From Labels to Humiliation: Generation of Discrimination and Resilience in the Obese Population

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Abstract. Obesity discrimination, stigma, and biases toward the obese population have always been a toxic yet common phenomenon in contemporary society. The obese population, in many cases, is naturally held at a disadvantage, both stereotypically and social-structurally. Therefore, to seek possible solutions to reduce such toxicity and help the victims of obesity discrimination build up resilience, the researcher aimed to find behind such a phenomenon, psychologically and socially. Data and research results from previous studies are collected and intergraded to reference references in finding specific reasons for obesity discrimination. Meanwhile, another online survey is put out to collect the latest data regarding the same issues and also as a potential comparison. Lastly, the researcher interviews 50 adult victims of obesity discrimination to gain first-hand stories from the victims' views regarding this social issue and therefore pursue a more comprehensive understanding of it. The research found that the primary reasons behind obesity discrimination are the overly enhanced endorsement of slender bodies from famous figures, which also coincides with the social identity theory.

Keywords: Obesity discrimination; Structural stigma; Resilience; Identity.

1. Introduction

"Does my body look good enough?" This question must have come across many people's minds throughout their lives. Especially in today's society, where fashion trends are changing faster and more accessible than ever, more people develop concerns about their body images. Most almost universally believe a slender body is more often considered to indicate healthiness, fitness, beauty, or even self-discipline. Therefore, what are the reasons behind such a toxic social phenomenon and issue? And how do people suffer from obesity discrimination from resilience that protects them from toxicity? In the following study, the researchers will give out an online survey to retrieve the most recent reflections on obesity discrimination and data on the frequency and intensity of such toxicity in different social populations. After that, the researchers will hold face-to-face interviews with adult victims of obesity discrimination and record each of the cases for further analysis.

This study aims to provide an educational view on the issues of obesity discrimination, something the majority of people are unfamiliar with terminology-wise. Specifically, the combination of authorized data from past studies and the latest stories and analysis provides readers with a generally accurate picture of what obese people are genuinely like-- what they, as the victims, consider as obesity discrimination, how they felt when going through such experiences and how they dealt with it. Such information can hopefully diminish some long-held stereotypes toward the obese population and thus reduce some hate and bias held toward them. The emphasis on the adverse effects of obesity discrimination may be able to ring the warning bell and guide people to realize the seriousness of this social issue. Furthermore, according to the interviews, researchers will analyze the different types of social support and resilience. People who have gone through obesity discrimination need to find possible ways to release victims' mental stress and anxiety and rebuild confidence.

2. Discrimination Towards Obesity

2.1 Identity-wise Discrimination

People might misunderstand Obesity discrimination as merely the behavior of being mean to individuals with larger body shapes or verbally abusing or being sarcastic about others' appearances, but it is much more than that.

With more people trying to achieve a slender body shape and thus the rising concern on body image, society develops negative bias against those with higher weights, identified explicitly as the obese population. According to the World Health Organization, "Overweight and obesity are abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a health risk. A body mass index (BMI) over 25 is considered overweight, and over 30 is obese." [1]

Stigma and discriminations occur when society categorizes individuals into specific groups. League then starts to form expectations about those groups once the cultural stereotype is secured. Previous research has specifically identified stigmas associated with obese individuals: overweight people are lazy, have poor willpower, and lack self-discipline [2]. In the cases of obesity, discrimination and stigmas reach almost all genders, ages, and racial groups. A research study done in the US reported that 40% of the participants had experienced weight-based teasing and discrimination, especially for women affected by obesity [3]. Three out of every 50 female participants claimed that they had experienced or were experiencing obesity discrimination daily [4]; 58.9% of the participants in a male-focused study on obesity discrimination admitted being abused, verbally or physically, because of their weight in adolescence, and 37.5% of them still had similar experiences within their forties [5]. Even in children, who are generally perceived as being kinder and less biased than adults, body weight is one of the primary reasons for bullying in schools [6].

Existing not only in real-life scenarios, roasting such as "gross" or "you are a shame to yourself" emerge under posts from people who have more oversized body shapes sharing their photos on social media are not single cases. Despite the existence of elaborate Community Rules on comments' content on social media websites, hate comments biased toward the obese population still manage to exist out of the corners of people's lives.

Moreover, in contrast to other cases of discrimination or stigmas where many strong ladies stand up for their gender and people with darker complexions fight for justice, the obese population remains primarily silent, taking in harsh criticisms, missed opportunities, and abuses thrown at them. Most people within this population suffer from both physical discomforts and mental distress [7] -- Physically, high rates of obesity discrimination are associated with people having lower rates of enjoyment and increased reluctance to exercise, leading to a less healthy lifestyle [8]; mentally, weight or body shape-related rejection has been shown to predict higher depression risks, and people experiencing obesity discrimination tend to be more self-abased [9]. But because of its commonness, obesity discrimination's harm and damage to the victims are often overlooked.

2.2 Structural Stigma on Obesity Discrimination

Structurally speaking, many public facilities unconsciously contribute to the constant discrimination held toward the obese population. The most obvious examples are seats on subways, buses, trains, and the economic class of planes. To fit more people in a relatively small space and area, these sites are designed to be just enough for most people but leave the obese population out of consideration. Therefore, when obese passengers inevitably take up the space of more than one seat, others may very possibly roll their eyes or even stare at those innocent passengers with disgust to make them feel uncomfortable and harmful to themselves, even though there is nothing they can do about it. On buses and subways, at least these victims can choose to perhaps stand in the corridor instead of sitting down to reduce some of the hate toward them. Still, on trains and planes, they have no choice but to stay put in a very uncomfortable seat feeling terrible about themselves while people sitting next to them are also not enjoying the ride. Also, in worst cases that are not at all uncommon, even when most people with larger body shapes choose to stand in the corridor instead of sitting down,

they still get shamed by sarcastic people saying that they are "taking up too much space" or that their existence "is making the bus feel more crowdy."

3. How Discrimination Toward the Obesity Population Generated

3.1 One-way Standards for Beauty

The most direct reason for obesity discrimination might be the fixation on people's standards for beauty. Part of it is associated with the trends of praising skinniness in media. With so many models with slender bodies and creators showing off their hotness or muscles while getting millions of views and likes, people have started to perceive skinniness as a core for beauty and vice versa.

Moreover, because of the viral trend and tout of slender bodies, many celebrities today also have small body shapes, and people who admire them tend to pursue similar statures. This frequent co-occurrence of star and skinniness forms an association that "experiencing the first item activates a representation of the second" [10]. In this way, admiring celebrities can be associated with admiring their body shapes. Furthermore, other characteristics of celebrities can form associations with their body shapes as well. Stars are visibly standing under the spotlight, earning millions each day, and being supported by people around the globe. People unconsciously connect their success, wealth, attention, and beauty with their easily visible characteristics—slender bodies. As a matter of fact, in a recent research study focusing on teenage girls, the majority of them claimed that celebrities greatly affected their figures because they wanted to pursue celebrities' exact body shapes [11,12, 13]. This effect is very similar to celebrity endorsement. When celebrities speak for a brand or a product, people, with their fans as a base, would want to buy it because they feel they can obtain the celebrities' successes or other attractive characteristics by purchasing the product [14].

3.2 Socially Identities and Grouping

Moving on to a larger scale of consideration that evolves the whole society, the reasons behind people's bullying and discriminating behaviors towards the obese population can be aligned with the social identity theory, which states that people will sort themselves into different social groups, and later use such groups to define themselves and stress their belongingness to the groups [15]. In the cases of obesity discrimination, when people pursue the slender body shapes as fashion trends push them to, they would want to prove their identity as belonging to the "skinny group" by exaggerating the difference between themselves and the obese population. By emphasizing the difference between "them" and "us," people increase their sense of belonging and confidence in the group they sort themselves into [16]. Furthermore, because of the media's portraits, people within the "skinny group" will consider themselves more successful and those who do not belong unsuccessful, therefore feeling superior towards the obese population that can even further boost their ego, creating a toxic loop that they unconsciously fall into.

3.3 Non-Severe Penalties and the Law of Effect

Another sad truth about obesity discrimination is that the disgust and associated mean rejections from others are, in many cases, more visible on the Internet than in real life. With the Internet acting as an anonymous shield that allows toxicity to spread, people do not truly feel the need and pressure they do in real life to hold responsible for what they say and do. A teenage girl was verbally bullied on Instagram for the natural rolls in her abdomen in a picture she posted. Comments such as "you are gross" and "go die" flooded her social media, causing her severe depression that lasted for years. In real life, however, though people might still have negative impressions about her, most would not express it in such a discriminative and dirty way.

This echoes the Law of Effect, which states that when people's specific behaviors are given positive feedback in a particular situation, they will tend to repeat that behavior. In contrast, if people's specific behaviors receive punishments or adverse outcomes in some instances, it is unlikely that such behaviors will occur again in that situation [17]. The negative consequences or penalties

associated with real-life weight-based rejections may be more significant than those related to online weight-based sacrifices.

In real life, open expressions of disgust or spite towards obese people are often met with negative feedback. One might lose their friends, popularity, and trust of others—consequences so severe and irreversible that people would try their best to avoid them. In the world of social media and the Internet, however, the results are much lighter and easy to overcome. Attacks or mean comments are usually automatically cleaned off, with the commenter being told to pay more attention to their language online. Even in the worst case, the commenter's account will be blocked or muted. This can hardly hold the commenter accountable, as one can easily log into another account to repeat the same behavior. None of these online consequences are harsh enough to threaten the obesity attackers' personal lives and egos.

4. How to Address Stigma: Process of Resilience Formation

4.1 For the Obese Population: Enhance Confidence

How can obesity discrimination be reduced if not eliminated in society? And how can the victims of such a toxic phenomenon be less harmed?

The most effective way for victims of obesity discrimination to form resilience is to increase their self-esteem. It is proved that people who constantly experience the pains of stigma and injustice generally possess lower self-esteem [17]. However, self-esteem can also be improved to become a shield against stigmas. In fact, according to the results of a research study done on the influences of different discrimination and how self-esteem varied, higher self-esteem can have a significant impact on one's experience of social unjust.

What can help build self-esteem? Research has found positive correlations between high self-esteem with humor, community involvement, and positive ingroup stereotyping [19]. Individuals who experience weight stigma can utilize emotional-coping strategies such as positive ingroup stereotyping (e.g., overweight people are more sociable) and humor about their situation. Community involvement can be achieved by interacting with stigmatized ingroup members or simply by talking about one's worries of stigma with a professional counselor or even a friend or family member, letting down the burden of weight stigma by letting others share some of the pain.

4.2 For others: Reduce Stereotypes and Negativity Spreading

As for people who think that fat or a large body shape does not correlate to one's beauty, abilities, and personality, all people can do is advocate such positive notions and try to influence more. We could encourage more people to spend time with people without a "perfect" body shape and promote more to conclude these people after getting to know them and not just based on their appearances.

An attitude change within society is not easy but can be done slowly and steadily as more people get to look at the obese population with their naked eyes. This could be achieved through education, where students are taught from a young age to respect and care for others of all genders, body shapes, and ethnicity. As for the mass majority, more frequent exposure to the issues of obesity discrimination through movie productions, literature, or social media could raise awareness on the topic and therefore make it possible for society to reduce some toxicity held toward people with larger bodies.

5. Conclusion

Overall, obesity discrimination is a social problem that severely impacts its victims, but the issues are usually overlooked by most individuals and societies. Reasons behind this toxic issue are a celebrity and famous figures' endorsement of slender body shapes and organizations overly linking one's body with their success. Social Identity theory can crucially account for the persecutors' psychological thought process while abusing the obese population, and much of such toxicity online is cultivated by people's lack of responsibility for their actions and words once they become

anonymous; the overwhelming toxicity of obesity discrimination and body shame online could be primarily cultivated by the fact that penalties for expressing negativity anonymously on the Internet are not severe enough to catch people's attention. Identifying the reasons behind obesity discrimination is one of the first steps in reducing or solving this social issue.

Retrospections on the study show that some limitations still exist. Most of the sources contributing to this study are from at least three years back, meaning that some reasons behind obesity stigma in contemporary society, more or less reframed by the global COVID-19 pandemic, might still be left out. Also, since the interviewees are only fifty grown-ups from the United States while obesity discrimination is a worldwide issue that occurs in all age groups and under various cultural backgrounds, the results of case studies might not be a complete comprehensive representation of what going through obesity discrimination and forming resilience is for all victims around the world.

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