

Media's Effect on America's Obesity Crisis

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Abstract

The obesity epidemic in the United States has continued to increase with more and more children and adults being diagnosed every year. While many recognize this as an issue, there has been little attempts to correct this problem. This paper will research how media has effected this rise in obesity rates by exploring a lack in health promotion as well as how advertisements are directed towards individuals. This examination of media's effect on obesity points out the ineffectiveness of mainstream media to address the rise in obesity levels and will suggest changes required for a comprehensive solution that includes communication outlets and the use of positive health promotion programs.

Media's Effect on America's Obesity Crisis

Media, in general, can be defined as communication outlets or tools used to store and deliver information or data, but in today's world it is so much more to us. Television is a great example of media in our society. According to a study by Shrum, Wyer, & O'Guinn, television has been one of the highest consumed forms of media since 1998 and has the biggest impact on an individual's perception of reality as well as how they think. The study researched priming methodology which occurs when an individual's thought process is unconsciously guided by specific stimuli. The study proved that through this priming technique, a person's beliefs on reality are more consistent with what they view on television and that television is the causal factor (Shrum, Wyer, & O'Guinn, 1998). Therefore, it can be assumed that media, especially television, can have a distinct influence on obesity rates in the United States based on the programming shown. There is little to no advertisement on the negative health effects caused by obesity, a decrease in physical activity promotion, and the media over-advertising unhealthy, cheap dietary options.

Mainstream media is notorious for the rapid turnover of news, only allowing for a few days of coverage for the most notable stories. Very few of 2019's top stories looked at one of the biggest issues plaguing this nation: obesity. According to a 2011 article, obesity rates started to climb at an accelerated rate during the late 1970s and early 1980s (Mitchell, Catenacci, Wyatt, & Hill, 2011) however the media didn't actively start to recognize this crisis until the 2000s. The 2004 documentary film *Super-Size Me* shed a light on how fast food effected the body and the many negative consequences to consuming it on a daily basis but the film was slowly forgotten and fast food advertisements continued to pour into our lives through television and social media. The speed at which stories are replaced in the media is one of the main reasons Canadian

journalist Carl Honore is an outspoken advocate for the Slow Movement. In his book, *In Praise of Slow*, Honore defines the Slow Movement as the slowing down of life. Honore claims that we are rushing through life and in doing so we are no longer focusing on some of the most important aspects of our life.

In our fast-forward culture, we have lost the art of eating well. Food is often little more than fuel to pour down the hatch while doing other stuff - surfing the Web, driving, walking along the street. Dining al desko is now the norm in many workplaces. All of this speed takes a toll. Obesity, eating disorders and poor nutrition are rife. (Honore, 2005)

This quote from Honore speaks on how the fast paced world we live in is taking a toll on our bodies and by doing so we find ourselves at risk of losing the importance of nutrition and falling into the trends that cause obesity.

At the same time media started to cover obesity due to the popularity of *Super-Size Me*, companies that offered cheap dietary options, or what is considered “fast food”, started some of their more extreme advertisement campaigns. These ad campaigns were used to combat the rising backlash of the recognized issues of obesity. McDonald’s, the star establishment of *Super-Size Me*, was one such company to start aggressively advertising after the film’s release. McDonald’s “*I’m lovin’ it*” campaign began in 2003 but didn’t reach popularity until the summer of 2004 after the release of 13 new commercials following the debut of *Super-Size Me*. According to a New York Times article, the slogan was ineffective until the release of these new commercials and for good reason. Prior to the release of the new commercials, all McDonald’s advertisements were targeted towards young people but these new ads expanded the target population to also include mothers and their children (Ives, 2004). Glistening hamburger buns and crisp french fries paired with low prices already caused people to flock to these establishments in order to save a buck and after the new round of commercials were released in

2004, the number of individuals frequenting fast food establishments only grew. Fast food advertisements are still in abundance today, however, there has also been an increase of advertisements for much healthier food options but they are portrayed very differently. Your fast food options are marketed for their prices rather than their nutritional value; they offer limited time deals like buy one get one free or buy two and save \$3 in an attempt to get more customers in a shorter amount of time. On the other hand, “healthy” food options focus their advertisements on the positive nutritional value it provides. While this is typically true, price is never involved due to the fact that healthy food options are almost always two to three times more expensive than the unhealthy option, which can be a particular strain on the budget of some consumers.

Cheap dietary options are a very appealing for those living in low income households. A typical, middle-class family of four spends about \$250 on food a week in order to sustain themselves. On the other hand one meal from a typical fast food option costs, on average, \$5 (P. M. Morris, 1990), so \$20 a day for a family of four is only about \$140 a week, almost \$100 less than what a typical middle class family would spend. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, the highest percentages of children growing up in low-income households are those of minority families. 59% of Hispanic children, 60% of American Indian children and 61% of African American children are living in low-income households (“NCCP | United States: Demographics of Low-Income Children,” n.d.). According to a meta-analysis done in 2011, these children of minority demographics, are at a much higher risk for childhood obesity meaning that it is very likely that they are fed a cheaper, unhealthy diet (Mitchell et al., 2011). Figure 1 shows that although Caucasian male obesity rates rose much more quickly and still have a higher prevalence than most other ethnicities, the percentage of obese Caucasian males has

already started to decline whereas the percentage of obesity in most other ethnicities in the United States is still continuing to rise.

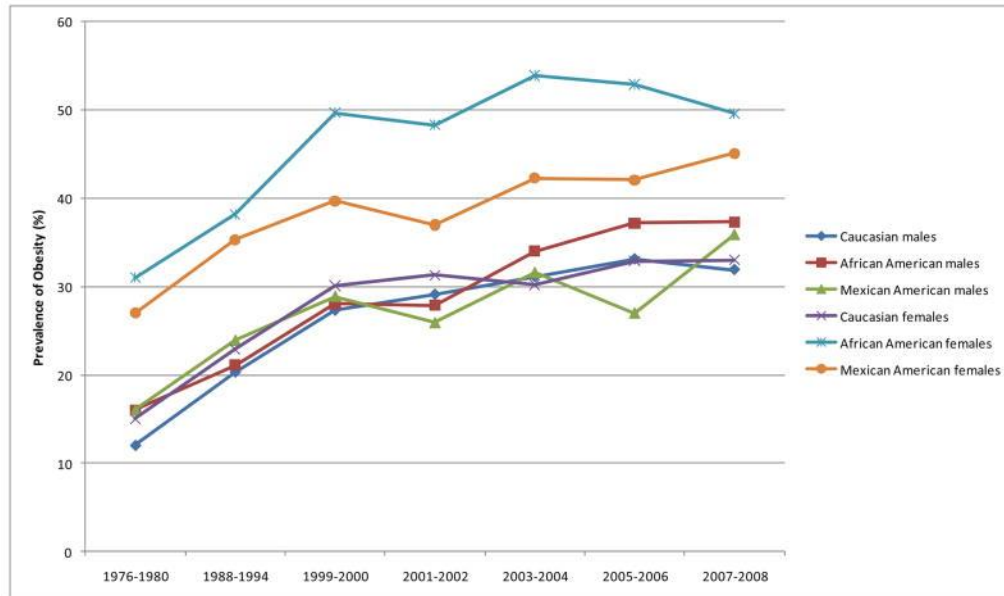


Figure 1. Obesity prevalence rates increased over time in all gender-ethnic groups (Mitchell et al., 2011).

According to the same study, families with lower income, especially minority families, have a much higher prevalence of eating cheaper, unhealthy dietary options (Mitchell et al., 2011). A study by Block, Scribner, & DeSalvo found that predominately African American neighborhoods had, on average, six times more fast food establishments than predominantly Caucasian neighborhoods (Block, Scribner, & DeSalvo, 2004). Due to low-income families consuming cheaper food options, the obesity rate of families who make less than \$15,000 a year is much higher than families who make over \$50,000 per year as seen in Figure 2 and these rates have continued to rise from 20% in 1995 to almost 35% in 2009.

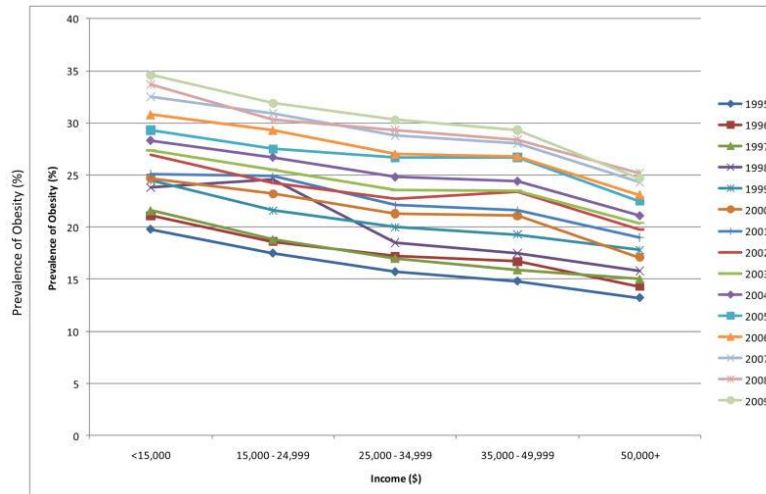


Figure 2. Obesity rates are the same at all income levels (Mitchell et al., 2011).

What is most interesting about families with low-income housing, is where they are located here in the United States. In some cases, low income is not the sole cause of frequent fast food consumption but rather where families live relative to healthy food options. Food shortages in the United States are very real and very prevalent but, like obesity, are rarely covered in the media. These food shortages, or food deserts as they are sometimes called, are considered an urban area in which it is difficult to buy affordable or good-quality fresh food (“USDA Defines Food Deserts | American Nutrition Association,” n.d.) which is where the majority of low-income families find themselves living. Figure 3 compares a map of the food deserts in the United States to a map of families that are living poverty.

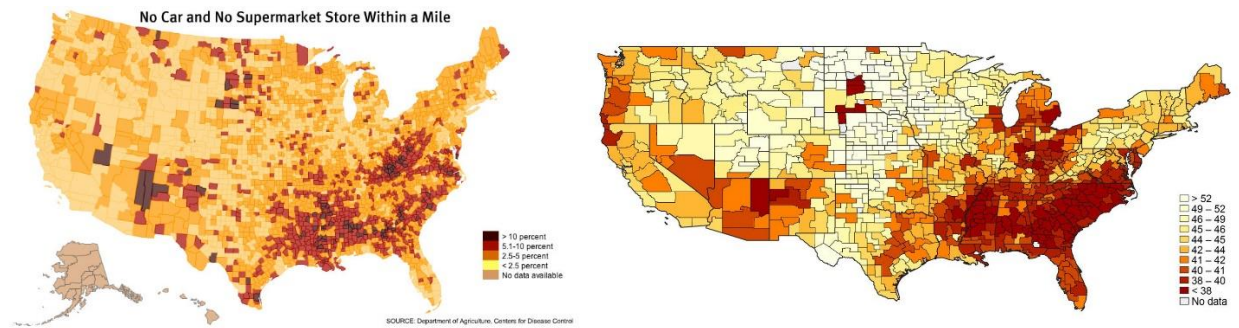


Figure 3. Concentration of food deserts where dark color is higher concentration (“USDA Defines Food Deserts | American Nutrition Association,” n.d.) versus concentration of impoverished families where dark color is higher concentration (“NCCP | United States: Demographics of Low-Income Children,” n.d.).

Figure 3 shows that food deserts as well as highly impoverished areas are typically concentrated in the same locations which has been proven to lead to higher obesity rates. Several studies have found that low-income residents have less access to chain stores that offer healthy food options (Myers & Chung, 1999) which means that low-income residents have to travel further to have access to these stores (Alwitt & Donley, 1997). However, individuals living in low-income areas have a severe lack of access to transportation (“The Urban Grocery Store Gap—AgEcon Search,” n.d.) meaning that they are unable to travel to locations with healthy food options and instead have to resort to cheap, fast food options. The impact that food deserts have on low-income areas when it comes to obesity cannot be overlooked, the lack of affordable, healthy food options in these areas makes it near impossible to maintain a healthy diet (Hendrickson, Smith, & Eikenberry, 2006) On top of this, children living in low-income food deserts are at an even higher risk for obesity (Schafft, Jensen, & Hinrichs, 2009). According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, children under the age of 18 saw 3.6 advertisements regarding fast food daily and the advertisements were shown in even higher concentrations in target areas with

African American and Hispanic youth; populations at high risk for obesity and related diseases (“Fast Food Facts 2013,” 2013; Lewis et al., 2005).

According to a study done by Edward Maibach, there has been a steady decrease in physical activity here in the United States over the past fifty years (Maibach, 2007). In his study, Maibach confirms that media plays a huge role in our life and can be a direct cause of the decrease in physical activity levels. Between 1977 and 2007, 30 years, the average annual consumption of all media is 3,874 hours. To put this number into perspective, 3,874 hours is equal to 161 days and 10 hours or almost 6 months. These numbers prove the importance of promoting physical activity in the media, especially for children. Obesity starts in children, and in 2012 about 17% of all children in the United States were diagnosed as obese (Mitchell et al., 2011). This issue is cause for concern because obesity is difficult to reverse without an increase in physical activity and should a child be diagnosed as obese, they can be almost certain of contracting health issues, specifically heart disease, later in life. Over the last 40 years or so, work hours for the average American have decreased, giving about 4 hours per day of the work week for simple leisure time, which is imperative for both children and adults. Due to this increased leisure time both parents and children could conduct themselves in various activities allowing for an increase in physical activity. This was quickly reversed however when leisure time was instead used for media consumption rather than activities which is why promoting physical activity is so important. Simply watching people engage in physical activity is not enough, promotion needs to cause people to want to engage in physical activity themselves. In the past there was an abundance of these promotional strategies but today there are virtually none. The National Football League created a program called “NFL Play 60” which was meant to encourage children to increase their physical activity. The Center for Disease Control

recommends that people of all ages, but especially children, should engage in 60 minutes or 1 hour of physical activity each day. The NFL started their program in 2002 and it quickly became very popular. NFL players would go to areas with high populations and play football and other games with the children in order to get them moving and active for the recommended 60 minutes. Commercials for the program would air during children's television programming, encouraging children to engage in physical activity for the chance to play with their athletic heroes. However, the advertisements for NFL Play 60 decreased every year until today when advertisements for the program barely exist especially during children's programming. In 2010, a resurgence to get children active and healthy occurred when Michele Obama started her Let's Move campaign. The campaign was very well-rounded and focused not only on physical activity but nutrition as well both in the home and at school. The program was very successful but like NFL Play 60, it slowly disappeared from mainstream media, especially when President Obama left office in 2017. Unfortunately, schools are not doing much better when it comes to increasing physical activity in children. Physical education is slowly leaving elementary and middle schools due to decreases in funding year after year. Elementary schools that still allow children to have recess only have them outside for ten minutes or less and that's during the summer months. In areas that experience winter or even during bad weather, children are kept inside the classroom instead of attempting to find an alternative so the students can still engage in some form of physical activity. Children are not the only ones being hurt by a lack of exercise promotion. The importance of physical activity should be stressed to all age demographics. An increase in physical activity in children will cause a decrease in childhood obesity and therefore obesity in adults allowing for longer and healthier lives. Elderly individuals should also be promoted to

exercise. Just standing up and walking is considered exercise and has been proven to increase lifespan (Maibach, 2007).

Adolescents are affected negatively by the media just as much, if not more, than children. Due to adolescents having increased hormonal levels, they are easily guided to certain mindsets through priming methodology (Shrum et al., 1998). Media persuasion has also been linked to physical aggression as well as tobacco and other substance use in adolescents ((Maibach, 2007). However, the most dangerous connection between teens and media is poor self-body image. Body image, in and of itself, can be a very complicated conversation because a lot of medical disorders, especially eating disorders, stem directly from poor self-body image. Media comes into play because it has the most direct connection between adolescents and body dissatisfaction. A study performed in 2003 asked girls under the age of 19 how they felt about their bodies, then showed them media in the form of magazines and television with images of unrealistically thin models. When asked about their own bodies again, body dissatisfaction increased significantly but only with unrealistic body types. When shown images of average and plus size models or inanimate objects, there was no significant change in self-body image (A. M. Morris & Katzman, 2003). The study also found that adolescent boys tend to want to be bigger, stronger and more muscular. They see that taking drugs and/or smoking can be considered cool and therefore take steroids, start smoking and are equally affected by other drugs, however, boys experience much less body dissatisfaction than girls. Girls would rather weigh less and have the slender body types of the aforementioned unrealistic models which is why girls are typically the ones afflicted by eating disorders. Regardless of size, many young women feel that they need to lose weight because of the body types they see on a day to day basis in the media. One study found that 44% of girls surveyed felt they were overweight and 60% were actively trying to lose weight despite

being in normal weight limits for their age (Ozer, Park, Paul, Brindis, & Irwin, n.d.). Some may argue that body image in the media is actually starting to change for the better. It's more common to see realistic body images on television, in magazines and even on social media. This is more important than most realize because having individuals feel comfortable in their own bodies actual has the chance to increase physical activity among Americans. When individuals feel forced to exercise by extrinsic motivational factors such as pressure to conform to unrealistic body types, they are actually less likely to exercise because they feel as if they have to. This is why many turn to more extreme measures: men taking steroids to become more muscular and women developing eating disorders to be thin. On the other hand, if people feel comfortable in their own bodies, they may choose to exercise out of self-efficacy and other intrinsic motivational factors. This can lead to a decrease in obesity rates across the nation because people want to make themselves healthy rather than someone telling them they have to be healthy. However, this requires a lot of work on the part of media. There will always be unrealistic body images portrayed in everything we see but by decreasing the over-promotion of these body types in the media we are taking a step in the right direction.

If media can take a stand when it comes to body image, it's not a stretch to take a stand against obesity and fight for the side of health; and it's been done before. Mainstream media worked directly with the federal government and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) to fight the war against smoking. Since advertisements about the dangers of smoking have come about, the amount on individuals smoking in the United States has decreased drastically. A press release from the CDC in 2016 claimed that their advertisement campaign, *Tips from Former Smokers*, caused over 100,000 Americans to quit smoking indefinitely ("CDC Press Releases," 2016). If government regulated advertisement campaigns like this could be applied to obesity, such as

transparency when it comes to the dangers of obesity as well as daily or weekly promotion of the benefits of physical activity, it is possible that obesity rates in the United States can see the same decreases as smoking. In today's world, advertisements are everywhere: on television, on the radio, on our computers and phones, there should be no reason that physical activity promotion as well as education about the dangers of obesity cannot be disseminated by mainstream media. Heart disease is the leading cause of death, not only in the United States, but around the world and one of the biggest contributors is obesity. Smoking used to be biggest contributor when it came to heart disease but, due to effective advertisement campaigns, smoking has been all but ruled out. However obesity levels continue to rise and heart disease still remains the leading killer of humans worldwide.

Some studies have shown that the media does have its place when it comes to health promotion and prevention strategies, like smoking for example (A. M. Morris & Katzman, 2003). However, just like realistic body image promotion, there is always more than can be done. Some have considered the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) implementing a "media blackout" for a selected amount of time following the end of the work day. While the idea seems to be an effective way to allow American's to utilize the leisure time they are given to perform some physical activity, the introduction of tablets and smartphones has put access to the media at our fingertips meaning that an FCC implemented blackout would be rendered useless. However, there are still options that can be considered. Similarly to the CDC's anti-smoking campaigns, the federal government can again step in and work with media to promote healthy habits. Healthy People 2020 (HP20) is the United States government's agenda in terms of building a healthier nation however very few have heard about or even know that it exists. HP20 outlines goals for several Leading Health Indicators that ideally will be met by the year 2020. Some of

the goals of these indicators have been met or even exceeded such as injury and violence prevention. On the other hand, some indicators, like mental health, are getting worse (“Midcourse Review: LHIs | Healthy People 2020,” n.d.). One of the indicators I was drawn to was the goal percentage of individuals diagnosed with diabetes. Type II, or adult-onset diabetes, is typically caused by a lack of production of insulin in overweight and obese individuals. The HP20 goal percentage of individuals with diabetes by 2020 is 16.2% however from 2010 to 2015 the percentage rose from 18% to 21% and one of the reasons is that children and adolescents are now being diagnosed with Type II diabetes due to childhood obesity (“Midcourse Review: LHIs | Healthy People 2020,” n.d.). Using federal funding to promote the goals of HP20, especially those that are getting worse, mainstream media can advertise the adverse health effects of obesity as well as promote the importance of physical activity in our day to day lives. Social media is no exception. Although television is still one of the highest consumed forms of media, younger generations are getting more and more of their information from social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. By partnering these platforms with HP20 and other health promotion programs, the advertisements that younger individuals see on a daily basis can be tailored to promote healthy choices and habits. At the end of the day, obesity can never be truly eradicated just as there are still individuals that still choose to smoke however there is always something that can be done. Media surrounds all of us every second of every day. We are constantly bombarded with new information and different advertisements about everything imaginable. L. J. Shrum, Robert Wyer, Jr. and Thomas O'Guinn proved that what we see in the media directly influences our decision making (Shrum et al., 1998) and it's time to start using that to our advantage to make the citizens of the United States healthy.

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