

Natasha Singhal

Year 3, Medicine, University of Plymouth

Email: natasha.singhal@students.plymouth.ac.uk



Background

This review looks at the role of social media in the general perception of obesity amongst the public and healthcare professionals. The power of these platforms to contribute to a skewed perception of body image and self-worth amongst obese individuals, often preventing them from seeking professional help, is unmistakable.¹⁻³ This review outlines the need to regulate the increasing influence of social media on body image and self-worth through legislation, and to change the use of these very platforms to promote social acceptance of obese individuals through supportive blogs and forums.

Introduction

Information propagation in the modern world is predominantly through social media and similar digital media platforms. These have very extensive reach and the ability to influence all age groups because the user can become both a reader and a contributor of information.⁴ Social media has been shown to play a role in the general perception of obesity amongst the public, propagating a biased perception of body image, often aggravating low self-esteem amongst obese individuals.¹

Obesity, should we be concerned?

Obesity is defined as an "abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that may impair health"⁵ and can be measured in terms of body mass index (BMI).⁵

$$\text{BMI} = \text{weight}(\text{kg})/\text{height}^2(\text{meters})$$

The World Health Organization (WHO) has called obesity an epidemic of alarming proportions, stating that at least 2.8 million people per year die due to this condition.⁵

The fact that obesity leads to a myriad of physical health problems has been discussed in detail in modern medical literature;⁵ however, the contribution of obesity to psychological problems, such as low self-worth and feelings of emptiness, has not been discussed to the same extent. The psychological problems experienced by obese individuals are often due to the stigma attached to obesity in almost all societies internationally.⁶ Goffman⁷ describes stigma as "an attribute that in our minds, reduces an individual (different from most of us) to a discounted, tainted kind".

Literature search

As part of this review, a literature search was conducted to investigate the influence of social media on the stigmatisation of obesity. The resources were found on the Peer-Reviewed Instructional Materials Online Database (PRIMO) and PubMed. The search terms used were "social media", "Obesity" and "body image". The search returned over 1500 results. A peer-review filter was then applied, leaving 870 articles for inclusion, and, of these, 130 papers were taken forward based on their titles and abstracts (papers were only retained if they explored the impact of social media on obesity). Full-text articles were further assessed for relevance to the Western world, particularly the USA, UK and Australia, resulting in 20 of these articles being included in the literature review.

Moreover, the University of Plymouth and Life Sciences Resource

Centre (LSRC) libraries were searched for books that met the inclusion criteria.^{7,8} In addition, searches for the terms “obesity”, “fat shaming”, “fat people memes” and “fat jokes” were conducted on Instagram, Google and YouTube.

Body image and the media

The perception of ourselves when we peer into the mirror can vaguely be defined as body image. To define body image precisely, however, can be onerous. Thompson and colleagues⁸ attempted to define it in 16 different ways. One strand of body image is obesity. In the social context, being thin is often viewed as being healthy.⁹ However, “health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being; and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.¹⁰ Morgan et al¹¹ proposed the “mass communication model” wherein they stated that “mass media plays a central role in creating stereotypes of beauty and body image”. The social agents (i.e. media), and society at large, has contributed hugely to the belief that outward appearances are important.¹²

Social media: the modern information source

Modern social media networks, including websites and platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, have replaced conventional media, such as magazines, newspapers and television channels, as sources of information.^{4,13} A study found a steady decline in viewership of conventional television amongst young adults between 2010 and 2011.¹³

In the author’s view, modern social media uses its capacity for instantly creating, accessing and processing an idea or opinion to entice people. The ceaseless ability to access these platforms is alluring to young adults craving attention and adulation. These technologies allow the user to personalise communications, “thereby transforming formerly passive mass-media receivers into full-fledged communicators, enhancing autonomy and personal agency”.¹⁴

Eternalisation of the weight stigma

An obese individual is often derided, decried and rejected on social media platforms. This verbal abuse is responsible for causing anxiety, depression and low self-esteem.² Chou et al² found that of the 1.37 million posts from social media platforms, 92% related obesity with negative misogynistic or derogatory words. A search for the term “fat people memes” on Google in July 2019 revealed memes that were outright abusive and offensive to overweight people. A similar search on YouTube in July 2019 showed videos ridiculing fat people. Many of these videos had millions of ‘likes’ and ‘views’. On Instagram in July 2019, #fatpeople yielded 37,000 posts and also led to pages such as #fatpeoplefalling and #daily_fat_people_pictures.

Users of social media platforms feel empowered due to their ability to stay anonymous.¹⁵ It has been suggested that aggressiveness and ‘toxic inhibition’ may result due to lack of eye contact (an important social cue) when using social media.¹⁵ This affront aggravates the feeling of low self-worth in targets of the abuse and, to worsen matters, these individuals may not have the necessary tools to protect themselves from the negative impacts of these stressful experiences.¹⁶⁻¹⁸

The social media paradox

Modern social media ridicules the obese but also advertises and promotes a cornucopia of weight-loss therapies; from fancy diets and magic potions to exercise plans.^{2,3} The domination of these platforms is such that the vulnerable obese population easily fall prey to such advertisements. These dieting regimens generally do not work, and the individual feels cheated and misled.³

The vulnerable healthcare professional

Research conducted by Teachman and Brownell¹⁹ in the USA showed that people in the healthcare community had an ‘implicit negative association’ towards individuals who were overweight. A study on UK trainee dietitians, doctors and nurses showed similar trends of negative connotations towards overweight individuals.²⁰ Although these studies were limited due to the sample demographic, the results are alarming. The very group of professionals who know that obesity is a multi-factorial disorder and not just due to individual nonchalance, exhibited a negative bias. It is suggested that this might largely be due to the exposure of healthcare professionals to the same sources that created the negative bias in the public. Therein lies the role of healthcare trusts and medical societies to improve awareness amongst health professionals to improve patient trust and safety and provide overweight patients with a positive experience in a healthcare setting.

Conclusion

Social media platforms are constantly evolving and competing with each other to improve the user experience. Their burgeoning influence means that offensive or unhelpful content with regard to obesity and, subsequently, unhappiness in vulnerable users can only escalate if left unregulated. There is a need for legislation to regulate such vexation towards the vulnerable. It will be an uphill task to bring in such legislation when the often-cited right to “freedom of speech” can be used to defeat it. People downplay the matter by saying “it’s just a bit of humour, but is it?”

The same social media platforms can be used constructively by forming and promoting online communities, such as ‘Fatosphere’ (a fat acceptance community)⁹ and supportive blogs and forums. In an analysis of Fatosphere, Dickins et al⁹ suggested that this site offers another pathway for individuals to resist and respond to social media. Though not suitable for all individuals, many, particularly those who have had undesirable experiences with obesity, have reported developing a more positive relationship with their body. They also found support and a sense of community, which enabled them to deal with any stigma in a more positive manner. In addition, the removal of pressured emphasis on weight loss was found to enable participants to focus on well-being and leading healthy lifestyles, rather than focusing on the highly advertised thin-ideal.⁹

Most importantly, further high-quality research is needed, involving a wider spectrum of people, to find solutions to the ways in which social media affects the perception of body image.

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