Understanding Perceptions and Anti-Fat Bias: Treatment of Obese Individuals in the Media, Emphasizing Popular Television

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Obesity Rates have steadily increased in recent years. Along with this increase comes a barrage of "fatalistic" media framed images and stories that research shows perpetuates stereotypes of obese individuals. Where there has been thorough research on media framing and anti-fat attitudes, there has been little research into television sitcoms and how they may or may not perpetuate stereotypes. The author of this paper uses both quantitative and qualitative measures to determine if television shows perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce weight bias.

Current treatment of rates of obesity in the media, medical journals and health policy illustrate that obesity has reached "epidemic" proportions. Some question whether the term "epidemic" is appropriate, as obesity does not fit the "traditional" model for an epidemic. Instead, obesity as an epidemic has developed out of a moral panic in which everyone is at risk to varying degrees (Boero, 2007). Nothing highlights the level of this "post-modern epidemic" and moral panic better than the U.S. Surgeon General's 2006 warning that obesity is the "terror within" and that "unless we do something about it, the magnitude of the dilemma will dwarf 9-11 or any other terrorist attempt" (Saguy and Almeling, 2008; Associated Press, 2006). Clearly the discourse on the topic would lead us to believe that the "United States is eating itself to death" (Saguy and Almeling, 2008).

Research shows that media has contributed to the moral panic surrounding obesity with its "fatalistic" framing reports of the issue and its unending need to place blame. With obesity, more often than not; the blame is placed with the individual (Shugart, 2011; Barry et al., 2011). It is argued that media perpetuates that obesity is primarily "an individual's personal responsibility," and obese persons are often stereotyped as "less popular, less active, weaker, dirtier and as having less self discipline than thin people"

(DeJong, 1993; Backstrom, 2012). This is also highlighted in the media's representation of eating disorders. Food deprivation or purging disorders are far more likely to be attributed to being outside one's control, whereas responsibility for binge-eating disorder is more likely to be attributed to individual responsibility (Backstrom, 2012).

The goal of this paper and the research herein is not to dispute whether or not obesity is on the rise. Statistics clearly show that rates of obesity are rising, especially among children where rates of obesity tripled from 1980 to 2008 (Barry et al, 2011). The goal of this research project is to determine how obese individuals are treated and portrayed in media, specifically popular television. This research also seeks to determine how audiences interpret negative portrayals of obese individuals.

Weight bias and stigmatization have occurred in various forms over the years. This includes negative representations of obese individuals in entertainment mediums. An early form of obesity representation in entertainment was the inclusion of obese individuals in the circus side show. These individuals "often performed under stage names that referenced their body size, such as 'Ima Waddler,'" (Backstrom, 2012). In circus side shows obese individuals (predominantly females) "adopted a presentation style of joviality and telling stories, jokes or even songs that poked fun at their weight (Guyer and Roen, 1968; Backstrom 2012).

Obese individuals are no longer featured in circus side shows. However, individuals with this anomalous body type are still viewed as something to be gawked at in reality shows that focus on weight as a body project. During the heyday of circus side shows, obese individuals were in the minority, as they are today. Reality shows about obese individuals typically feature those who are medically classified as morbidly obese. These individuals comprise only 4.7% of the United States population. Therefore they are still viewed as a type of freak or side show attraction (Backstrom, 2012).

Fictional television series are not doing any better than reality series at dispelling obesity stereotypes. The medium has changed, but the message remains the same. In an analysis

of the 1999-2000 television season, Greenburg et al. performed a content analysis on each of the top 10 prime-time programs. From this analysis they found that, "thinner women are portrayed more positively and larger ones more negatively, whereas both of these deviations from 'normal' weight may serve to stigmatize men" (Greenburg et al., 2003).

Heavy research has been done on how the media frames obesity, but research is lacking as it pertains to stereotypical portrayals of obese persons and audience perception of these individuals related to anti-fat attitudes. Clear evidence exists that proves discrimination against obese individuals occurs in health care, employment, school, and interpersonal relationships, but little research has been done to explore the "correlates of these attitudes" (Bissell & Hays, 2011). This paper and the research herein were developed to find these correlates.

Methods

Empirical understanding for this paper was sought through both quantitative and qualitative means. The researcher conducted a Focus Group using a survey and questionnaire to measure perceptions based on anti-fat bias. This focus group was based on a model used by McClure, Puhl & Heuer to determine if photographic images that accompany news stories about obesity influence anti-fat attitudes (McClure, Puhl, & Heuer, 2011). After the focus group was conducted, the researcher and assistant decided analyze the content of two seasons of popular television sitcoms from different decades to see if stereotypes have changed over 20 years.

Focus Group Design & Measures

First, a focus group was conducted in order to determine how anti-fat attitudes factor in to perceptions of obese characters from television sitcoms. The focus group was designed to have 10 participants. Those 10 participants were to be broken up into two groups of five. Each group would be shown a clip from a television sitcom featuring two lead obese characters. The sitcoms chosen were, *Roseanne* and *Mike & Molly*. These shows were specifically selected because obese individuals were the lead characters. The

Roseanne clip featured a negative and stereotypical portrayal of obese individuals. The *Mike & Molly* clip featured a positive portrayal.

A Fat Phobia survey (see Appendix A for complete survey) was adapted from The Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. This survey was designed to measure baseline anti-fat attitudes. A questionnaire was designed to qualitatively measure attitudes after viewing the positive and negative clips. The goal of the focus group was to determine if pre-existing anti-fat attitudes were reinforced or changed by the clips and if anti-fat attitudes correlated to blame assignment (individual, societal, genetic). A primary hypothesis was developed that those with higher anti-fat bias would have more negative reactions to portrayals of obese individuals and their anti-fat attitudes would be reinforced. Secondarily, a hypothesis was developed that those who had higher anti-fat scores would primarily assign blame to the individual.

Due time constraints and a restrictive student email policy at the university of research, participants were only solicited through one on one invitation and class room announcements. This lack of exposure led to a poor respondent percentage. The researcher was able still conduct a focus group, but with only 5 participants. The researcher decided to only expose the participants to the negative *Roseann*e clip to gain a qualitative understanding of how participants perceived the stereotypical portrayal of obese individuals.

The focus group survey was designed using a scale with positive adjectives at the low end of the spectrum and negative adjectives at the high end. The lines were numbered 1 – 5 and respondents were asked to mark and X on the number line closest to the adjective they felt best described "obese or fat people." Higher scores indicate greater anti-fat bias and lower scores indicate lesser anti-fat bias. The survey also included variable for age, sex, race/ethnicity, height and weight. The height and weight categories were used to calculate the body mass (BMI) of participants. This was done to determine if there is a correlation between weight bias and personal BMI. The qualitative questionnaire was

attached to the survey so that the researcher could accurately measure qualitative attitudes with the quantitative measures of the Fat Phobia Survey.

Focus Group Results

Survey

The mean age of respondents was 20.2 years. There were 4 female participants and 1 male participant. Three participants considered themselves to be white and two considered themselves to be American Indian/Alaska Native. Each participant's height and weight was used to calculate BMI using the Centers for Disease Control BMI calculator. According to the calculation, two of the participants had normal body weights. One participant was classified as being overweight and one participant was considered obese. One participant did not report their height so they were excluded from BMI calculation.

The mean level of weight bias for the entire group was 3.1% ($SD = .56$). This is indicative of a moderate level of weight bias and is similar to results found in other studies using the Fat Phobia Scale (e.g., Bacon et al., 2001; Puhl, Wharton, & Heuer, 2009; McClure, Puhl, & Heuer, 2011). The highest level of agreement was on food favoritism. That category saw a 100% rate of agreement. All five participants had high scores showing they believe obese people like food. Three other categories saw high rates of agreement. Two of these were on the negative end. There was an 80% agreement that obese people overeat and 80% of participants believe that obese people are slow. The only category where a positive adjective was selected in favor of a negative one with a high rate of agreement was the "strength' category. Eighty percent of participants view obese individuals as strong (see Appendix B for complete results of survey). This deviation in the strength category is consistent with previous research using this scale (Mclure, Puhl & Heuer, 2011).
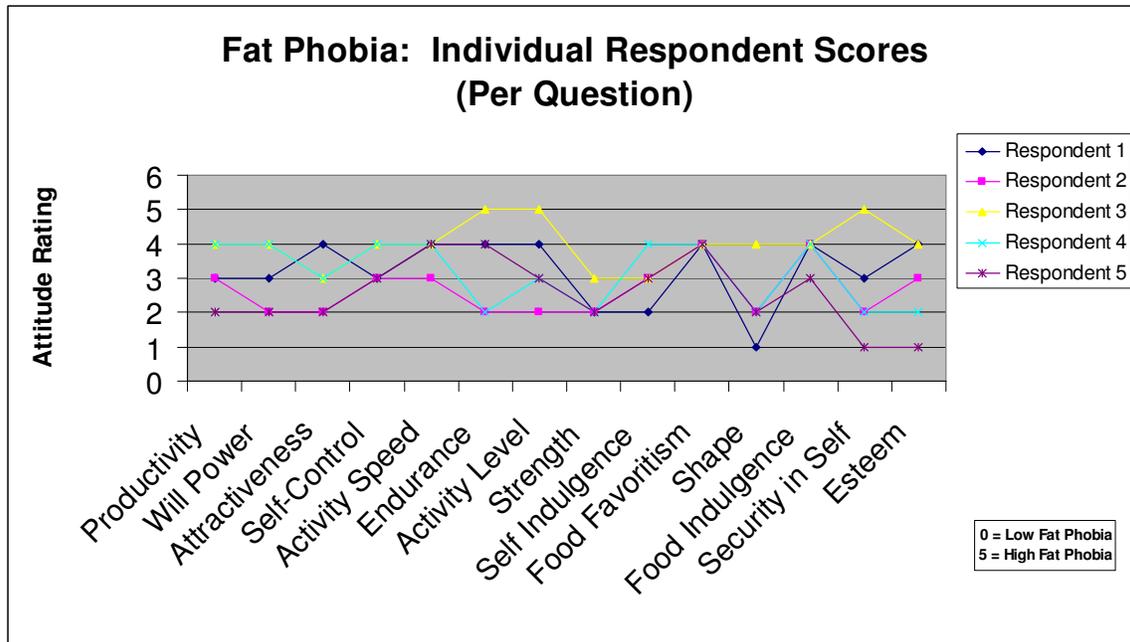
**Fat Phobia: Individual Respondent Scores
(Per Question)**

Figure 1. Individual respondents scores per question. One indicates lowest amount of weight bias. Five indicates a great amount of fat bias.

Because of the small sample size of the focus group, results linking BMI to fat bias were inconclusive. Other researchers have shown a conclusive link between these two variables (McClure, Puhl, & Heuer, 2011). It should be noted, though, that the participant with the highest BMI (classified obese) in this focus group also showed the lowest weight bias; however, the participant with the second highest BMI (classified overweight) had the second highest weight bias score. As previous research has determined, a larger sample group will yield more conclusive results in this area.

Questionnaire:

After being exposed to a negative clip from the television series, *Roseanne*, participants were issued a moderated questionnaire (see Appendix C for complete questionnaire). The clip of *Roseanne* was chosen because it featured behavior surrounding food (junk food) and activity (laziness) that could be considered stereotypical of obese individuals. The participants were asked a series of 7 questions after viewing this clip. Six of the questions were short answer and the 7th question was designed to be discussed openly in the group. The questions were designed to determine three things: 1) To whom do

participants assign blame for obesity, 2) Do participants believe the negative portrayals of obese individuals on television are accurate and 3) Do Fat Phobia Scores correlate to these thoughts and feelings?

While a relationship between BMI and weight bias was inconclusive on the Fat Phobia Survey, it was clear from the questionnaire that those with a higher mean level Fat Phobia score were more likely to assign responsibility of obesity to the individual, and less likely to blame genetic pre-disposition or societal factors (education resources, food industry). To of the participants, B and D (see Figure 2 for room layout), had the lowest reported BMI scores and were among those who believed the individual is responsible for their obesity. These two participants were also more likely to agree that obese individuals lack self-control, eat more junk food and exercise less. Although it should be noted that 4 out of 5 respondents actually agreed that "most overweight people do not exercise regularly." Most respondents believe that in some instances genetics plays a role in a person being obese; however, all respondents expressed that they believe genetic pre-disposition only occurs in a minority of obese individuals. The male respondent gave a guesstimate that only "thirty percent" are likely obese because they are "born that way." When it came to blaming the food industry all respondents were quick to disagree. Across the board, not a single participant blamed the food industry for obesity.
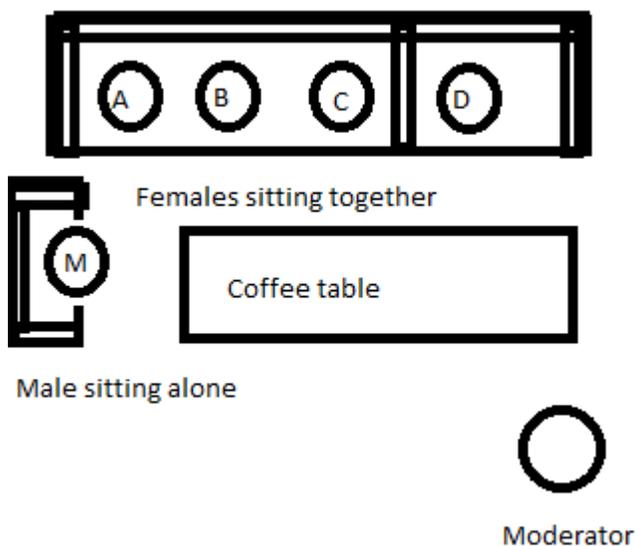

Figure 2. Layout of the moderated focus group.

The last question on the questionnaire was designed for open discussion. Participants were asked if they agreed with the following statement: "The clip viewed today was an accurate representation of obese persons." For the most part, respondents believed the portrayal to be stereotypical. Participant D clarified her position saying she knows some obese individuals but "none of them eat like that" but that "they don't exactly eat healthy…" Participant B mentioned talking to an obese girl who dunked "a whole box of Oreos in a glass of milk" for a snack, but went on to say that she believed only "10 percent" of obese people really act like that. Both the male participant and female participant C mentioned thin siblings who eat quite a bit and seem to not gain weight. Overall, the sentiment was that the *Roseanne* clip portrayed obese individuals in an overwhelmingly stereotypical way. The discussion question, which showed a moderate attitude towards obese individuals after viewing the clip, showed no significant change from Fat Phobia Scores, which were also in the moderate range.

Content Analysis:

After sorting through clips for the focus group portion of this paper, the researcher determined that it would be beneficial to this field of research to conduct a content analysis on the two television sitcoms selected for the focus group. The goal was to determine if stereotypical representations are as prevalent now as they were 20 years ago (when *Roseann*e first aired). Five random episodes each from the first seasons of *Roseanne* and *Mike & Molly* were coded.

Content Analysis Design

To analyze the ten episodes a 31-item coding sheet was developed (see Appendix D for complete sheet). These items were broken down into 5 areas: general behaviors, sexual behaviors, appearance, attitudes, and language. A coding assistant was trained. The terms were defined for the coding assistant and the 31 item on the coding sheet was explained. So data would not be skewed, the researcher and assistant viewed episodes at different time so that neither was present when the other was coding.

The coding sheet addresses 31 items each for male lead characters and female lead characters on both sit-coms. There were a total of 124 items. The researcher and coding assistant only agreed on 48 items.   The rate of agreement was 39 percent. The low agreement percentage could be due to a few factors. First, there was some subjectivity or lack of clarity on a few of the coding definitions, especially those where male and female perspectives may differ, such as sexual innuendo and physical affection. Second, only verbal training was provided to the assistant coder and no key was provided. Third, there was some confusion about the difference between being "ridiculed" and "disrespected." In future research, "disrespected" should be removed from the coding sheet. The term "ridiculed" seems to be more appropriate to the research topic. Also to guarantee a better inter-coder reliability in the future terms should be defined more clearly and coders should be provided with a written/typed key for those terms.

Content Analysis Results

General Behaviors

 General behaviors that were coded for include: eating, drinking (non-alcoholic), drinking alcohol, eating junk food, eating healthy food, exercising/being active, smoking, and being sedentary. Overall there was more visible consumption of alcohol and food on *Roseanne*. The majority of the alcohol consumption was done by the male obese character. Interestingly, on *Roseanne*, the female lead was seen eating more frequently than the male and on *Mike & Molly*, the roles were reversed. *Roseanne* also featured more consumption of junk food than *Mike & Molly* and featured the lead characters being more sedentary. Representations of physical activity or exercise were pretty equal on both programs. Both shows showed zero representations of the lead characters smoking.

Sexual Behaviors

Sexual behaviors coded for were: sexual innuendo, showing physical affection, visual sex implied, and sexual rejection. Overall, the lead characters on *Roseanne* tended to be more physically affectionate and used sexual innuendo more frequently than the lead characters on *Mike & Molly*, on both shows; however, the female lead used sexual innuendo more than the male (2:1). None of the episodes we viewed had visual implications of actual sex

and there was only one instance of sexual rejection. The male lead rejected the female lead on *Roseanne* in order to fix their refrigerator.

Appearance

Appearance was coded using the following terms: sloppy dress, well dressed. This category is where there was the most agreement between coders. Overwhelmingly, *Mike & Molly* portrayed the lead characters as more professional and well dressed than the characters on *Roseanne*. On *Mike & Molly*, the female had more instances of being "well dressed" than the male. On *Roseann*e sloppy to well dressed ratio for the male and female were somewhat equal (see Figure 3).
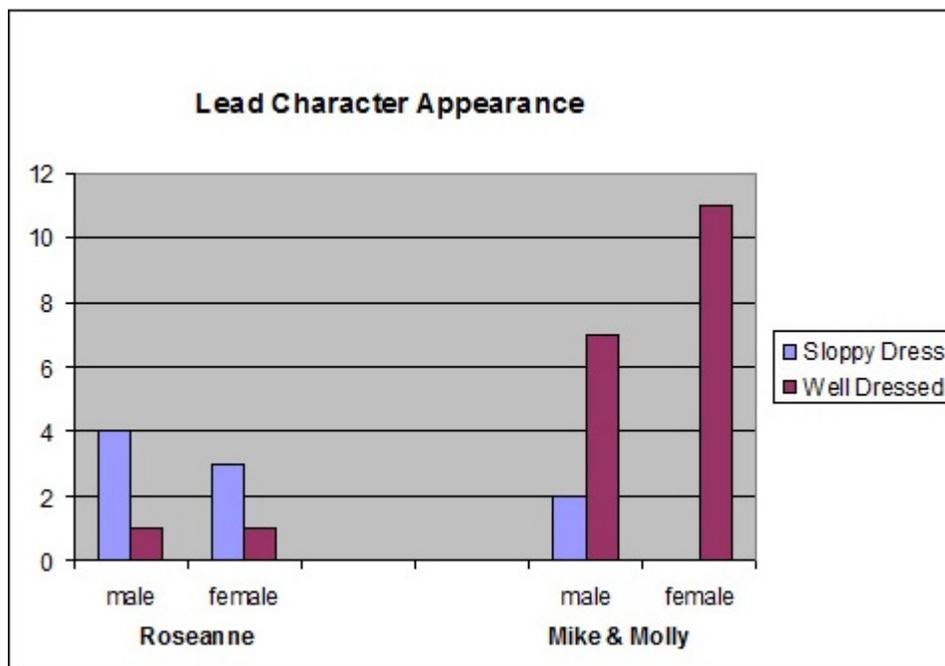
Figure 3. Graph showing that lead characters in Mike & Molly are portrayed as more attractively dressed.

Attitudes Toward Others

In the category of attitudes toward others, coders were looking for the following: respectful, disrespectful, jolly, annoying, supportive/helpful, and hindering others. "Jolly," "annoying," and "hindering others" didn't seem to apply to the episodes and for future study may be dropped from the coding sheet. However, both coders agreed that the female lead on *Roseann*e had high incidences of being disrespectful whereas the female lead on

Mike & Molly had zero incidences of the same attitude. And although she may be portrayed as disrespectful, the lead female on *Roseanne* was more often viewed as helpful or supportive than the female lead on *Mike & Molly*.

Others Attitudes toward Lead Characters

Others attitudes toward lead characters were measured by coding the following: respected by others, disrespected by others, ridiculed by others. As previously mentioned, there was some confusion by coders on what attitudes were indicative of disrespect and what attitudes showed ridicule. However, in effort to understand the dynamic of the relationships on these shows, the scores for disrespected" and "ridiculed" were combined. The lead male character on *Mike & Molly* was over 15 times more likely to be ridiculed or disrespected than the male lead on *Roseanne*; however he was also more likely to be respected by other characters.

Attitudes toward Self

Attitudes toward self were measured by coding the following: secure, insecure, and cocky. Overall, there was less display of the self attitudes coding criteria on Roseanne and on Mike & Molly the coders could not come up with conclusive data. This portion of the coding sheet may need revision in order to more clearly define attitudes toward self.

Language

For language coders were looking for instances of the words: "fat," "obese," "diet," "exercise" (which we expanded to include any mention of activity), and general food references (e.g. "dinner," "lunch" or specific food reference). Overall the term "fat" was only used once. It was used by the male lead on *Mike & Molly*. The term "obese" was never used. There was no mention of "diet" on *Roseanne*, but "diet" was mentioned six times on *Mike & Molly*. The male lead on *Mike & Molly* was twice as likely to mention, "diet." Exercise or activity was mentioned more often on *Roseanne*, but this included bowling and dancing. There was actually only one visual representation of an actual work-out. That representation was on *Mike & Molly*. When it came to food references, *Mike & Molly* overwhelmingly mentioned food more often than *Roseanne*. The lead characters on

Mike & Molly were almost three times as likely to mention food as their counterparts on *Roseanne*. And the roles were reversed here. On *Roseanne*, the female lead was more likely to mention food, but as mentioned in the criteria, this included references to "dinner, "breakfast," and "lunch." Most of the food references on *Roseann*e were due to her role as caretaker of her family. On *Mike & Molly* more of the food references came from the male lead. The male lead on *Mike & Molly* had more than two times the food references as the female lead.

Content Analysis Conclusion

The lead characters on *Roseanne* were seen eating and consuming alcohol more often then the characters on *Mike & Molly*. They were also portrayed as more sloppily dressed. Thee female lead on *Roseanne* was more disrespectful than any of the other lead characters on both shows. But she was also seen more often as helpful or supportive. It should also be noted there were more instances of sexual behavior between the lead characters on *Roseanne*. The amount of ridicule toward the obese male on *Mike & Molly* was unexpected. He was 15 times more likely to be ridiculed than the male lead on Roseanne. *Mike & Molly* also featured an overwhelming focus on food.

From this analysis it is clear that negative representations are prevalent in both epochs of television portrayals. This analysis also showed that obese persons are presented more attractively now then in the past, but they are also presented as less sexual. Current representations also portray obese individuals as being more obsessed with diet and weight. In conclusion, the overwhelming sentiment is that stereotypical portrayals were prevalent in the 1980's during *Roseanne's* prime-time reign, and they still prevail today on *Mike & Molly.*

Limitations & Future Research

This research project encountered some limitations. The Fat Phobia Scale relied on self-reporting of height and weight. There may be instances of under or over reporting for that variable. As previously mentioned, some limitations were encountered due to time constraints and student email policy at the university of research. Because of this the focus

group had a limited amount of respondents; however, for the low number of respondents important data was gathered. This data will serve to aid future research.

The content analysis had a low 38% inter-coder reliability due to some miscommunications between the coder and coding assistant. In future research, a larger sample of material will also help draw a more conclusive picture of stereotypical prevalence. It may also be beneficial to future research to compare the analysis of Mike & Molly to other current sitcoms that feature thin lead characters but have obese individuals as supporting characters or guest characters to see if stereotypes prevail there.

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Appendix A

This is a confidential focus group. Your identity will only be known to the researcher and research assistants. Thank you for your participation.

Age: _____   Sex (circle one): M F

Race/Ethnicity (Circle one): American Indian/Alaska Native   Asian
African-American/Black   Hispanic/Latino   White   Other
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

Height:_____   Weight:_____

Listed below are 14 pairs of adjectives sometimes used to describe **obese** or **fat people**. For each adjective pair, please place an X on the line closest to the adjective that you feel best describes your feelings and beliefs.

1. lazy   _____ _____ _____ _____ _____   industrious
                     5   4   3   2   1

2. no will power   _____ _____ _____ _____ _____   has will power
                     5   4   3   2   1

3. attractive   _____ _____ _____ _____ _____   unattractive
                     5   4   3   2   1

4. good self-control _____ _____ _____ _____ _____   poor self-control
                     5   4   3   2   1

5. fast   _____ _____ _____ _____ _____   slow
                     5   4   3   2   1

6. has endurance   _____ _____ _____ _____ _____   has no endurance
                     5   4   3   2   1

7. active   _____ _____ _____ _____ _____   inactive
                     5   4   3   2   1

8. weak   _____ _____ _____ _____ _____   strong
                   5   4   3   2   1

9. self-indulgent   _____ _____ _____ _____ _____   self-sacrificing
                   5   4   3   2   1

10. dislikes food   _____ _____ _____ _____ _____   likes food
                   5   4   3   2   1

11. shapeless   _____ _____ _____ _____ _____   shapely
                   5   4   3   2   1

12. undereats   _____ _____ _____ _____ _____   overeats
                   5   4   3   2   1

13. insecure   _____ _____ _____ _____ _____   secure
                   5   4   3   2   1

14. low self-esteem _____ _____ _____ _____ _____   high self-esteem
                   5   4   3   2   1

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Appendix B

Fat Phobia: Individual Respondent Scores (Per Question)

Figure B1. Respondents scores per question.

Average Fat Phobia Scores Per Respondent
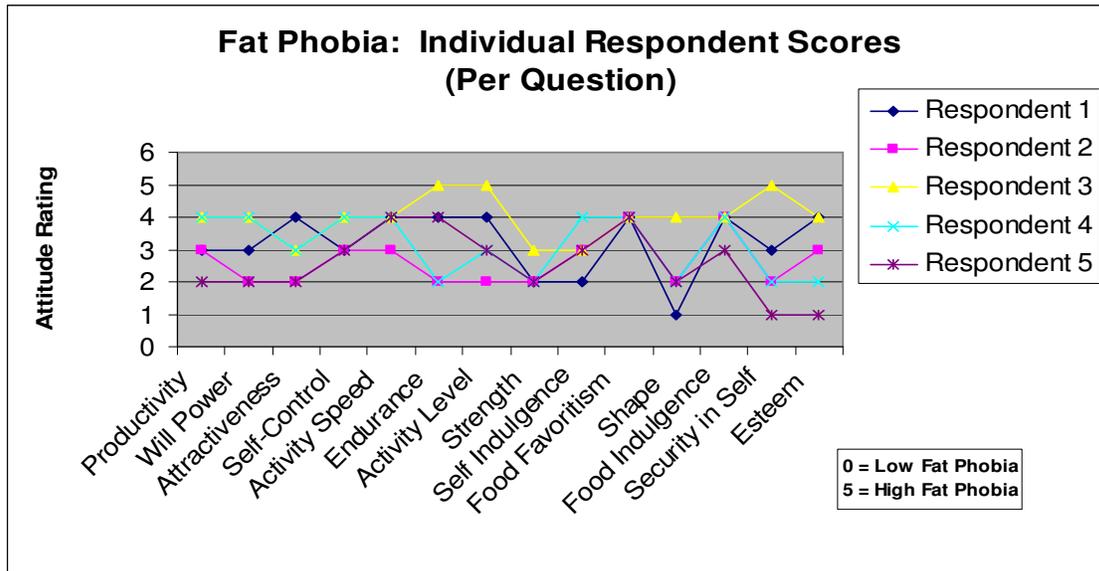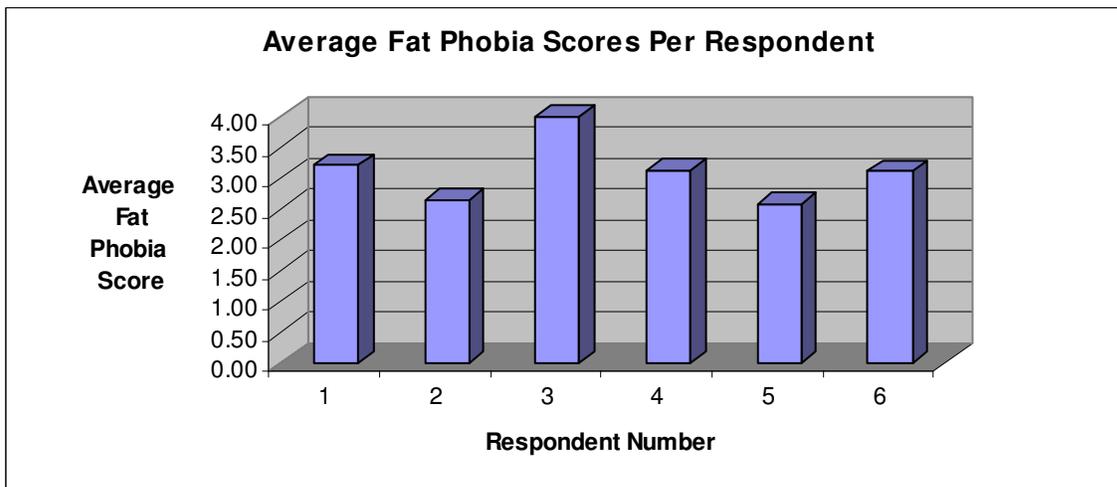

Figure B2. The above graph shows the average fat phobia score per respondent. Total mean level for all respondents was 3.1%.
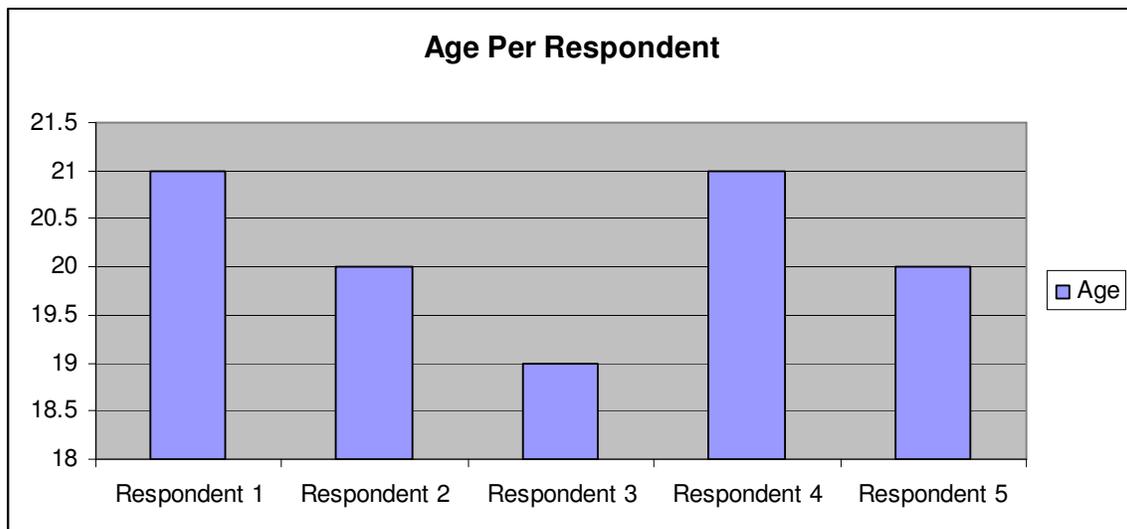
Figure B3. This bar graph shows ndividual respondent age. Average age was 20.2.
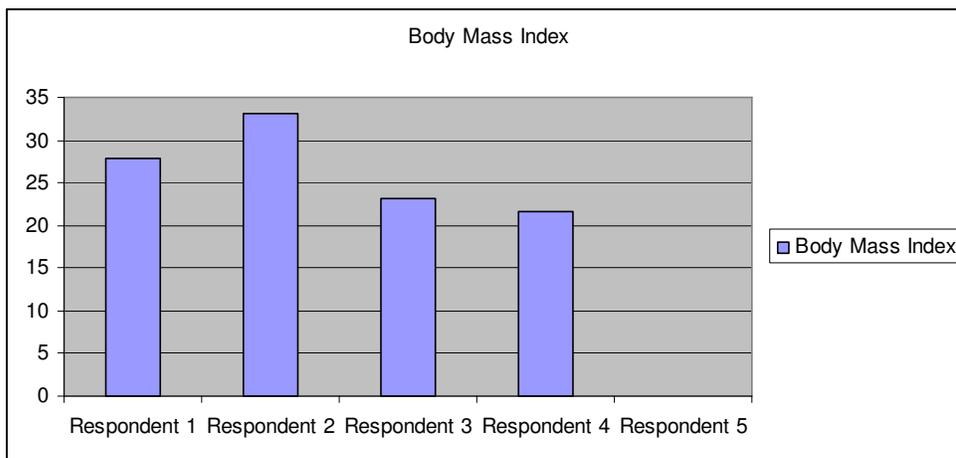
Figure B4. This bar graph shows respondent individual BM. Respondent 5 provided no data.

Appendix C

Focus Group Moderated Questionnaire

Anti-fat Attitudes and Television Sitcoms

Do you agree with the following statements? Please explain why or why not in detail:

1. Most overweight people are born that way (genetic).

2. Most overweight people lack self-control.

3. Most overweight people eat a lot of junk food.

4. Most overweight people do not exercise regularly.

5. Most overweight people lack good information on diet & exercise.

6. Most obese people can blame their weight on restaurants/the food industry.

7. The clip viewed today by this focus group was an accurate representation of obese persons. (Discussion)

Additional thoughts:

Appendix D

Coding sheet for content analysis:

Roseanne Data	Mike & Molly Data

<u>Behaviors:</u>   <u>Behaviors:</u>

	Male <u>Lead</u>	Female <u>Lead</u>		Male <u>Lead</u>	Female <u>Lead</u>

General Behaviors:

Eating   Eating
Drinking (non-alcoholic)   Drinking (non-alcoholic)
Drinking Alcohol   Drinking Alcohol
Eating Junk Food   Eating Junk Food
Eating Healthy Food   Eating Healthy Food
Exercising/Active   Exercising/Active
Smoking   Smoking
Sedentary   Sedentary

Sexual Behaviors: *Sexual Behaviors:*

Sexual Innuendo   Sexual Innuendo
Showing Physical Affection   Showing Physical Affection
Visual Sex Implied   Visual Sex Implied
Sexual Rejection   Sexual Rejection

Appearance: *Appearance:*

Sloppy Dress   Sloppy Dress
Well Dressed   Well Dressed

Attitudes: *Attitudes:*

Attitudes toward others: Attitudes toward others:

Respectful   Respectful
Disrespectful   Disrespectful
Jolly   Jolly
Annoying   Annoying
Supportive/Helpful   Supportive/Helpful
Hindering Others   Hindering Others

Attitudes of others toward obese leads: Attitudes of others toward obese leads:

Respected by others   Respected by others
Disrespected by others   Disrespected by others

Rediculed by others

Attitudes toward self:

Secure
Insecure
Cocky

Language:

"Fat"
"Obese"
"Diet"
"Exercise" (activity)
General food references