

“Fatties Get a Room!” An Examination of Humor and Stereotyping in *Mike and Molly*

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Every culture around the world has a different definition of beauty. In many societies, the ideal beauty is formed by the reigning male hegemony, and often reflects attitudes and ideals of that culture. In American culture, the definition of beauty is the “thin ideal”—something that is reinforced not only through the media, but also through peers as well. Most television programs feature characters that conform to the thin ideal. According to Hollywood standards, actresses in particular appear to be cut from the same cloth, and the cloth is a size 2. When Hollywood does stray from the thin ideal, it is typically with a supporting character or a male leading man who is married. In 2004, New York Times reporter and former TV critic reported that almost all sitcoms that season were about “a fat

guy with a hot wife” (Marin, 2004, p. 92). The chubby husband with the thin wife has been a long-standing presence in American television, from Ralph Kramden in *The Honeymooners* to Peter Griffin in *Family Guy* and many portly papas in between. However, one new program, *Mike & Molly*, breaks the mold by telling the story of two obese people dating and falling in love. Although the sitcom *Roseanne* broke ground with its two overweight leads, this is the first program of its kind featuring not only an obese and single leading man, but also an obese and single leading lady. The idea that CBS is using humor in an unorthodox way has drawn the attention of both viewers and critics alike. In fact, the media created a firestorm surrounding the show when a journalist from *Marie Claire* magazine, Maura Kelly, wrote in her blog “I think I’d be grossed out if I had to watch two characters with rolls and rolls of fat kissing each other ... because I’d be grossed out if I had to watch them doing anything” (Kelly, 2010). Reactions such as this have shown that although CBS may have good intentions, not everyone is comfortable with a body image different from the norm. This has made the program a unique opportunity to examine and understand humor, body image, and stereotyping from a new perspective.

The purpose of this study is to examine the use of humor and stereotyping—both traditional and non-traditional—in the CBS program *Mike & Molly*. Each episode from season one will be examined through content and textual analysis for the type of humor used by the program, imagery, and the use of stereotyping in the program. In the program itself, the humor and jokes that are used are often pointedly fat jokes or based on stereotyping. A content analysis was used to categorize the central characters as well as the humor used in the show to determine the roles and stereotypes depicted by the main

characters. This study will determine if the humor that is used falls within the norm, or rather, uses humor as a defense mechanism.

Mike & Molly

As the #1 new comedy in the fall of 2010, *Mike & Molly* is an atypical sitcom that revolves around the love-story of two overweight, working-class individuals living in Chicago (CBS Entertainment, 2011). The characters on *Mike & Molly* fill roles not conventionally played in television sitcoms, for not only are the two main characters overweight, the program delves into a prevalent (and touchy) subject for many Americans: obesity. In fact, it is such a prevalent subject that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates 3 in every 4 American adults are overweight or obese (2009).

Mike & Molly is one of the few programs on television that uses main characters that do not fit into the normal thin-ideal body type, and the producers know it. In an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, show creator Mark Roberts indicated that he was "aware that putting bigger people 'back on television' was challenging because television has long since moved into a realm featuring mostly unrealistic-looking people. On network television, there are guidelines and there are clearly parameters..." but "... the statement of the show is everybody deserves to find, cherish and hold on to someone to love" (Idato, February 17, 2011).

Since the premise of the show is so unique, it has drawn the interest of many people, and has garnered both praise and criticism. A review of online forums not only shows comments from people supportive of the show, but also comments from those disgusted by the show. This polarity of opinion has been seen in the media as well. When the series launched in the fall of 2010, Maura Kelly's blog generated a great deal of media attention

for the show, but her appalling commentary was demoralizing to people who are overweight. “To be brutally honest, even in real life, I find it aesthetically displeasing to watch a very, very fat person simply walk across a room—just like I’d find it distressing if I saw a very drunk person stumbling across a bar or a heroin addict slumping in a chair” (Kelly, 2010). Her post also called the actors “fatties” and gave dieting tips for the “plump” and obese.

The blog created uproar in the media, and she quickly issued an apology for bullying, and revealed that throughout her life she had struggled with anorexia; however, the backlash against her commentary had already begun. Talk shows, body image activists, and even Mark Roberts, the creator of *Mike & Molly*, all made statements denouncing the blog (Hibberd, Oct. 27, 2010). Roberts stated, “This wasn’t about the show, this wasn’t about the writing, this wasn’t about the acting. This was about someone’s hateful response to how these two human beings look.” (Bierly, Oct 28, 2010). Marilyn Wann, a fat-pride activist, stated that this controversy was in no way surprising, for it was a mirror of “our culture’s attitudes toward fat people... The media is telling you ‘fatties don’t count.’ They don’t get to be the hero. They don’t have to have sex. So maybe they’ll be grateful as the object of a joke” (Streeter, Nov 2, 2010). Some critics of the blog noted that although obesity is unhealthy, discriminating against those who are obese is also unhealthy, and even wondered if the entire thing was a ploy to drive more traffic to the *Marie Claire* site. Despite this controversy, ratings for the series have remained strong.

Unlike the cast of a typical sitcom, *Mike & Molly* has reached out to fans in new ways. Not only are they showing a love story, for which anyone could connect to, but also their

use of atypical characters allows for a different segment of the population to connect with the cast. For example, on the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), one fan of the show stated,

“Let me say candidly my wife and I both deal with weight problems, and for the first time I felt the issues were centered without being insulting. The jokes are ‘laugh with me’ style rather than ‘laugh at me.’ Needless to say, dealing with these issues can make a person self conscious, and we see that portrayed in Mike as he is smitten with Molly (and I can certainly see why) but hesitates to make the move to ask her out” (Internet Movie Database, 2011).

However, critics have noted that some of the jokes in the program are not uniting the audience by sharing the follies of the human condition, but rather, are poking fun and dehumanizing the exploits of the obese (Rox, Sept 21, 2010). In the first episode, after Mike receives a hug from his partner, he is told, “It’s like hugging a futon.” In same episode, Molly’s mother—who is by all accounts, petite—says “Take her [Molly] to a lesbian bar. They like beefy girls...” (Roberts, 2010). By using a multitude of fat jokes, the sweetly subversive premise of the program gets lost in the sea of slapstick fat, gay and race gags that often dominate television. In fact, this theme is prevalent in many sitcoms, where fathers and men in working class television are often portrayed as a buffoon or the butt of the jokes (Scharrer, 2001). Additionally, these men are often partnered with thin, smart, and sexy wives. Because of this television standard, both Mike—a heavier leading man—and Molly—a leading lady who is not thin—are a major step from the norm.

Characters

Officer Mike Biggs. The male lead, Officer Mike Biggs, is a “good-hearted cop who sincerely wants to lose weight” (CBS Entertainment, 2011). Not only is his name a play-on-

words, but also his character also routinely struggles with weight issues and attends overeaters anonymous. His nature is brusque, yet tenderhearted as you see him navigate the dating world with Molly. In some areas, he seems almost emotionally stunted, as it is revealed that his father left when he was young and was raised by his single, hard-working, tough-loving mother.

Molly Flynn. The lead female character, Molly Flynn, is an “instantly likeable fourth-grade teacher with a good sense of humor about her curves” (CBS Entertainment, 2011). Molly may be good-hearted, but it is immediately evident that she struggles with dieting in a house where her sister and mother are constantly indulging their appetites and flaunting their svelte figures in front of her. Molly is the ingénue in this series: sweet, pretty, smart, and the object of Mike’s affection. The only difference between her and the typical female lead is that she is not the size 2 that is normally expected. Together, she and Mike have a nice, low-key chemistry (Holmes, 2010). Molly is typically the character that is the voice of reason in dealing with the antics of the other characters.

Officer Carl McMillan. Mike's partner, Officer Carl McMillan, is a “thin, fast-talking wise-guy who, despite his teasing, encourages Mike on his road to slimness and romance” (CBS Entertainment, 2011). Carl is African-American, lives with his grandmother, consistently ribs Mike about his weight and dating, and does not shy away from giving his opinion on topics even if he is wrong.

Victoria Flynn. Although this character is a brunette, she is voluptuous and portrays the characteristics of the stereotypical blonde bimbo. She has a ditzy nature that is both hilarious and somewhat endearing. Throughout the program, Victoria is seen solving

mundane problems with quirky and oddball solutions that often refer to pot, sex, or her job as a mortician.

Joyce Flynn. Molly's mother is a widow on the dating scene, and enjoys her newfound sexuality. Her fiery red hair matches her personality. She is slender, enjoys sex, and eats with voracity in front of Molly. It is quite obvious to the viewer that she loves both her daughters, but doesn't necessarily understand the plight and stresses that Molly undergoes as an obese woman.

Samuel. Much like Molly, Mike also "faces temptation at the diner he and Carl frequent. It is at the diner where they've met and become friends with a Senegalese waiter, Samuel, to whom dieting is a foreign concept" (CBS Entertainment, 2011). Samuel has a thick accent, is often critical of Mike and his eating habits, and is quick with demeaning remarks.

Grandma. As the mammy archetype of the program, Grandma houses Carl, keeps him in line, and advises Mike on life and love. Like many other "mammies" on screen, Grandma is a sassy, heavysset, matronly, church-going woman who cares deeply for those she loves and isn't afraid to voice her opinion (Gonzales, 2001).

Vince. Vince is Joyce's boyfriend. He is the stereotypical Guido—short, swarthy, and has many connections—some unsavory—in the community. His uncouth nature and lack of tact or social charms does not sit well with Molly.

Peggy. Peggy is Mike's mother. She fills the bitter-divorcee stereotype in the program. She is bossy, manipulative, overly-protective of Mike, obsessed with her dog, and does not like Molly. Throughout the program, it is apparent that it is in her nature to put people down, and is very bitter about her husband leaving her for a younger woman.

The show itself also seems to have a Dr. Jeckyl/Mr. Hyde-like quality. On one hand, you have a surprisingly sweet story with lovable characters that the audience can root for. But on the other hand, you have a type of physical comedy that is almost humiliating for the obese characters and a pervasive use of stereotypes throughout. In the first episode, two Overeaters Anonymous members get stuck in a staircase because they attempted to walk up side-by-side, a table broke under the weight of Mike Biggs, and Molly worked out to the song "Brick House" (van den Berg, Sept. 20, 2010). One blogger commented, "All in all, though this was most definitely funny, I think its humour... could wear thin fairly rapidly. I mean really, who wants to hear fat jokes over and over? They're ok for a while, but ad infinitum?" (Curtis, Sept 21, 2010).

Framing in Mass Media.

Framing theory (Goffman, 1974) forms the theoretical background to describe and explain the framework of these television show. A frame has been defined as the "[selection of] some aspects of a perceived reality [that] make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Frames are created through placement, selection, repetition and emphasis of content, and exclusion of material (Entman, 1993; Gitlin, 1980). The focus of this paper emphasized framing and stereotyping because—much like the saying that a picture is worth a thousand words—visual frames are extremely influential on the perceptions of audience members (Gibson & Zillmann, 2000; Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). These visuals frames can be created through a variety of media such as photograph, video, drawing, advertising, and the human body (Coleman, 2010). Framing is an essential part of experiencing media, because it is

part of the natural process that an individual uses to make sense of their experience and the world around them. By using cues and social norms that are created through framing, it allows an individual to easily process mediated messages (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974).

Stereotypes. Stereotypes are part of framing, and like many television programs, are seen throughout *Mike & Molly*. Although some stereotypes create negative connotations, they are not necessarily inherently good or bad (Perse, 2001). Rather, there are highly charged emotions that are often associated with stereotypes (Lippmann, 1956), and can allow people to create order in the confusion of reality and have a significant impact on the framework, perceptions of, and interactions with different social groups (Appiah, 2008). The associations that are made when creating stereotypes help individuals to categorize and process information that they are not familiar with. However, when people violate an individual's preconceived stereotype about a topic—such as the obese characters of *Mike & Molly* in a romantic relationship—that individual will be more likely to evaluate that violation of their norm negatively (Mandler, 1982). Although stereotypes do not necessarily elicit negative behaviors, they can lead to the objectification and the invalid categorization of entire groups of people, which can deny people opportunity to create their own unique and personal identities (Enteman, 2003).

Mass media is a powerful influence in the development, reinforcement, and validation of stereotypes. Although many stereotypes may come from personal interaction, mass media messages use them to assist audiences in processing information about groups that they may not have first-hand knowledge of or personal experiences with (Appiah, 2008). People often rely on the examples set by the mass media as the standard for engagement in order to know the appropriate response to new and uncertain situations. La

Ferle and Lee (2005) argued that in order to help create a path to cultural understanding, “mass media employ stereotypes as a convenient categorization tool. The stereotypical Images found in media messages are easily accepted because they are usually simple and have little ambiguity” (p. 142). Many situational comedies and drama, like *Mike & Molly*, use of stereotypes to do just that.

Although this can lead to open communication about certain subjects, relying on these can also perpetuate stereotypes about different social groups (Wicks, 2001). Since most people only deal with a set group of people in their day-to-day lives, exposure to mass media often results in indirect exposure to other groups and stereotypes (Appiah, 2008). In television, however, the frequency of stereotypes in character development causes some concerns to scholars. For, although stereotypes helps people understand groups that are not their own, they can also may have a “detrimental effect on attitudes and beliefs among audience members...the media are capable of shaping or reinforcing unhealthy attitudes, opinions, and beliefs by repeating stereotypical scripts” (Wicks, 2001, pp. 192-193).

Stereotyping is an extremely relevant topic to *Mike & Molly*, as the characters in the program fill both stereotypical and atypical roles. The male and female leads are one of the only couples on television that does not fit the typical body type of a lead character. This alone is unusual, as they do not fit within thin ideal. Thus, the visual imagery allows the audience to gain exposure to a stereotype in which they may not have exposure to. Additionally, the type of jokes and use of stereotypes in the program may not necessarily lead people to be more willing to accept difference from their own, but rather lead them to rely on their own preconceptions (Macrae et al., 1994). This could cause an individual to have inaccurate images of a group and be unable to think more deeply about a stereotypes

group (Milkie, 1999).

The Thin Ideal Stereotype. One pervasive stereotype in mass media is the thin ideal, a concept that equates being slender with being attractive. Mass media have often been blamed for being incremental in the creation of the thin ideal. According to Downs and Harrison (1985) the stereotypes associated with beauty and attractiveness have “permeated virtually the entire television advertising market, making television commercials powerful sources of attractiveness stereotypes” (p. 17). Because of this pervasiveness, the ideal female television lead is a slender beauty who can easily fit into a size two (Barber, 1998; Thompson et al., 1999)—a stark contrast from the pleasantly plump Molly who constantly struggles with her weight. During the freshman season of *Mike & Molly*, CBS also aired a short-lived program known as *Mad Love*. Although the plot of the program had the same general concept as most comedies—a group of friends with special emphasis on the romantic couple—the cast was extremely different. *Mad Love* featured the typical size 2 cast of female leads and extremely fit male leads. The framing of the two shows was telling and they aired one after the other.

One reason for this societal acceptance of the thin ideal stereotype may be related to the messages that mass media purvey. For example, Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, and Kelly (1986) reported that even though 34% of the U.S. population is overweight, a mere 5% of female television characters were overweight. Fouts and Burggraf (1999) reported that 33% of female leads had weights that were “below average” in weight, while only 7% of characters had a weight that was “above average.” These studies indicate that television has consistently created a distorted model of women’s body types, one that is unrealistic, and often seen as an object of desire rather than an individual (Fouts and Burggraf, 2000).

Fouts and Burggraf (1999) also noted that messages for young female viewers appear to be that males pay attention to women's bodies, and if one does not match the "thin ideal," they may be subjected to sarcasm, derision, ridicule, "helpful" suggestions to lose weight, and would likely be dateless. In today's culture, a successful woman is expected to be beautiful, thin, smart, healthy, and in control (Cash, 1990; Downs & Harrison, 1985), and if women aren't these things, they are regarded as a failure by the media.

The Obesity Stereotype. Over the past 80 years, negative associations with some stereotypes—like racism and sexism—have waned (Bobo, 2001); however, other negative associations—like attitudes toward obesity—have not (Crandall, 1994; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). The negative stereotypes that are associated with obesity can be traced to cultural values that emphasize thinness (Himes, 2005; World Health Organization, 1998). Through simple observation of mass media, it is apparent that society places much emphasis and glorification on the thin ideal. If a person does not fit into the normal thin ideal body type, they are negatively stereotyped and can be seen as dishonest, lazy, self-indulgent, sloppy, unhealthy, or unattractive (Braziel & Le Besco, 2001; Himes, 2005). The negative stereotyping can become so bad that overweight individuals can even face discrimination (Crandall, 1995; Rothblum, Brand, Miller, & Oetjen, 1990). Although labels such as "curvy" and "voluptuous" are used, the underlying message perpetuated by the mass media is that women who are not conforming to the thin ideal are fat, a concept that contributes to weight-related stigmatization (Himes, 2005; Neumark-Stzainer & Haines, 2004). This type of stereotyping about overweight individuals is known as "fat stigmatization" or "anti-fat bias" (Neumark-Stzainer & Haines, 2004).

Anti-Fat Bias in Media. The most common form of fat stigmatization found in

humor in situational comedies (Himes, 2005). Situational comedies—also known as sitcoms—are television programs that present comedic plots about a variety of situations in life. Sitcoms are typically half an hour in length, air during prime time hours (7-11 PM), and contain audience reactions (live or taped) known as laugh tracks (e.g., Chapman, 1976; Mercer & Fouts, 1978). Laugh tracks are typically produced professionally and have three functional purposes: to help audience members register that a joke has occurred, to contextualize jokes into a societal context, and to reinforce behavior—either positive or negative (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000). In short, they create the framework for when audience members are supposed to laugh. If a laugh track uses a stereotype to reinforce behavior it may have a negative affect on the viewer. For example, if a character is ridiculed because of his or her weight, and an audience member then hears a laugh track, the positive affirmations to the negative comments may implicitly suggest societal approval of the ridicule and reinforce the idea that that behavior is acceptable (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000). Additionally, laugh tracks are used significantly more often when men make negative comments about women's appearance (Fouts and Burggraf, 2000), but not when women comment on men's appearance (Fouts and Vaughan; 2002).

Primetime sitcoms have been found to reinforce negative stereotypes and discriminatory behavior against women more harshly than men (Himes, 2005). Previous studies have examined the framing of body type on television as well as the media's portrayal of the ideal beauty (e.g., Hawkins, Richards, Granley, & Stein, 2004). According to Fouts and Vaughn (2002), male television characters received very little ridicule in regard to not conforming to the thin ideal. However, in a study examining television sitcoms, Fouts and Burggraf (1999, 2000) noted that as woman's size increased, so did the negative

ridicule they received from male characters on the show. Additionally, thinner characters received more positive affirmations. Inversely, although there are more overweight male characters on television, only 9% of male characters were ridiculed about their weight (Fouts & Vaughan, 2002; Himes, 2005). They concluded that this type of message reinforced the concept to viewers that in order to receive positive comments from men, women were required to conform to the thin ideal—thus propagating anti-fat bias in the media (Fouts & Burggraf, 1999). Although the issue of anti-fat bias is associated with negative body image and satisfaction (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Harrison, Taylor, & Marske, 2006), the impact of an obese body image in media is not known. With the exception of the previously mentioned studies, little quantitative research has specifically focused on instances of anti-fat bias in the media (Himes, 2005).

Despite research documenting that fat people are stigmatized and prejudiced against in U.S. society, generally anti-fat bias and discriminatory behavior based on weight are not recognized as legitimate forms of oppression (McHugh & Kasardo, 2012). The literature indicates that bias against people who are overweight and obese not only has an impact on their romantic, occupational and income opportunities, but also their ability to receive quality healthcare (Puhl & Brownell, 2001). A survey involving a nationally representative sample of primary care physicians revealed that more than 50 percent of respondents believed that obese patients would be noncompliant with treatment as they are “weak-willed and lazy,” while another study found physicians reported having less patience and less desire to help overweight patients (Foster, Wadden, & Makris, 2003).

Hypotheses

Television programs often deal with sensitive topics within American culture; they also reflect the prevalent stereotypes that exist in our society (e.g., Signorielli, 1986). Often, these programs use humor that targets the character associated with the stereotype to help the general public deal with these sensitive topics (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000). However, programs that don't deal with controversial issues typically focus more on the relational aspects of the characters involved. Thus, the following hypotheses were created to examine and quantify the framing of obesity in the television program *Mike & Molly*:

RQ1: How will obesity be portrayed in a situation comedy on television?

H1: *Mike & Molly* will have significantly more jokes regarding food and weight issues than other typical sitcoms.

RQ2: Are overweight male characters targeted as the butt of a joke more often than other characters?

H2: Overweight characters will use a significantly greater number of self-deprecating jokes.

H3: The tone of jokes will be significantly more negative for the obese characters than other characters.

H4: Overweight characters will have a significantly greater number of jokes pertaining to food and weight issues targeting them.

H5: Female overweight characters will have more jokes targeting them.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine the use of humor and stereotypes in the CBS comedy, *Mike & Molly*. The following section explains the metrics used in the study, as well as the data collection process.

Unit of Analysis

The sample for this study was determined by examining the jokes in five randomly selected episodes of the first season of the CBS sitcom *Mike & Molly* ($n = 646$). To serve as a control, jokes in four episodes of *Mad Love* ($n = 499$)—a sitcom with similar characteristics—were also coded. A total of 1144 jokes were coded. Both programs are in their freshman season, air on CBS, and feature the story of the lead characters falling in love. However, unlike *Mike & Molly*, *Mad Love* features characters that fit within the thin ideal. The shows were recorded upon airing during the fall of 2010 and spring of 2011.

Procedure

In order to examine the ant-fat bias in the programs, a content analysis was completed to examine the jokes from each episode. Every episode was watched in its entirety, and the episodes were viewed as many times as necessary until the coders were positive all the variables were accounted for and coded correctly, and to clarify any questions. Each coder used a coding sheet to assist in the coding of the episodes. Discussion between coders was permitted. The jokes in the program were coded for the character that made the joke, who the joke was targeting, the tone, the topic of the joke, the type of joke, and whether the joke was self-deprecating. Jokes were conceptualized as any statement that was followed by the show's laugh track.

Training and Reliability

Two individuals from a large, Midwestern university were used to code the data for this project. Training sessions were conducted to educate both the coders on the variables and refine the coding schema. At the end of the coding period, a subset of 20% of the

episodes was used to test for reliability, and a high level of inter-coder agreement emerged (.938).

Results

In order to better understand the nature of these programs, descriptive statistics were run. Results indicated that in the program *Mike & Molly*, the male lead (Mike) made 36.0% ($n = 232$) of the jokes, the female lead (Molly) made 16.3% ($n = 105$) of the jokes, the male sidekick (Carl) made 18.0% ($n = 116$) of the jokes, and the female sidekick (Victoria) made 7.8% ($n = 50$) of the jokes. The remaining characters—Joyce ($n = 43$), Grandma ($n = 12$), Vince ($n = 21$), Samuel ($n = 34$), and “Others” ($n = 22$)—made the remaining 21.9% of the jokes. In contrast, *Mad Love*’s male lead made 24.7% ($n = 76$) of the jokes, the female lead made 38.6% ($n = 66$) of the jokes, the male sidekick made 63.2% ($n = 199$) of the jokes, and the female sidekick made 17.2% ($n = 86$) of the jokes in the program. *Mike & Molly* used self-deprecation in 8.7% ($n = 56$) of the jokes; whereas *Mad Love* only used it in 5.4% ($n = 27$) of the jokes.

In order to examine H_1 a Chi-square goodness of fit test was used to compare topics of jokes between *Mike & Molly* and *Mad Love*. This test indicated there was a significant difference in joke topics between the two programs $\chi^2(6, N = 1140) = 40.93, p < .001$. See Table 1 for a breakdown of frequencies of joke type by show.

Table 1
Frequencies of joke type by program

Joke Type	Mike & Molly		Mad Love	
	%	n	%	n
Body Image	19.6	126	6.4	32
Dating & Sex	36.3	233	61.9	308
Family & Friends	7.2	46	9.4	47

Alcohol & Drugs	2.6	17	0.4	2
Work	5	32	4.2	21
Gay Innuendo	4.5	29	0.2	1
Other	24.8	160	17.5	87

Note. $\chi^2 = 40.93^*$, $df = 1$. * $p < .001$

H₂ asked how often obese characters were the targets of self-deprecation. An independent samples t-test of the amounts of self-deprecating humor between the two programs found significant differences, $t(1139, N = 1141) = 2.12$, $p < .05$. Because the hypothesis was specifically focused on the obese characters, another independent samples t-test was run between the obese and non-obese characters for self-deprecating jokes. The differences were significant, $t(1139, N = 1141) = 3.69$, $p < .001$ and obese characters were the target more often than non-obese characters. H₂ was supported for both program and characters.

To look at RQ₁ and H₃, an independent samples t-test of tone by obesity of character indicated that there were significant differences in tone between the two groups, $t(1140) = -2.39$, $p < .05$. A negative tone would be below 1, a neutral tone would be a score of 1, and a positive tone would be a score greater than 1. The mean score of the tone of jokes made at the expense of obese characters was .71, while the mean score of the tone for jokes made toward non-obese characters was slightly less negative at .81. In response to RQ₁, it appears that obesity is portrayed in a significantly more negative manner by receiving more negatively tone jokes; although the means from each group indicate that the majority of jokes were negative in nature regardless of target. This also supports H₃, which predicted that the tone of jokes would be significantly more negative targeting obese characters than non-obese characters.

H₄ elaborated on H₁ by predicting that obese characters would be target of jokes about weight and food more often than non-obese characters in the same program. A Chi-square goodness of fit test compared the two obese characters to all of the non-obese characters in *Mike & Molly* found a significant difference between the obese and non-obese characters, $\chi^2(1, N = 642) = 24.74, p < .001$. For the obese characters, 26.1% ($n = 99$) of the jokes made toward them were about food or weight, while non-obese characters were only the butt of food or weight jokes 10.2% ($n = 27$) of the time. In contrast, 280 (73.9%) of the jokes made toward obese characters were about other topics, while 236 (89.7%) of the jokes made toward non-obese characters were about other topics.

RQ₂ and H₅ discussed if obese characters were targeted in jokes more often than other characters. The only obese male character, Mike, was the butt of 46.2% ($n = 298$) of the jokes (54% of the jokes with a character target). This is in contrast to the rest of the characters (including the only obese female character, Molly), who together were the target of 39.4% ($n = 254$) of the jokes (46% of the jokes with a character target). Molly, the only obese female character, received 13% ($n = 84$) of the jokes, (15.2% of the jokes with a character target) while all other characters (including Mike) received 72.6% ($n = 468$) of the jokes (84.8% of the jokes with a character target). However, when jokes targeting Mike were removed from the sample, Molly received 33.1% of the jokes with the remaining characters receiving 66.9%. In response to RQ₂ and RQ₃ it is clear that obese characters are targeted for jokes more often than non-obese characters. Additionally, it appears that the obese male character was the target of well over half of the jokes made targeting a character in the program. This does not support H₅, which predicted that the obese female would be the target of more jokes than other characters.

As predicted by H₁, *Mike & Molly* used significantly more weight-related jokes than *Mad Love*. The findings also supported H₂, H₃, and H₄, as overweight characters used self-deprecating jokes significantly more often than other characters, the tone of jokes directed toward overweight characters were more negative in tone, and nearly all of the jokes pertaining to food and weight issues targeted overweight characters. Support was not found for H₅, as the male overweight lead was the target of significantly more jokes than the female overweight lead.

Discussion

When *Mike & Molly* began airing in Fall 2010, its atypical leading characters drew attention from critics and audiences alike. Given the amount of research demonstrating a media preference for thin actors and a history of marginalizing overweight and obese characters, the inclusion of two overweight single leads in a romantically-themed comedy seemed progressive. As this analysis demonstrates, however, the use of overweight actors does not necessarily improve the weight-related messages a program conveys to viewers.

The results of this study only underscore the fact that obesity is not a coincidence but a central theme of *Mike & Molly*. Both *Mike & Molly* and *Mad Love* were ostensibly centered around the romantic lives of the lead characters. As you would expect from a show about such topics, two-thirds of the jokes from the “traditional” sitcom are about dating and sex. Although dating and sex dominated the jokes in *Mike & Molly*, they did so by a much smaller margin, with only one-third of their jokes broaching the topic. Nearly one out of every five jokes made in *Mike & Molly* were about weight or body image, although jokes about weight and body image represented less than one-tenth of *Mad Love*'s

comments. These findings suggest that *Mike & Molly* is not a show about two people dating, but pointedly a show about two *overweight* people dating.

This falls in line with previous research that has shown even when overweight characters are in central roles, they are kept on the sidelines when it comes to dating and romance (Greenberg, et al., 2003). Although the show's premise required that Mike and Molly engage in typical dating activities usually reserved for the thin, it minimized the amount that viewers had to think about the two characters engaging in these behaviors, diverting humorous attention back to their body shape instead.

Mike & Molly also seems to make other attempts to help viewers acclimate to the concept of overweight leads. As Himes and Thompson (2007) noted in their analysis of fat stigmatization in popular television and film, male characters are far more likely than females to engage in fat humor. Ironically, Mike fills the shoes of both the stereotypical "funny fat man" as well as serving as the target of weight-related jokes from others and himself. Both aspects of his character fall in line with more traditional portrayals of how overweight characters should behave, as research has shown that the heavier a male character, the more negative references he makes at his own expense and for the audience's benefit (Fouts & Vaughan, 2002).

One somewhat surprising finding that emerged during this study is the relative lack of weight-related jokes directed at the show's overweight female lead, Molly. Based on the research regarding gender and weight bias (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000), we predicted that Molly would be the target of more jokes than any other character on the program. The results show that Mike was overwhelmingly the target of more jokes, although once jokes targeting Mike were removed, Molly was the target of one-third of the jokes made. This

may be explained by the increasing public sensitivity toward overt jokes about a woman's body shape, while mockery of overweight males is still generally acceptable. It is possible that humor related to Molly's weight was expressed through less verbal cues, through physical comedy or jokes relying on visual humor. This is an area worth additional exploration in order to understand how overweight male and female leads may experience different forms of bias.

It is possible that *Mike & Molly* could cause more harm than good in battling public acceptance of weight related stereotypes. A study by Burmeister and Carels (2014) found that anti-fat attitudes and stereotype acceptance were connected to a viewer's endorsement of weight-related humor. The viewers who expressed the most anti-fat sentiments also found jokes about overweight characters to be funny, while those who did not endorse anti-fat beliefs found weight-related jokes to be distasteful. With one-third of *Mike & Molly's* humor coming from weight-related topics, it is possible that the program attracts those with strong anti-fat beliefs while deterring those who are more accepting of different body types. Instead of "normalizing" these overweight characters, it is possible that *Mike & Molly* only serves to reinforce negative beliefs in its audience members. Although the findings reported here are discouraging in terms of stereotype persistence, in some ways, *Mike & Molly* may play a role in helping overweight characters become a regular part of the television landscape. As Clark (1969) proposed, marginalized groups are often incorporated into mainstream media over four stages: non-representation, ridicule, regulation, and respect. Although *Mike & Molly* does not do much to move overweight characters out of the ridicule stage, the relative success of the show may pioneer the inclusion of more overweight characters in leading roles in the future. Through

increased participation in media, this group can move from ridicule to respect, playing a wider range of characters that more accurately portray the general overweight population and may help to turn the tide in anti-fat bias.

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