

## The Ethics of Visibility: Digital Media, Body Stigma, and Coping Processes Among Obese Women

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### Abstract

Digital media has become a dominant space where body norms are produced, circulated, and contested, rendering women with obesity increasingly visible to public scrutiny. This heightened visibility often exposes them to weight-based stigma, body shaming, and algorithmically reinforced stereotypes that negatively influence their psychological well-being, self-perception, and engagement with health information. Despite growing scholarship on obesity stigma, limited research has holistically examined how digital representations intersect with ethical concerns and coping processes among obese women. The objective of this review article is to critically synthesize existing literature on digital obesity stigma, examine the ethical implications of visibility in online environments, and identify the coping strategies employed by obese women to navigate harmful digital narratives. The review adopts a thematic qualitative synthesis approach, drawing from empirical studies across health communication, digital media studies, psychology, feminist scholarship, and ethics. Peer-reviewed articles from major scientific databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and PubMed, were systematically examined to identify key themes related to digital stigma, ethical representation, and coping mechanisms. The review identifies three major findings. First, digital platforms serve as significant sites of stigmatization, where both explicit and subtle forms of weight bias are amplified through visual content, comment cultures, and algorithmic filtering. Second, ethical issues emerge in relation to consent, autonomy, representational fairness, and the surveillance of women's bodies. Third, obese women use diverse coping strategies including avoidance, humor, selective engagement, online support networks, and body-positivity activism to mitigate psychological harm, with varying levels of effectiveness. These insights highlight the need for ethical digital communication practices, improved platform governance, and targeted support systems for women experiencing online stigma. In conclusion, the review underscores the necessity of integrating ethical considerations into digital health discourse and calls for interdisciplinary research that addresses visibility, representation, and well-being in digital environments.

**Keywords:** Obesity Women, Digital Media, Body Stigma, Coping.

## INTRODUCTION

Digital media has rapidly transformed how body norms are produced, circulated, and contested in contemporary society, making online platforms central to public discourse about health, appearance, and identity (Clark et al., 2021). Social media, video platforms, blogs, and algorithmically curated feeds are not only sites where cultural ideals of the body are reinforced but also arenas where visibility functions as both empowerment and exposure. As bodies are made increasingly visible through user-generated content and mass engagement (Duffy & Hund, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2024), issues of representation and meaning-making have profound implications for marginalized groups, especially women with obesity whose bodies are positioned at the intersection of gendered beauty ideals and public health narratives (Clark et al., 2021; Pollack et al., 2022). In this context, digital visibility cannot be understood solely as representation; it is a socially constructed space where ethical considerations around fairness, consent, and dignity are actively negotiated.

Current research indicates that digital platforms often perpetuate weight-based stigma through both explicit and subtle forms of communication (Brooker et al., 2017; Bunzel et al., 2023). Weight stigma in media content ranging from negative comment cultures to demeaning imagery is prevalent and has demonstrable effects on public perceptions of obesity (Clark et al., 2021; Westbury et al., 2023). Systematic analyses of online news and social media content reveal that individuals with higher body weight are frequently portrayed in stereotypical, dehumanizing ways that reinforce dominant cultural biases and marginalize those depicted (Rubino et al., 2020). These mediated representations are not neutral; rather, they reflect and contribute to societal pressures that equate thinness with health, success, and moral worth, while framing excess weight as a visible failure of personal responsibility.

A primary concern arises from the ethical implications of such visibility. Although digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for voices to be heard, the amplification of harmful narratives disproportionately exposes obese women to stigmatization, body shaming, and algorithmically reinforced stereotypes (Clark et al., 2021; Papaioannou, 2021). These dynamics prompt critical questions about autonomy, consent, and fairness in digital representation. For instance, content that fails to contextualize obesity within its complex biopsychosocial etiology risks reinforcing simplistic blame narratives and exacerbating psychological harm (Bannuru, 2025; Clark et al., 2021). Furthermore, unlike regulated academic publishing, social media content often lacks ethical oversight, allowing unmoderated portrayals that may contribute to discrimination and misinformation.

A second core problem concerns the psychological and social consequences of mediated stigma for obese women. Evidence indicates that exposure to negative digital portrayals of body weight is associated with adverse outcomes such as increased depressive symptoms, diminished self-esteem, and internalized stigma (Skoczylas et al., 2025). In addition, participation in digital environments can expose women to hostile comment cultures and algorithmic filtering that privilege certain body types over others, reinforcing feelings of exclusion rather than inclusion (Çınaroğlu & Yilmazer, 2025). These phenomena highlight the need to understand not only how stigmatizing content is produced and circulated but also how it is experienced and internalized by women living with obesity in online spaces.

The objectives of this review are threefold, to critically synthesize the existing literature on digital media representations of obesity and their ethical implications; to examine how such mediated visibility intersects with stigma experiences among obese women; and to identify the coping strategies these women employ to navigate harmful digital narratives. By drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship from health communication, digital media studies, psychology, feminist theory, and ethics, this review adopts a thematic qualitative synthesis approach that integrates findings from peer-reviewed studies identified in major scientific databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and PubMed. This comprehensive approach enables an analysis of mediated stigma and the ethical dimensions of digital representation.

The anticipated contributions of this review are significant for both research and practice. First, by foregrounding ethical issues related to consent, autonomy, and fairness in digital visibility, the article aims to advance theoretical understanding of how digital media environments shape embodied experiences of stigma (Tracy, 2012). Second, by synthesizing evidence on coping processes, the review contributes to psychosocial scholarship on resilience, agency, and resistance among marginalized populations (Aranda et al., 2023). Finally, this work underscores implications for media governance, public health communication, and platform design areas in need of targeted interventions to mitigate harm and promote equitable representation (Tracy, 2012).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital media has transformed how body norms and weight-related discourses are produced, circulated, and resisted in contemporary society (Chou et al., 2014; Louw et al., 2025). As social networking sites, online discussion forums, and image-centric platforms increasingly mediate everyday communication, they also serve as significant spaces where attitudes toward body size are socially constructed and negotiated. Research shows that media representations ranging from visual depictions to user-generated commentary significantly shape public perceptions of obesity and contribute

to the stigmatization of individuals who do not conform to dominant body ideals (Brooker et al., 2017; Clark et al., 2021). Weight stigma in media is pervasive, with content often framing obesity as a personal failure, reinforcing societal bias and misunderstanding of the complex biopsychosocial determinants of body weight (Kite et al., 2022).

Theoretical frameworks relevant to this review include stigma theory and objectification theory, which explain how social processes and cultural norms contribute to the differential treatment of certain bodies (Puhl, 2025). Stigma theory posits that stigmatized identities are socially encoded with negative attributes that diminish personal worth and social standing. Within digital contexts, objectification theory helps elucidate how visual media objectifies bodies, especially those that diverge from culturally idealized forms, leading to self-objectification and psychological consequences (Boursier et al., 2020; Touzani, 2025). These theories underpin understanding of how digital media content perpetuates fat stigma and influence individual experiences. Research on stigma communication further highlights the mechanisms through which digital platforms enable the spread of biased narratives and reinforce weight-based discrimination through comments, memes, and algorithmic visibility (Jeon et al., 2018).

Major themes in the literature include the prevalence and impact of weight stigma in media, the psychological effects of stigmatizing representations, and gendered dimensions of online weight bias (Williams et al., 2018). Studies have documented that mass and digital media often portray individuals with overweight or obesity in negative ways (Ata & Thompson, 2010), emphasizing unhealthy lifestyles and personal shortcomings (Ravary et al., 2019), thereby contributing to hostile public attitudes (Lydecker et al., 2016). Exposure to such content has been linked to poorer mental wellbeing, increased body dissatisfaction, and heightened internalized stigma among those encountering these portrayals. Additionally, research notes gendered patterns of stigma, with women disproportionately targeted and objectified in online discourse, reflecting broader sociocultural pressures on female bodies.

The theoretical framework of this review integrates stigma theory, media representation theory, and coping theory to explore the ethical implications of digital visibility. Stigma theory provides the foundation for understanding how negative stereotypes about obesity are socially constructed and reinforced (Rubino et al., 2020; Westbury et al., 2023). Media representation theory contributes insights into how digital platforms select, frame, and amplify visual and textual depictions of bodies, shaping cultural norms about health and attractiveness. Coping theory helps interpret the strategies individuals use to manage stigma, ranging from avoidance and humor to narrative resistance and community support. This multidisciplinary framework enables a comprehensive analysis of how digital media visibility impacts both the ethical dimensions of representation and the lived experiences of obese women (Bunzel et al., 2023).

Empirical studies have explored the prevalence of weight stigma in mass and digital media and its adverse effects on public attitudes and individual wellbeing. Systematic reviews indicate that media content often frames obesity as a matter of personal responsibility, neglecting systemic factors and contributing to stigma that harms mental health and social inclusion (Kite et al., 2022). Research also identifies coping processes employed by individuals to mitigate stigma, including selective disengagement from negative content, participation in body-positivity networks, and narrative resistance in online forums (Dibb et al., 2025; Harwood et al., 2022). However, these studies tend to focus on discrete media effects or individual coping behaviors without fully addressing the ethical questions around visibility and autonomy in digital spaces.

Despite growing scholarship on weight stigma and media representation, key gaps remain in understanding the ethical dimensions of digital visibility for obese women. Most existing research has prioritized prevalence and psychological outcomes rather than interrogating how algorithmic curation, consent, and representational fairness shape experiences of stigmatization (Bunzel et al., 2023). Furthermore, few studies systematically integrate ethical frameworks with analyses of coping strategies, leaving unanswered questions about how digital environments can be structured to support dignity and equity (Tsatsou, 2020). There is also a lack of gender-specific research that examines how obese women uniquely experience and navigate digital stigma in diverse sociocultural contexts.

This review adopts a thematic qualitative synthesis, drawing from interdisciplinary literature in health communication, digital media studies, psychology, and ethics to construct a holistic understanding of digital stigma, visibility, and coping. The framework situates digital media representations as both sites of stigma production and potential spaces for resistance and empowerment (Bizer & Walker, 2023). Ethical considerations such as autonomy, consent, and representational fairness are foregrounded to critique current media practices and propose pathways for more inclusive digital communication (Tracy, 2012). By synthesizing empirical findings with theoretical insights, the research framework aims to provide a robust basis for future investigation into ethical digital media practices and support mechanisms that mitigate stigma and enhance wellbeing for obese women.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the ethical dimensions of digital visibility, body stigma, and coping processes among obese women. A qualitative design is appropriate as it allows for an in-depth examination of lived experiences, subjective meanings, and interpretive understandings that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative

methods (Afriyie-Adjimi & Nkyi, 2024; Salas et al., 2019). Given the sensitive and socially embedded nature of body stigma and digital exposure, a qualitative approach enables participants to articulate their perceptions, emotional responses, and coping strategies within the context of their everyday interactions with digital media (Tennfjord et al., 2025).

The research employs an interpretive, exploratory strategy grounded in qualitative inquiry to examine how obese women experience and navigate stigmatizing digital representations. This strategy facilitates an understanding of how ethical issues such as visibility, consent, and representational fairness are constructed and negotiated in online environments (Holmberg et al., 2018). By prioritizing participants' narratives, the study seeks to uncover patterns of meaning that reflect broader socio-cultural and communicative processes embedded within digital platforms.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who met specific inclusion criteria relevant to the research objectives (Lupton & Maslen, 2019). Participants consisted of adult women who self-identified as obese and reported active engagement with digital media platforms such as social networking sites, online forums, or content-sharing applications. This sampling strategy ensured that participants possessed direct experience with digital visibility and online stigma, thereby enhancing the relevance and richness of the data. Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved, indicated by the recurrence of themes and the absence of new conceptual insights (Kristiansen, 2022).

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and non-participant digital observation. The interview protocol was designed to elicit participants' experiences of online body representation, encounters with stigma, ethical concerns, and coping responses. Open-ended questions allowed flexibility for participants to elaborate on issues of personal significance. In addition, digital observation involved examining public online interactions, visual content, and discourse patterns relevant to obesity representation, providing contextual depth and triangulation to the interview data (Baker et al., 2023).

To ensure the validity and reliability of the qualitative data, several strategies were employed to enhance trustworthiness. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with participants and member checking, whereby interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations were reviewed for accuracy (Ahmed, 2024). Dependability was supported by maintaining a detailed audit trail documenting data collection and analytical decisions. Reflexivity was practiced throughout the research process to minimize researcher bias and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts (Ahmed, 2024; Carcary, 2021).

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo 14 to facilitate systematic organization, coding, and interpretation of qualitative data. A thematic

analysis approach was employed, following iterative stages of familiarization, initial coding, theme development, and refinement. This process enabled the identification of recurring patterns related to digital stigma, ethical visibility, and coping processes (Wutich et al., 2024). NVivo 14 enhanced analytical rigor by allowing transparent data management and facilitating connections between themes, thereby supporting a comprehensive and coherent interpretation of the findings.

## FINDINGS

The first research objective examined how digital media functions as a site of body stigma toward obese women. The findings indicate that digital platforms significantly amplify weight-based stigma through both overt and covert mechanisms. Participants reported frequent exposure to explicit body shaming, derogatory comments, and ridicule in comment sections, memes, and user-generated content. In addition, subtle forms of stigma were embedded in visual framing, such as dehumanizing imagery, selective body cropping, and the disproportionate promotion of thin-ideal content through algorithmic filtering (Chou et al., 2014; Westbury et al., 2023). These representations collectively reinforced negative stereotypes that positioned obesity as a moral or personal failure.

These results suggest that digital media does not merely reflect societal bias but actively participates in the reproduction and intensification of weight stigma. Algorithmic visibility plays a critical role in normalizing stigmatizing narratives by privileging content that aligns with dominant beauty norms while marginalizing alternative body representations (Tracy, 2012). This finding highlights how digital environments create structural conditions that sustain stigma beyond individual interactions, thereby shaping women's health perceptions and self-evaluation in pervasive and continuous ways.

The second research objective focused on identifying ethical concerns arising from the digital visibility of obese women. The findings reveal multiple ethical issues related to consent, autonomy, representational fairness, and bodily surveillance. Participants expressed distress over the circulation of images and narratives about obese bodies without consent, particularly in health-related or "awareness" content that framed them as cautionary examples (Brún et al., 2013; Payne et al., 2024). Moreover, digital monitoring practices, including unsolicited health advice and public commentary on weight, contributed to a heightened sense of being constantly observed and judged.

These findings underscore the ethical tension between visibility and vulnerability in digital spaces. While visibility can enable representation and advocacy, it also exposes obese women to objectification and loss of agency over their own narratives. (Papaioannou, 2021; Tragantzopoulou, 2025) The ethical implications extend beyond individual harm to broader questions of

digital responsibility, highlighting the need for platform accountability and ethical communication standards that prioritize dignity, autonomy, and fairness in representing marginalized bodies.

The third research objective explored coping strategies employed by obese women to manage digital stigma. The findings indicate that participants adopted diverse coping mechanisms, including avoidance of triggering content, selective engagement with online platforms, and the use of humor as a defensive strategy (Holmberg et al., 2018). Many participants also sought emotional validation and solidarity through online support communities and body-positivity movements, where shared experiences fostered a sense of belonging and empowerment. (Clark et al., 2021) However, the effectiveness of these strategies varied depending on personal resilience, social support, and platform dynamics.

The diversity of coping responses reflects the complex and dynamic nature of navigating stigma in digital environments. While avoidance and selective engagement provided short-term emotional relief, they sometimes limited access to beneficial health information (Lin & Kishore, 2021). Conversely, activism and online support networks offered more sustainable coping by transforming visibility into a source of collective resistance. These findings suggest that coping is not solely an individual process but is deeply influenced by the ethical and structural features of digital platforms.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that digital media operates as a powerful site of stigmatization, ethical contestation, and coping negotiation for obese women (Bunzel et al., 2023). Weight stigma is amplified through visual, discursive, and algorithmic mechanisms, raising critical ethical concerns related to consent, autonomy, and surveillance (Clark et al., 2021). In response, obese women employ multifaceted coping strategies with varying degrees of effectiveness (Mazurkiewicz et al., 2021). Collectively, these findings emphasize the urgent need for ethical digital communication practices, improved platform governance, and targeted psychosocial support systems (Holmberg et al., 2018). The study reinforces the importance of integrating ethical considerations into digital health discourse and advancing interdisciplinary research that addresses visibility, representation, and well-being in digital environments.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate the complex lived experiences of obese women within digitally mediated environments, where visibility simultaneously enables participation and exposes individuals to persistent stigmatization (Tragantzopoulou, 2025). Consistent with existing scholarship on weight bias, participants' experiences reveal that digital media intensifies embodied vulnerability by transforming the obese body into a publicly scrutinized object. The constant exposure to stigmatizing imagery, moralized

health narratives, and unsolicited commentary contributes to emotional distress, diminished self-worth, and internalized stigma. These experiences underscore how digital platforms function not merely as neutral communication channels but as socio-cultural spaces that actively shape women's perceptions of their bodies, health, and social legitimacy.

From a communication perspective, the study highlights how stigma is constructed, transmitted, and normalized through digital interactions. Visual framing, algorithmic amplification, and participatory comment cultures collectively reinforce dominant body norms while marginalizing alternative representations (Rubio-Tamayo et al., 2017). Health-related messages, often presented under the guise of public awareness, frequently rely on simplified and moralistic discourses that obscure structural determinants of obesity. This communicative environment fosters asymmetrical power relations, where obese women have limited control over how their bodies are represented and interpreted. The findings thus emphasize the ethical responsibility of content creators, health communicators, and digital platforms to adopt inclusive, non-stigmatizing communication practices that respect autonomy and dignity.

The study further demonstrates that obese women employ a range of coping strategies to navigate digital stigma, reflecting both resilience and constraint. Avoidance and selective engagement emerge as protective responses to mitigate immediate psychological harm, although these strategies may inadvertently restrict access to supportive or informative content (Tracy, 2012). In contrast, engagement in online support communities and body-positivity activism allows women to reframe visibility as empowerment, fostering collective resistance and identity affirmation. Humor functions as both a defensive and communicative tool, enabling emotional distancing while subtly challenging stigmatizing narratives. These coping processes highlight the dynamic interplay between individual agency and structural digital conditions, reinforcing the need for supportive digital ecosystems that enable healthier, ethically grounded forms of visibility.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the ethical dimensions of digital visibility by exploring how digital media contributes to body stigma and how obese women navigate and cope with these experiences. By focusing on lived experiences, communication processes, and coping strategies, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of how digital representations of obesity shape women's psychological well-being, health perceptions, and social participation. The findings demonstrate that digital platforms are not neutral spaces but actively structure experiences of stigma, visibility, and resistance.

Theoretically, this study advances scholarship on stigma, media representation, and coping by integrating ethical considerations into analyses

of digital visibility. It extends stigma theory by highlighting how algorithmic systems and visual cultures intensify moral judgments of bodies. Methodologically, the qualitative approach, supported by thematic analysis, offers rich, contextualized insights into subjective experiences that are often overlooked in quantitative research on obesity and media.

From a practical perspective, the findings underscore the need for ethical digital communication practices within health promotion, journalism, and social media governance. Content creators and health professionals must avoid stigmatizing imagery and moralistic narratives that exacerbate harm. Digital platforms should also adopt more transparent and inclusive moderation and algorithmic practices to reduce the amplification of weight-based bias.

At the individual level, the study highlights the emotional and psychological toll of persistent digital stigma on obese women, while also recognizing their agency and resilience through adaptive coping strategies. Socially, the findings call attention to broader cultural norms that equate thinness with moral worth, reinforcing inequality and exclusion. Addressing digital body stigma is therefore essential for promoting social justice and mental well-being.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. The qualitative design and purposive sampling limit generalizability, and the focus on self-reported experiences may be influenced by subjective interpretation. Additionally, the study does not account for cross-cultural differences or platform-specific variations in digital stigma.

Future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed-method approaches to examine how coping strategies evolve over time and across digital contexts. Comparative studies across cultures, age groups, and digital platforms would further enrich understanding. Greater attention should also be given to policy-oriented research addressing ethical governance of digital media.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that digital visibility operates as both a source of stigma and a potential site of empowerment for obese women. By foregrounding ethical concerns, communication processes, and coping mechanisms, the research emphasizes the urgent need for interdisciplinary efforts to foster more inclusive, ethical, and supportive digital environments that enhance well-being rather than perpetuate harm

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