

Interpreting press coverage of South Africa's post-apartheid "obesity epidemic"

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ABSTRACT

This study examines news reporting on South Africa's alleged "obesity" epidemic between 1997 and 2012. Results indicate that fatness is equated with disease, crisis, and dysfunction and the fat black body is singled out for particular attention as a social problem. News reporting on fat in South Africa uncritically takes up the views of sources with commercial interests who are presented as "experts" on fat. Their interpretations of the fat black body as a social problem are influenced by the imperative of new markets for products that are to be found principally in the ranks of the post-apartheid black middle class.

KEYWORDS

Obesity epidemic; South Africa; fat; media; representation; race; post-apartheid

A wide scholarly literature has pointed to the way in which a variety of social problems—from homosexuality to alcoholism—has historically come to be redefined as illness and incorporated into the realm of medicine (for examples, see Lupton, 2003; Freidson, 1988). Perhaps the most recent addition to this long list of human experiences and behaviors has to do with questions of how bodies look—their physical size, shape, and weight—and what people choose to eat.

A growing critical literature has sought to question the taken-for-granted contemporary orthodoxy equating fat and disease (for examples, see Campos, 2004; Gaesser, 2002). In this study we were interested to discover whether reporting on fat embodiment in South Africa uncritically reproduces the prevailing orthodoxy well documented in other contexts (for examples, see Boero, 2007; Saguy and Almeling, 2008) which assumes that there is a "normal" size for human bodies and that weighing more than "average" is undesirable.

Our interest however is not in simply describing media discourses concerning fat and "obesity" in post-apartheid South Africa but also in asking why the discourse takes the form that it does. Here we draw on the work of theorists of media framing who argue that we need to tie dominant interpretations of social problems that are reproduced in the media to the notion