

*Full Length Research Paper*

## Obese's People Role in Brazilian Advertising: an Analysis on Fit Consumer's Perspective

Francisco Vicente Sales Melo\*, Salomão Alencar de Farias, Michelle Helena Kovacs and Elielson Oliveira Damascena

Federal University of Pernambuco, Brazil.

Received 10 June, 2013; Accepted 7 May, 2014

The way media presents fat people in ads is the focus of this paper. We analyzed, from the perspective of non-fit individuals the role played by fat people in Brazilian TV commercials. Therefore, there were one focus group with people who have seen advertisements in which the protagonist was a fat guy. There was initially a content analysis of a collection of commercial as well as the content of the discussions in which it was built a map of the social representation of 'being fat' in these messages. The analyzes stressed that these protagonists present themselves in order to provoke laughter through humor. Because of this, stigmas as 'comical', 'weird' and 'weak' are formed from their stereotypes and roles. The question that remains is how far these interpretations may affect the brand image conveyed, considering that the obesity phenomenon is present in everyday life of most consumers.

**Key words:** Television commercials, fat people, stigma.

### INTRODUCTION

Today, the body shape is a common theme, being the main topic in several conversations among individuals of different social and economic levels. The point is that such discussions are often influenced by actions that originate from slant marketing advertising actions. This fact brought the interest in this study, as well as the ability to generate further discussion on the topic, it will be possible to understand how some marketing practices in advertisement are constituted through the disadvantage of this social condition considered as not ideal. Since this is a topic that in one hand tends to favor a particular segment (market) and on the other

hand can provide 'malaise' to a social group of individuals (fat or obese people), it is believed that the present study lies in the perspective of transformative consumer research (TCR).

It is known that western culture values thinness based mainly on the findings of biomedicine that turned the concept of a fat body in a synonymous not only of bad health, but in a 'dehumanized body', a pejorative moral bankruptcy. This is because at any other time the slim and svelte body was so in evidence (Sudo and Luz, 2007). The perfect body is a trend topic and present debates on television and commercials, articles published

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: vicsmelo@gmail.com

in magazines, newspapers, internet and other types of media, always highlighting diets, perfect shape body, the fears of getting fat and how not to get fat. It is assumed here that the media tends overall, to promote a thin body as 'ideal' and the fat one as 'not ideal' (stigmatized) (Goffman, 1988). If this is a valid premise, the discussion here presented is relevant because communication, in its various ways, is a powerful tool to manipulate images and information. So if a fat person is not within the optimum standards, he/she may come under pressure of contemporary society and not be accepted as adequate to do television work, in this case, advertisements, for example, because of an image that could possibly generate negative assessments by target consumer. However, when they are hired to participate in advertising work, which role is played by them as protagonists? And how thin consumers perceive and evaluate the roles of fat people on TV ads? Those questions are of interest in this paper.

Media is biased, and it usually communicates, what seems to be more interesting, attractive and profitable for its viewers. The selling of information considers the impact that this kind of pressure has on public health, to carry the sense of a model or unattainable standard of beauty and the mistreat of obesity, placing it just as a problem of 'greed carelessness or laziness'. In this context, the stereotype created over the years by the figure of a fat person is assumed to be a „ill“ one, in some cases, becomes a „sloppy“ (Felippe et al. 2004), 'damaged' (the popular meaning of 'idiot' or 'nonsense'), 'unable', 'clumsy' person that make promises of weight loss at every New Year's Eve. Obesity, while stigmatizing, produces discrimination, prejudice and social exclusion. But this issue is more complex than imagined, because for years researchers have considered it as a public health problem (Hunte and Williams, 2009; Puhl and Heuer, 2010; Santos and Scherer, 2011).

It is assumed also that when communications are established and interpreted through mechanisms that instigate discrimination and prejudice, its essence can negatively influence the evaluation of the company and the product by consumers, especially when communication is built with the image of people perceived as more vulnerable. This way, taking into account that Brazil is a very sensual country where people expose themselves on the beaches, during carnival, on the soap operas, and so on, and also that obesity is growing among Brazilians, we found here an opportunity to analyze, from the perspective of skinny consumers, the role played by fat people in commercials aired on television in Brazil.

### **Skinny, yes! fat, no!**

Discussions about prejudice in social relations, manly at work environment, are not new. From 1960s, in the

United States, studies related to employment discrimination were widely publicized due to the increase demand of women and physical disabled persons looking to work full time. Moreover, even not fitting on these characteristics, obesity was considered a kind of 'disability' which referred to prejudices, then awakening the interest of researchers (Bellizzi and Hasty, 1998). In Brazil, only in 1986 the debate was strengthened through the creation of the Brazilian association for the study of obesity (ABESO), whose aim is to bring together professionals from different areas to bring awareness about issues related to obesity, including discrimination (ABESO, 2012).

Earlier studies indicated that obese people were seen as objectionable, weak-willed, lazy, unreliable, incompetent and disgusting (Staffieri 1967; Lerner and Gellert, 1969; Weiss, 1980). Weiss (1980), for example, pointed that obese ones tended to be associated with laziness and dependence, indicating that this association would remain for many years, which was later confirmed by the analyzes of Klassen (apud 1987, Bellizi and Hasty, 1998). Those authors have shown that people who are overweight are characterized as lazy, sloppy, undisciplined, unreliable, unhealthy, clumsy (without self care), insecure but happy (extroverted). Thus, relating these characteristics to the logic of the market, fat people are rarely associated with job success, ability and competence to properly develop a task (Bellizi and Hasty, 1998).

In this perspective, some authors have called the attention to the fact that the facial or physical appearance could be linked to success or failure in organizations, suggesting because of that, they have to work closely on individuals stereotypes (Dickey-Bryant et al. 1986; McAdams et al., 1992 Apud Bellizi; Hasty, 1998; Puhl and Brownell, 2003), which somehow reinforced the need to have people with good looks in the organizational environment. For example, McAdams et al. (1992) reported that, due to the appearance, the most attractive persons in terms of stature, weight and facial appearance were the most likely to earn higher incomes and have better opportunities in companies. Other studies also have reported weight discrimination at work. For instance, Gortmaker et al. (1993) have shown that individuals who are overweight often suffer detrimental social and economic consequences. This seems to still be a trend: increasing of the discrimination due to new standards and media influence on the accepted body fit. Ziolkowski (1994) reinforces this argument showing that those who are overweight are less likely to get a good job and when they are employed, are hardly promoted and generally earn lower wages when compared to thin peers.

The literature also reveals a possible association between obesity and lower intelligence, suggesting that obese individuals may be intellectually disadvantaged when compared to the non-obese persons (Sargent and

Blanchflower, 1994; Elias et al., 2003). Puhl and Brownell (2003) consider that only through a deep understanding of weight stigma and debate on its different perspectives of analysis, one can reflect on and document its social and psychological as well as reveal their effects on health and well-being. Consequences of prejudice against obesity, like social isolation may trigger the exacerbation of obesity increasing the likelihood of over-eating, sedentary lifestyle, and as result, bringing problems at work, and consequently financial losses. Thus, while such connections are postulated to health imbued with aspects prejudiced in this, it is clear that discrimination continue to be part of everyday life for overweight individuals (Gortmaker et al., 1993; Puhl and Brownell, 2003).

### **Discussion about the media and its contribution to the obesity stigma**

Those individuals who are aligned to the positive characteristics will be inserted in the category of 'normal', while those who have negative attributes were associated with the category of 'abnormal' or 'stigmatized' (Goffman, 1988). There are many manifestations of negative attitudes, including the way in which people who are overweight are portrayed by the media. As examples, linked to fat jokes are common on television and the characters who are overweight are viewed quite negatively in movies and cartoons (Puhl and Brownell, 2003). The point is that is not something that is static at the moment are watching and such attitudes may generate future consequences and it can now be considered 'normal' social relationships.

There are two approaches in the discussions on mass communication suggest that it is likely that there are negative impacts when portraying differences between fat and thin people in media (Harrison, 2000; Greenberg et al., 2003). The first is that such images will accumulate over time and eventually may lead to true negative expectations in society. The second is that some evidence supports the argument that by watching television people can pass to discriminate obese people from their stereotypes (Harrison, 2000). As an example of concern for the present and future, in a study of elementary school children, Harrison (2000) showed that children, who watched more television programs, were more likely to attribute negative stereotypes to an overweight woman.

Greenberg et al. (2003) conducted a detailed analysis of one thousand and eighteen characters of the main commercial and popular television programs of six major North American television networks. The objective was to analyze the representation of overweight and fat people on primetime television. The results revealed that fat women were less likely to be attractive, interact with

romantic partners and show physical affection. The male obese characters were less likely to interact as romantic partners, talk about dating, being involved with behaviorally oriented tasks (example, interactions of leadership) and were often seen eating and being used as an 'humor object'.

### **METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**

We adopted a qualitative perspective driven by interpretive guidance (Denzin, 1978; Godoy, 1995) in search to achieve the paper objective. The research was conducted in two stages: the first one, we selected and analyzed fifty commercial, available on the internet that has been aired in open TV in Brazil on between 1992 to 2012, in which the protagonist was a actor. It was found in the selection of the ads that each one presented similarities in their structures. This way, it, was decided to work with twenty commercials that portrayed different situations, in an effort to have more diversity of situations and possible different roles played by the fat persons. In the second stage, of the research, we proceeded with a focus group formed by eleven participants that considered themselves as thin persons (Morgan, 1997; Queiroz, 1991).

Regarding the categories analyzed we defined preliminarily three relevant ones. Thus, based on the literature, followed by some adaptation to the context studied, the following categories were established: the role played in advertising (Harrison, 2000; Greenberg et al., 2003), stereotypes created by the obese figure (Weiss, 1980; Dickey-Bryant et al. 1986; McAdams et al., 1992; Apud et al., 1998; Puhl and Brownell, 2003; Felipe, et al., 2004), obesity image and stigma (Staffieri 1967; Lerner and Gellert, 1969; Weiss, 1980; Crandall, 1994; Roehling, 1999), all described in accordance with the vision of the participants. Finally, analysis of the content of the videos and data collected in the focus group, were performed.

### **ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

Regarding the profile of the subjects (focus group participants), the majority has undergraduate degree; four are female and seven are males; age are between twenty and fifty- five years old; all of them work in the commercial area of private sector companies; monthly household income on average of two thousand dollars; and they were classified as thin, based on weight and height patterns (parameters of the health ministry Brazil, 2013).

The initial analysis showed that almost all the protagonists of advertising messages selected were male. In just two commercials (Renault Logan – car and *Matte Leão* – a Tea brand) the character was a fat woman, but they were not playing the main role. This leads to a conclusion, considering what Brown and Bentley-Condit (1997 Apud et al., 2007) point. They claim that in the dictatorship of thinness, women are more affected than men, and more socially criticized for being out of shape. Because of that, we suppose that to avoid criticism and possible negative outcomes, companies exclude working with obese women in commercial. This way, predominately obese males were

portrayed in the analyzed TV ads, playing the role of the sloppy, goofy person, fulfilling expectations of what to expect of a fat person: to be loud and funny.

### **The role played by obese people in ads**

A lot of laughs and giggles! It was the manner in which the focus group participants behaved during the presentation of advertising messages. But after the observation of the commercials, some comments were coming out and unanimously, subjects indicated that fat people were being 'used' to cause laughs, acting like clowns. Through the comment of a participant, the group started to agree that the protagonists were actually in disadvantaged situations. One of the focus group, participant stated:

"In none of these commercials I've seen some of these actors starring a good, positive scene..." [P7]. Another one commented: "The obese character is always associated to ridicule or compared to a bad product..." [P7] (The letter "P" represents the participants of the focus group and the number is each individual).

Comments from participants on the focus group indicate that despite the fact of the 'funny' factor predominate in commercials. Other negative aspects in which the obese protagonists are submitted are not perceived at first sight. For example, during the discussions, a participant said:

"... when I saw the first TV ad I did not attempt to see the role that the fat actor exerted, but after the second ad, I began to realize that although they are funny, they experience many difficult and awkward situations" [P7]. The weird – or strange - image of obese people is noted in the Greenpeace's ad. As seen in the descriptions, a Michael Jackson's song start to play, and then a fat man appears, dancing and wearing a plastic jacket, accompanied by two other lean men. After that, the message: "Strange? Strange is who wears linen clothes, but has plastic attitude. Don't think disposable, act sustainable". The ad shows that the stranger is not only related to the clothing bag, but also on who is wearing it. In this case, if it was a thin man with perfect body would the ad create the same feeling of strangeness? Something to think about when considering that fat people are viewed as disgusting, are censored and perceived as strangers.

The observed features are common in the roles played by fat people in advertising and are aligned with the findings of Weiss (1980). Moreover, it is observed that the roles were predominant the cheerful and outgoing perspective, but this is achieved due to the way the obese

persons are considered clumsy, insecure and unhealthy (for example, see Bellizi and Hasty, 1998). Thus, some stereotypes are created and the social existent prejudice is reinforced by the media discourse.

### **Stereotypes created by the image of an obese character**

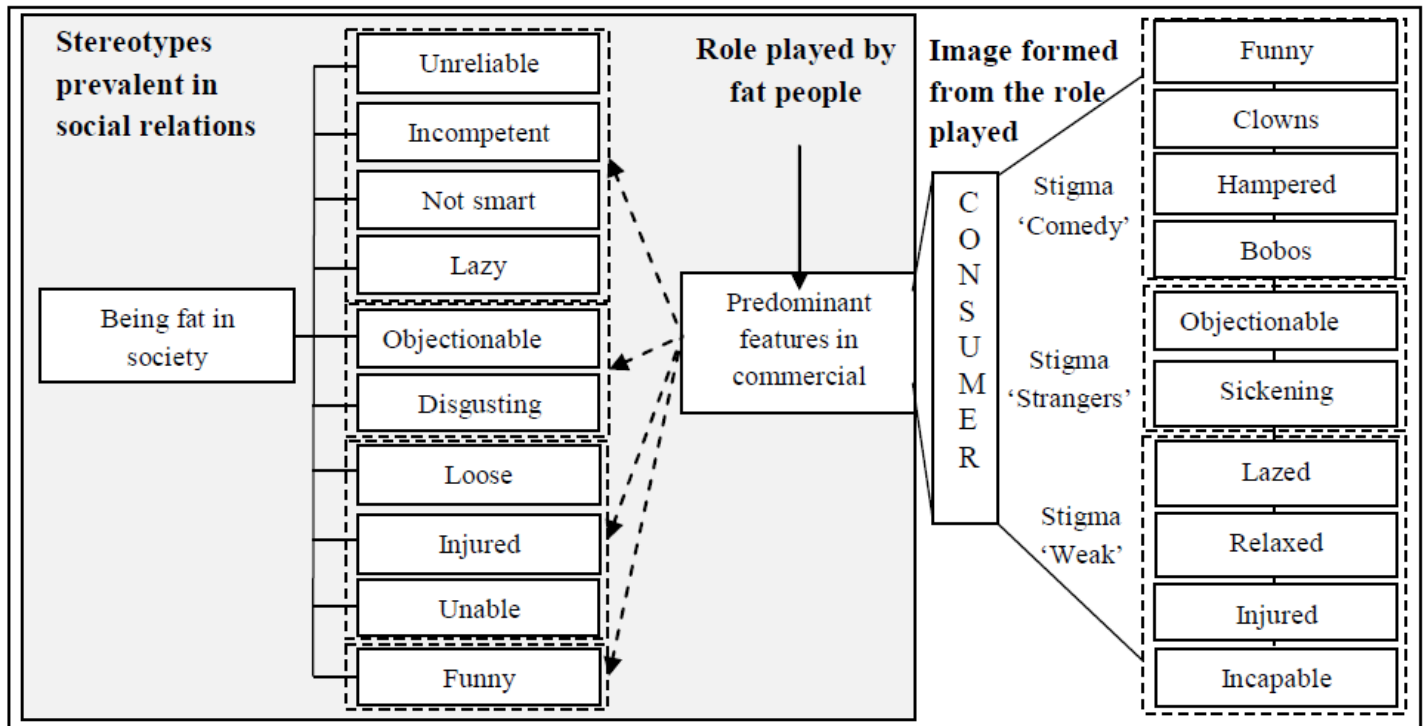
It was observed that the stereotypes that lead to stigmas are often reinforced by the media, in this case, by the advertising messages. Stereotypes like funny lead to laughter, but at the same time it may generate negative evaluations by the audience, like it has happened to the focus group participants. According to the an overall analysis of the participant comments:

"...It's funny the role they play, but the problem is that whenever they are in a difficult situation, I tended to see them acting like fools and clumsy...thinking better... I'm not sure if this is cool" [P11]. Another participant highlights: "...now on second thought, I do not understand why they accept to make fun of themselves ...I think there are several ways to portrait humor and I don't think I need to associate the obese person to being ridiculous in a attempt to call public attention ..." [P11]. "...I agree! The companies should avoid this kind of association of the image of fat people, considering that they suffer prejudice everywhere in their social lives" [P7].

At the first moments, the participants were not critical with regard to the roles played by fat people on advertisements. However, during the focus group, the subjects began to analyze the different presented situations and, while agreeing that humor was the central to all the TV ads, item because of the characters characteristics (stereotypes), the participants began to see the complexity of these associations. The image that stood out from the ads was funny people doing acting in a ridiculous way. The companies sold a negative image of obese people. "...Some commercial sells a negative image of obese persons and this is considered funny by those who see them ...I think it's funny ...everyone does ...but it seems that what stay in mind is that every fat person it's like that, even in real life..." [P2]. This reinforces prejudice and bullying. Companies should be more responsible and try to avoid perpetuating pain in a group of consumers that are usually forgotten in their marketing actions in a respectful and responsible way.

### **Image and stigma**

What image do the focus group participants have from obese protagonists after watching the ads? The



**Figure 1.** Being fat, society, their roles in commercial and consumer image

participants' responses were:

"Fat people are funny and silly, are unable to properly develop a task and liars, they are ugly, horrible, strange, but funny, the only way of drawing audience attention is by laughter, because there is no beauty at all, they have to be goofy to sell the company's products. Fat ones are used by the thin ones mockery because they are fools, and they don't fit in the beauty standards". There were also comments like:

"The fat person is fat because he/she wants to" [P4]. Crandall (1994) states that there is still a widespread perception that obese individuals are responsible for their own condition. This is because the gain or loss of weight is under personal control, creating the idea that the obese ones don't have self control, self discipline and are totally lazy (Staffieri 1967; Lerner and Gellert, 1969; Weiss and Caprio, 2005). This tends to reinforce the belief that the cause of obesity is the result of uncontrolled impulses and behaviors (Roehling, 1999). This is a social prejudice reinforced by the ads here analyzed, that do not take into account the complexity of the obesity phenomena.

**Social representation of fat people on Ads in the perspective of lean consumers**

To better understand the social representation of obese

people in the perceptions of lean consumers (focus group participants), we designed a map of this representation as shown in Figure 1. It separates in a quadrant the prevalent stereotypes the social relations related to being fat and their exercised roles in advertising. The stereotypes were extracted from the literature review, which are grouped in the lower quadrant in gray color (as the main characteristics predominate in commercials analyzed).

In the first group of variables inserted in the Figure, the inserted characteristics of fatty predominant in all ads, are all related to mood, such as: Funny, clowns, clumsy and silly. In the literature review the stereotype of funny rarely appears on the findings of several studies (example Elias, et al., 2003). But in this study, funny was the most prevalent due to the exaltation of this feature in ads as a way to attract audience attention (use of humor on communication that can be socially dangerous if not properly used). The most associated stigma, related to obese roles, it was the 'comical' one. In the second group of variables the stereotypes were reprehensible and disgusting, also related to the idea that when a fat person is interested on something he/she supposedly will not get due to his/hers condition (to be fat is to be handicapped). Stigma related to the role of obese linked to these characteristics was called 'strange'.

Moreover, in the third group of variables according to the analysis results, it was found that in participants view, characteristics as lazy, sloppy, damaged, weak

and unable. Based on these data, Figure 1 was structured.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis of advertisements and reports participants in this research, it was found that the roles played by fat people in Brazilian TV ads are linked directly to a comedy act. The association of stereotypes of being fat already present in social relations it is stressed in the ads, and the prejudice due to the way in which they exercised their roles and their physical appearance, it is seen as a way to reinforce the stigmas associate to obesity in our society. This way, based on focus group results participants see the ad as a form to continue to perpetuate prejudice. Obese people exert roles as ads protagonists in which ways that their image is used to attract consumer attention by ridicule (through stereotyped characters), which tends, on account of this condition, be interpreted as comical, and sometimes, as politically incorrect. It was found in our study that stigmas such as 'comical', 'weird' and 'weak' are formed from the stereotypes related to obesity and roles developed in the material analyzed (TV ads).

For participants of our research, the TV advertises had some reports of negative interpretation, even after some of them who have initially found the commercials funny. From the time that they come to realize what it is really behind the "funny" part of the ads, it is possible to see the prejudice discourses the communication brings about obesity. At the end, negative associations are made to the company and its products presented in the ads. When communications are established and interpreted through mechanisms that instigate discrimination and prejudice, its essence can negatively influence the evaluation of the company and the product by consumers. While the discussions about the perfect body can generate social problems by its inherent stigma, it is also believed that not everything that is produced by marketers is of extreme interest to consumers and society. Marketing campaigns tend to exalt deliberately physical patterns such as the 'ideal' (skinny), placing about 'not ideal' (obese), the mask of ridiculous, not acceptable in society nowadays. The question that remains is how far these interpretations may affect the brand image conveyed, considering that the obesity phenomenon is present in everyday life of most consumers.

This study searched to contribute to the dissemination of transformative consumer research in the Brazilian context, because to investigate a group of consumers neglected or treated prejudiced in marketing communications; provoking a discussion that is not always what's funny, like humor, this devoid of prejudice veiled, causing pain and grief psychological specific groups of

consumers. Same it investigated only Brazilian ads, we believe that the obesity phenomena and how fat people are presented in ads, reinforcing stigmas associated to their condition, it is a global problem that every society is trying to cope and searching for solutions to solve it.

## Conflict of Interests

The author(s) have not declared any conflict of interests.

## REFERENCES

- Abeso (2012). "Associação Brasileira para o Estudo da Obesidade". History, Available at: <http://www.abeso.org.br/pagina/296/historico.shtml>
- Bellizzi JA, Hasty RW (1998). "Territory assignment decisions and supervising unethical selling behavior: The effects of obesity and gender as moderated by job-related factors". *J. Pers. Selling Sales Manage.* 18(2):35-49. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08853134.1998.10754129#.U3x029JdVQO>
- Brown PJ, Bentley-Condit VK (1997). "Culture, evolution and obesity". In: Bray G. A., Bouchard C., James W. P. T. (orgs.), *Handbook of obesity*. New York: Marcel Dekker pp.143-155.
- Crandall CS (1994). "Prejudice against fat people: Ideology and self-interest". *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 66(5):882-882. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.66.5.882>
- Denzin NK (1978). "The research act: a theoretical introduction to sociological methods". 2., New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- Dickey-Bryant L, Lautenschlager GJ, Mendoza JL, Abrahams N (1986). "Facial Attractiveness and Its Relation to Occupational Success". *J. Appl. Psychol.* 71(1):16-19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.71.1.16>
- Elias MF, Elias PK, Wolf PA, D'agostino RB (2003). "Lower cognitive function in the presence of obesity and hypertension: the Framingham heart study". *Int. J. Obesity* 27(2):260-280. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/sj.ijo.802225>
- Felippe FML, Friedman R, Alves BS, Cibeira GH, Surita LE, Tesche C (2004) "Obesidade e mídia: o lado sutil da informação". *Revista Acadêmica do Grupo Comunicacional de São Bernardo* 1(2):1-5.
- Godoy AS (1995). "Introdução à pesquisa qualitativa e suas possibilidades". *Revista de Administração de Empresas.* 35(2):57-63.
- Greenberg BS, Eastin M, Hofshire L, Lachlan K, Brownell KD (2003) "Portrayals of Overweight and Obese Individuals on Commercial Television". *Am. J. Public Health* 93(8):1342-1348.
- Goffman E (1988). "Estigma". 4, São Paulo: LTC.
- Gortmaker SL, Must A, Perrin JM, Sobol AM, Dietz WH (1993). "Social and economic consequences of overweight among adolescents and young adults". *New England J. Med.* 329(14):1008-1012.
- Harrison K (2000). "Television viewing, fat stereotyping, body shape standards, and eating disordered symptomatology in grade school children". *Commun. Res.* 27(5):617-640. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/009365000027005003>
- Hunte HER, Williams DR (2009). "The association between perceived discrimination and obesity in a population-based multiracial and multiethnic adult sample". *American Journal of Public Health, United States, Washington* 99(7):1285-1292. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2696650/>
- Klassen ML (1987). "The cognitive basis of social judgment: the role of stereotypical beliefs in the processing of information about obese and thin people". Doctoral dissertation, Department of Psychology, Kansas State University.
- Lerner RM, Gellert E (1969). Body build identification, preference, and aversion in children. *Dev. Psychol.* 1(5):456-462. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0027966>

- McAdams T, Moussavi F, Klassen M (1992). "Employee appearance and the Americans with Disabilities Act: An emerging issue?" *Employee Responsibilities Rights J.* 5(4):323-338.
- Morgan DL (1997). "Planning focus groups". Portland State University, 2, <http://www.sagepub.com/books/Book6652>
- Puhl RM, Brownell KD (2003). "Psychosocial origins of obesity stigma: toward changing a powerful and pervasive bias". *The International Association for the Study of Obesity. Obesity Rev.* 4:213-227.
- Puhl RM, Heuer CA (2010). "Obesity stigma: important considerations for public health". *Am. J. Public Health* 100(6):1019-1028. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20075322>
- Queiroz MIP (1991). "Variações sobre a técnica do gravador no registro da informação viva". São Paulo: T. A. Queirós.
- Roehling MV (1999). "Weight-based discrimination in employment: psychological and legal aspects". *Pers. Psychol.* 52(4):969-1017.
- Santos AM, Scherer PT (2011). "Reflexões acerca das políticas públicas no enfrentamento a obesidade no Brasil". *Sociedade em Debate* 17(1):219-236. <http://revistas.ucpel.tche.br/index.php/rsd/article/view/692>
- Sargent JD, Blanchflower DG (1994). "Obesity and stature in adolescence and earnings in young adulthood. Analysis of a British birth cohort". *Arch. Pediat Adol. Med.* 148(7):681-687.
- Serra GMA, Santos EM (2003). "Saúde e mídia na construção da obesidade e do corpo perfeito". *Ciência Saúde Coletiva* 8(3):691-701.
- Staffieri JR (1967). A study of social stereotype of body image in children. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 7(1):101-104.
- Sudo N, Luz MT (2007). "O gordo em pauta: representações do ser gordo em revistas semanais". *Ciência Saúde Coletiva* 12 (4):1033-1040.
- Weiss E (1980). Perceived self-infliction and evaluation of obese and handicapped persons. *Percept. Motor Skills* 50:1268.
- Weiss R, Caprio S (2005). The metabolic consequences of childhood obesity. *Best Practice & Research Clinica*