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Post-'The Whale,' Pitt researchers to study fat representation in film, TV

Partnering with the Norman Lear Center, the team wants to examine how portrayals, particularly in medical dramas, have impacted society's perspectives and discussion of fat people.

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About halfway through the movie "The Whale," daughter Ellie barks "walk over to me" at protagonist Charlie. Weighing 600 pounds, Charlie relies on a walker to get around, but Ellie throws it to the floor.

Charlie attempts to stand, grunting and grimacing at the effort. He crashes into an end table and breaks a lamp — all commotion, then darkness, then shame. Ellie, played by Sadie Sink, storms out and does not return the walker to its place next to the table.

"The Whale" this year won two Academy Awards: A best actor statue went to star Brendan Fraser, and a best makeup and hairstyling nod went to Adrien Morot, Judy Chin and Annemarie Bradley. They were the team behind prosthetics that included Frasier's fat suit, which weighed nearly 300 pounds. Co-star Hong Chau was also nominated for best supporting actress as Charlie's friend, Liz. (*Warning: Spoilers ahead.*)

The movie received both praise, for the acting performances, and scrutiny, for relying on tropes of fat people and sending the message that those in bigger bodies cannot live full, happy lives. Other actors questioned why directors cast a thin person to play the role of someone struggling with obesity, instead of asking someone with more lived experiences to bring direct perspective to the role.

Keeping in consideration the polarizing views of "The Whale," its criticism speaks to a wider conversation about how fat people have been portrayed in the media for decades.

The term "fat," it should be noted, has been reclaimed by the fat activist community, after many felt a lack of representation in the body positivity movement.

Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh's School of Public Health, partnered with the Norman Lear Center at USC, want to examine how such portrayals, particularly in medical dramas, have impacted society's perspectives and discussion of fat people.

Research shows that people in larger bodies experience a disproportionate amount of discrimination and stigma in the health care setting compared to their thinner counterparts. Quantifying the language around fat characters in medical dramas can allow the researchers to gauge how fictional roles have shaped societal attitudes.

Beth Hoffman, a postdoctoral associate in the Department of Behavioral and Community Health Sciences at Pitt Public Health, said the research team is limiting the analysis to medical dramas to develop a baseline and target a specific sample.

IKate Walsh, left, and Chandra Wilson on

Kate Walsh, left, and Chandra Wilson on "Grey's Anatomy," which is among the medical dramas the study will analyze.
(ABC)

But as they dive deeper into post-analysis, they may broaden their scope. "It will be really valuable to look at how this topic is addressed across different genres," she said.

The institutions have collaborated before, and Norman Lear Center senior researcher Soraya Giaccardi said the center's history of studying representation and equity in the media led to a natural fit for further partnership.

"Anti-fat bias has largely been left out of the conversation," said Giaccardi. "It's socially acceptable to hold these negative beliefs."

From "Fat Monica" on "Friends" to Eddie Murphy in "The Nutty Professor," the use of fat suits in television and film isn't new, and neither is portraying people in larger bodies as the butt of a joke. Even bigger actors have upheld these stereotypes in roles, such as Rebel Wilson's character in "Pitch Perfect," named "Fat Amy."

"They're traditionally seen as lazy slobs and punch lines," said Giaccardi.

"There's been a lot of discussion about ... the way in which Brendan Fraser's character portrays disgust," added Hoffman, one of the lead researchers of the study.

Beth Hoffman is a postdoctoral associate in the Department of Behavioral and Community Health Sciences at the Pitt School of Public Health.

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(University of Pittsburgh)

Hoffman and Giaccardi plan to critically analyze 150 scripts from TV and movie medical dramas going back more than a century for keywords, depictions and attitudes around fat people.

"We want to get a sense of how fatness is discussed," said Giaccardi. "We're interested in whether moral language is involved, whether this is seen as a moral failing."

"This can be a really great way to not only characterize what the general public is seeing, but also look at stigma and bias in the medical community," said Hoffman. "We will be the first, as far as we know, to do this."

The proximity of the Norman Lear Center to Hollywood, and its outreach organization Hollywood, Health & Society, gives researchers access to thousands of scripts used in real episodes.

After scanning 150 scripts — including from current series "Grey's Anatomy," "Chicago Med" and "New Amsterdam" — they plan to dive deeper into 20 or 30 TV shows and movies to analyze themes around fat people more critically.

"We think this project can really help move the needle on the science behind what we're seeing and talking about," Hoffman said.

"We're making progress for folks of other identities," said Giaccardi, citing increased, multidimensional representations of immigrants and the impoverished (think "Fresh Off the Boat" and "Bob's Burgers," respectively).

But anti-fat bias seems stickier.

Norman Lear Center senior researcher Soraya Giaccardi.

USC's Norman Lear Center senior researcher Soraya Giaccardi.
(Norman Lear Center)

"Saturday Night Live" recently ran a sketch called "The Hippo." Host Woody Harrelson wore a fat suit, the joke being that he had gained 450 pounds by overeating for a "The Whale"-adjacent movie that was being canceled.

Hoffman said the skit was problematic, as it framed fatness as an individual failing based on lifestyle and eating habits, instead of what doctors are now calling a complex, chronic disease.

Anna Donovan, an internal medicine physician at UPMC, said she's seen many patients with obesity report some sort of bias or stigma in their medical journey, leading many to delay care.

Donovan completed medical school in 2008 and said she's noticed that comments on patient weight in the health care setting have become less common.

But bias, both in a social and medical context, is still prevalent, she said.

"Medicine really parallels society at large, and as a culture we still have issues with anti-fat bias." While she thought the situation is improving, "there's still an opportunity to further reduce stigma," she said.

It helps when doctors think about patients holistically and not just in the context of weight, said Donovan.

"Building relationships helps mitigate bias," she said. "There are patients I've seen for years, and it may be easier for them to open up because there's a preexisting relationship. It comes from listening to the patient and hearing them out."

Donovan also works as a leader in medical education and has conducted training using medical media to reduce race bias. She said media portrayals are helpful because they provide a removed perspective that can allow medical students to view a situation through the lens of the patient.

"If they portray how a patient is feeling, the learner may uncover new ways to treat the patient," she said.

One of the main goals of the Pitt-Lear Center study, Giaccardi said, is to highlight the importance of including anti-fat bias in conversations and to introduce the idea of identity as more than just race and gender.

"We're trying to get people to expand their thoughts in terms of what it means to be inclusive," she said.

They hope to publish their results in January. They plan to utilize creative channels to disseminate them, including a webinar anyone can access and social media posts to reach both medical professionals and students as well as a wider audience.

In the last scene of "The Whale," Charlie stands and trudges over to Ellie while she reads an old essay she wrote about "Moby Dick," the recitation of which has calmed Charlie throughout the movie.

Ostensibly a creative depiction of his death from congestive heart failure, he levitates off the floor and shoots into the sky, finally unburdened from a body that almost every character in the movie has told him is disgusting.

It parallels what Giaccardi said of most fat characters in media: "Fatness kind of becomes the defining characteristic."

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