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## Fat so?: Managing the Effect of Obesity Stereotypes on Customer Evaluations of Service Organizations

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

FAT SO? MANAGING THE EFFECT OF OBESITY STEREOTYPES ON  
CUSTOMER EVALUATIONS OF SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

By

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A Dissertation submitted to the  
Department of Marketing  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Degree Awarded:  
Summer Semester, 2010

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I dedicate this dissertation to my beloved son, Evan. He is the reason I start and end each day with a smile.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank everyone who was instrumental in my preparation for a career in academia. An attempt to name each person would undoubtedly result in the omission of someone worthy of acknowledgement. Therefore, I would like to sincerely thank my numerous friends, family members and colleagues who encouraged me and cheered my progress throughout my PhD program.

In addition, I would like to specifically thank Dr. Mrytle Bell and Mr. Jim Hicks who first inspired me to pursue a Ph.D. I would also like to thank the amazing professors at Florida State University for their excellent training in marketing theory and research. I send a heart-felt thanks to the members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Michael Hartline, Dr. Pamela L. Perrewé, and Dr. E. Ashby Plant, for their insight and patience during the completion of my dissertation. Finally, I have immense gratitude for Dr. Michael Brady, the chair of dissertation committee, for his guidance and direction over the past five years. Thank you for believing in me.

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## ABSTRACT

Obesity is described as the fastest growing public health challenge the nation has ever faced. Sixty-two percent of American adults are overweight or obese. Regardless of their weight, all Americans bear the burden of the \$147 billion health care cost and \$11.7 billion in lost productivity that results from obesity-related issues. With 75% of new job development occurring in service sectors over the next two decades, it is likely that a large number of frontline service personnel will be obese. This research introduces the topic of obesity into the services literature by taking a pointed look at the interplay between frontline employee obesity and customer evaluations of the firm. In particular, the author hypothesizes that the negative stigma assigned to an obese service employee will transfer to evaluations of the employing firm. Mitigating strategies are examined as well as methods by which a firm can evoke the countervailing "jolly fat" stereotype as a buffer of the transference.

Extant research has documented the existence of a "courtesy stigma" that leads to the stigmatization of non-stigmatized individuals when they are presented in a relationship with stigmatized others (Goffman 1963). The potency of this phenomenon results in vicarious stigmatization of non-stigmatized individuals who are merely in the proximity of a stigmatized individual, regardless of the perceived depth of their relationship. Study One extends this line of research by providing empirical evidence of the stigmatization of a firm based on the presence of a stigmatized employee. Many studies have addressed the role of employee appearance and behavior in the formation of brand impressions. The present research is the first to establish the *stigmatization* of an organization based on the *stereotypes* of its employee. Significant findings would mean that customers readily activate negative stereotypes when an obese frontline employee is encountered during a service transaction and those negative stereotypes lead to negative evaluations of the frontline employee and the associated service firm. It is determined that the customer's perceived interaction quality mediates the relationship between the obese frontline employee and evaluations of the service firm.

Studies Two and Three investigate possible buffers for the negative outcomes of obesity stigmatization. Signaling theory is drawn upon in Study 2 to justify the introduction of observable quality cues as a means to offset the negative implications of an obese frontline employee. In Study Three, joviality and pseudo-relevant information are simultaneously applied

to a scenario-driven experiment in an attempt to reverse the negative obesity associations. The absence of a significant three-way interaction implies that the obesity stereotypes may be intractable.

Self-disclosure of pseudo-relevant information by the frontline service employee successfully suppressed the negative outcomes of employee obesity in Study Three. The expression of joviality did not evoke a positive obesity stereotype. The combination of pseudo-relevant information and joviality expression failed to reverse customers' negative evaluations of the frontline employee or the service firm. Thus, a second buffering technique was identified in Study Three but a reversal of the negative obesity stereotype did not occur.

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF OBESITY RESEARCH**

The incidence of obesity has reached epidemic proportions across the globe and the consequences are serious. For the first time in world history, the number of obese and overweight individuals is so great that it rivals the number of average weight and underweight individuals (National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases 2007). A recent report by the World Health Organization (WHO) surmised that 400 million adults worldwide are obese and another 1.6 billion are overweight (World Health Organization 2006). Obesity not only affects adults, data indicate that obesity among children is at its highest level ever. Today, over 155 million children are overweight, including 45 million who are obese (Lobstein, Baur, and Uauy 2004). WHO projects that approximately 2.3 billion adults will be overweight and more than 700 million will be obese by 2015. In addition, nearly 287 million children are projected to be overweight or obese by 2010, which is 85% more than just a decade earlier (World Health Organization 2006). Thus, it appears obesity may be a paramount problem for present and future generations.

Once considered a concern in high-income countries only, obesity is dramatically on the rise in low- and middle-income countries as well. The results of a United Nations survey reveal escalating obesity rates in all developing regions (International Obesity Task Force 2002). For instance, in Brazil and Colombia, the 40% incidence of obesity rivals that of a number of European countries. Even sub-Saharan Africa, where most of the world's hungry live, is experiencing an increase in obesity (International Obesity Task Force 2002). Unfortunately, excess food is not always distributed to the people who need it most. Hunger is one result; obesity is another. Many countries have adopted health initiatives to reduce the prevalence of obesity, yet the situation is worsening rather than improving. The underlying causes of obesity are broadly debated; however, it appears that obese individuals now comprise a notable percent of the world's population and that number is likely to increase.

Until recently, studies about large-sized people have used the terms overweight (e.g., Hebl and Mannix 2003), obese (DeJong 1980), fat (e.g., Crandall 1994), and heavy (e.g., Miller and Downey 1999) to identify a weight class that is larger than what is generally considered healthy. These terms are used interchangeably in the literature, implying that they all have the

same meaning; however, this is not necessarily the case. Body mass index (BMI), the most readily accepted indicator of weight status, identifies three main thresholds of excessive body mass: BMI 25.00 – 29.99 suggests overweight; BMI 30.00 – 39.99 is indicative of obesity, and BMI  $\geq$  40.0 signals the onset of morbid obesity. The present research looks specifically at obesity rather than overweight for four reasons. First, obesity is generally observable across all genders, racial groups, ages, and socio-economic classes within a society and across countries. Second, obesity is easily discernible compared to overweight and it carries harsher stereotypes. Third, the largest growth in population weights over the last two decades has occurred in the percentage of people categorized as morbidly obese. Finally, the health discipline clearly defines “overweight” as increased body weight, composed of excess muscle, water, bone, and/or fat, in relation to height. Very muscular people may fall into the overweight category because excessive lean muscle causes them to weigh more than others of the same height. Conversely, “obesity” is defined as a severe health condition in which a person accumulates an abnormally high proportion of *body fat* in relation to lean body mass (National Institutes of Health 1998). It is a far more serious condition than being overweight because the latter is not always problematic. Smith and associates (Smith et al. 2007) determined that perceivers’ judgments of a target may differ based on the weight terminology used to describe the target. Therefore, the term “obese” is herein used to describe people who are obese or morbidly obese.

The burden of obesity was initially considered a personal issue with repercussions affecting the obese person only. However, the proliferation of obesity has made it a societal concern. In the U.S. alone, 400,000 premature deaths are associated with obesity each year, making it the second leading cause of preventable death behind tobacco (Mokdad 2004). The estimated cost of obesity to the U.S. economy is over \$147 billion annually in medical spending alone (Office of the Surgeon General 2001). Tucker and Friedman (1998) found that obese employees are 1.74 times more likely to experience high levels of absenteeism than their leaner counterparts. Wolf and Colditz (1998) found that obesity resulted in 239 million restricted activity days and 89.5 million bed days in 1995. While additional intangible costs such as employment discrimination, scholastic underachievement, and psychosocial problems are more difficult to quantify financially, they deserve due consideration. It appears that the upward trend in obesity will result in increased costs in many of these categories.

## **Obesity Stereotypes and Stigmatization**

A hierarchical relationship between stereotypes and discrimination is established in the psychology literature (see Allport 1954) whereby stereotype formation is thought to precede discriminatory behavior. Stereotypes are beliefs and opinions about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of various groups (Hilton and Von Hippel 1996) while discrimination is the differential treatment of group members based primarily on these beliefs (Whitley and Kite 2006, pg. 6-8). Once a stereotype is formed, it can be activated and used to influence thoughts (prejudice) and behaviors (discrimination) toward members of a targeted group. The effects of stereotypes and discrimination have received modest attention in the marketing literature with the majority of the research focusing on gender and racial disparities. However, the effect of other stereotypes and discrimination seem important to nearly every aspect of American society as the population continues to diversify.

Members of stereotyped groups often suffer social stigmatization in which they are ascribed a disadvantaged status because their appearance or behavior deviates from that of the dominant group. Weight stigma (i.e., obesity stigma) is especially harsh in that group members are commonly believed to both look and act differently than the general population. Research on weight stigma is relatively new, but it is robust enough to show that this bias is powerful, pervasive, and resistant to change. Obesity has traditionally been treated as a clinical condition that should be investigated from the perspectives of physiology and psychology (Hiller 1981). Due to its prevalence, however, it seems appropriate to look beyond the health and psychological effects of the obesity stereotype to consider its implications in other common settings.

Stereotyped groups include certain employers, such that people have knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions about the typical characteristics of many service providers (Weber and Crocker 1983). These stereotypes may be used to shape expectations about the performance of the service firm and may then impact evaluations of the service encounter. For example, in a test of gender-linked stereotypes, subjects expressed high expectations (positive performance) of a female wedding planner and a male financial advisor and low expectations (negative performance) when the service provider's gender was counter-stereotypical for the occupation (Matta and Folkes 2005). These findings support previous consumer research, which indicates that a counter-stereotypical service provider is evaluated differently than a stereotypical service provider (Iacobucci and Ostrom 1993). Moreover, stereotypes are found to be more salient as

explanations for performance outcomes when the provider is counterstereotypical for the job (Matta and Folkes 2005). An obese employee may seem counterstereotypical for service jobs, which tend to be labor intense.

### **Implications for Services Firms**

In light of the upward trend in obesity, it is apparent that obese individuals do, and will, make up a substantial percentage of the world's workforce. The United States provides a prime example of how obesity may impact the job market. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2007) projects the majority of new jobs created from 2006 to 2016 will be in service-providing industries and more than 75% of all employment opportunities created after 2016 will be with service firms. If current obesity trends continue, one can expect that 25% of those 15.6 million new jobs will be filled by an obese worker. Thus, forward-thinking service providers should consider and prepare for the possible challenges associated with an obese employment pool.

Curiously, weight stigma is intensifying even as obesity rates continue to increase (Latner and Stunkard 2003). The shift in population weights has not negated the ideal of the extremely thin woman (and man) as the image of prototypical beauty (Fallon 1990) in Western culture. Although this ideal is genetically unattainable for the masses, there are still significant societal costs for those who do not fit the mold. This mentality may create bias in the marketplace and it is a catalyst for both customer (Klassen and Clayson 1989) and employer (Puhl and Brownell 2003) weight discrimination. Prospective employees who do not meet the body image criteria are often eliminated from job candidacy, regardless of their other qualifications (Rothblum, Miller, and Garbutt 1988).

It is unlikely that any firm will publicize a policy of only hiring and promoting physically attractive people. In practice, reputable businesses such as Abercrombie and Fitch and IBM achieve the same goal by only hiring employees whose appearance aligns with the corporate "image" (Crow and Payne 1992). Obese employees who manage to survive the hiring process can expect to face lower performance ratings (Jasper and Klassen 1990), inferior job assignments (Bellizzi and Hasty 1998) and fewer promotions (Chung and Leung 1987). Although blatant discrimination is socially unacceptable in most instances, the expression of negative attitudes toward obese people is one of the last accepted forms of prejudice in American society (Puhl and Brownell 2003). Allon (1982) determines that of all the conditions for which a person may be stigmatized in Western culture, including race, ethnic group membership, religious affiliation,

physical handicap, or sexual preference, obesity may be the most debilitating. Since it is generally more permissible to openly disparage obese people than those with other social stigmas, it is logical to expect that weight discrimination will occur in the marketplace.

Weight is typically not job-critical, but decision makers often rely on stereotypical beliefs about an employee's physical characteristics and how these qualities match job requirements (Heilman 1983; Olian, Schwab and Haberfeld 1988). The prevailing view in the services marketing literature suggests that employees *are* the organization in the minds of customers (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996). Thus, a negative evaluation given to a stereotyped employee may very well extend to the service provider. In fact, the results of a study by Klassen, Clayson, and Jasper (1996) indicate that a salesperson's stigmatized appearance can affect perceptions of the store image and store management. Yet, what is a firm to do when its best, or possibly its only, employees are members of a stigmatized group?

This issue may be especially important for frontline service jobs where the employee/customer interface is an intricate part of the service experience. In these positions, the employee plays a critical role in perceptions of overall firm performance. On the surface this may appear to be a human resource issue, as it relates to the assignment of people to specific positions. However, the results of this research have important marketing implications because the actions, appearance, and demeanor of service employees are extensions of the service provider.

### **Research Purpose**

The present research consists of three empirical studies. To expand understanding of the obesity phenomena, the first study examines three important research questions. The first, and primary, question is: Are negative stereotypes activated when customers encounter an obese employee in a service transaction? Second, do these negative stereotypes remain at the employee level or do they also trigger negative evaluations of the service firm with which the obese employee is associated? Third, do these negative stereotypes transfer to evaluations of job performance and satisfaction with the encounter? Answers to these questions may hold important implications for managers.

Specifically, it is proposed that the presence of an obese employee in a service environment evokes negative stereotypes about the encounter, which can result in negative consequences for the service firm. For instance, obesity is commonly associated with meanness, stupidity, ugliness, unhappiness, laziness, and unfriendliness (Brylinsky and Moore 1994) in



Western culture. Likewise, obese employees are viewed as less disciplined and less competent as compared to their thinner peers (Paul and Townsend 1995). These attitudes have been shown to negatively impact wages, promotions, and employment status. However, researchers have failed to fully explore the ramifications of these evaluative judgments on a frontline transaction.

The null hypothesis that customers are indifferent to the presence of an obese employee in the service environment is herein tested. If the null hypothesis is not rejected, managers can reasonably conclude that customer perceptions of obese frontline personnel are consistent with perceptions of average-size employees. Yet, extant obesity literature suggests that negative obesity stereotypes will dominate customer perceptions and will result in negative attitude formation. If this is the case, strategies identified in the second and third studies of this manuscript may be effective in suppressing the negative stereotypes and perhaps eliciting a more positive obesity stereotype.

This research contributes to the literature in several ways. First, and most importantly, it attempts to identify a theoretical explanation and empirical evidence that support broad assumptions regarding the role of stereotypes on evaluations of employees and the firm. There is a well-developed consensus that people hold negative attitudes towards obesity, but there is little empirical evidence to support these notions outside of the psychology and medical disciplines. In spite of its broad consequences, only a few marketing scholars (e.g., Campbell and Mohr 2008; McFerran et al. 2009) have investigated the role of weight on customer behavior. The present work examines the employee- and firm-related implications of obesity and applies two actionable strategies that may buffer against the negative associations of the obesity stigma.

### **Manuscript Outline**

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. This first chapter outlines the importance and timeliness of obesity research in a services context and positions this work as an extension of both stereotype and services research. Chapter Two presents the conceptual background, hypotheses, and methods section for Study One. Chapter Three presents the conceptual background and methods sections for Study Two, while Chapter Four contains the conceptual background and methods sections for Study Three. Chapter Five offers a summary of the findings, acknowledgement of research limitations, and discussion of managerial implications.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **STUDY ONE – CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND METHODS**

The purpose of Chapter Two is to review the conceptual framework and present the hypothesized relationships for Study One. The study objective is to provide empirical evidence of a negative link between employee obesity and customer evaluations of frontline service employees and the firm.

### **CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND**

#### **Stigma By Association**

When a member of a dominant social group associates with a member of a stigmatized group, a “courtesy stigma” may occur whereby the dominant group member is assigned a stigma as a function of a perceived alliance with the stigmatized person (Goffman 1963). Neuberg and colleagues (Neuberg et al. 1994) observed a similar phenomenon, which they called stigma by association. This research confirmed the existence of the courtesy stigma and provided empirical evidence of the denigration of a dominant group member when in the presence of stigmatized other. Attempts to buffer negative associations by establishing similarities between the dominant group member and the observer and by presenting the dominant group member as a person of affluence were unsuccessful. The theoretical basis for this research stems from Heider’s (1946) balance theory, which posits that a tendency towards balanced states in human relationships exists. People strain for cognitive consistency in the perceptions of others; therefore, an imbalance initiates attempts to restore cognitive equilibrium through modifications of evaluative responses or perceptions of ownership (Heider 1946). An imbalance occurs when an observer feels positive affect for the dominant group member and negative affect for the stigmatized other when the two are affiliated. Equilibrium is restored by either stigmatizing the dominant group member or destigmatizing the stigmatized other.

When imbalance exists, the link in which the observer is most heavily invested tends to be most resistant to change (Neuberg et al. 1994). For example, if the observer has strong, positive perceptions of the dominant group member (relative to the strength of negative opinions

of the stigmatized person), balance is restored through destigmatization of the stigmatized person. Conversely, if the observer has strong negative views of the stigmatized person, restoration is most likely achieved through the stigmatization of the dominant group member (Neuberg et al.1994). A series of anecdotal and experimental studies (e.g. Sigelman et al. 1991) reveals that stigma by association processes can lead observers to infer that an individual possesses the identical stigma as an associated other. Following this line of reasoning, one might posit that the stigmatized other can benefit from an association with a dominant group member that is viewed positively. For instance, the association of celebrities with stigmatized groups (e.g., Angelina Jolie with the war in Darfur or Bono with HIV/AIDS) can serve a destigmatizing function, at least for observers who hold the celebrities in high esteem (Omoto, Snyder, and Berghuis 1993). Existing research on the destigmatization of stigmatized groups typically addresses strategies relevant to changing group-level stereotypes and prejudices (e.g., Miller and Brewer 1984) and has not focused on the change of individual-level evaluations.

However, destigmatization by association is a difficult task to achieve. Although some stigmas may be more amenable to destigmatization attempts than others, it is noted that White perceivers stigmatize other Whites for associating with Blacks (Saenz and Smith 1993), heterosexuals are stigmatized for associating with homosexuals (Sigelman et al. 1991), and male job applicants are stigmatized for their mere proximity to an obese woman (Hebl and Mannix 2003). The latter situation prevails regardless of the perceived depth of the relationship between the male job applicant and the obese woman. Destigmatization may be particularly difficult for stigmas that activate ego-defensive concerns and processes relevant to expectation violation (Neuberg et al. 1994). In addition, Lofland (1969, p. 210) concludes that stigmatization is a more common process in our society than destigmatization: “Entrance into normality from pivotal deviance occurs less often than entrance into deviance from normality.” In other words, it is more difficult to improve perceptions of a deviant person than it is to tarnish the reputation of a respectable person.

People fear stigma by association with gay people so much that they will attempt to socially distance themselves from a lesbian even when doing so requires agreement with socially unpopular positions or the utterance of sexist epithets (Swim, Ferguson, and Hyers 1999). Individuals who are dating a disabled person are stigmatized as less intelligent and sociable than those dating a nondisabled person (Goldstein and Johnson 1997). Yet, stigma by association can

lead to positive outcomes such as the perception that dating a disabled person is indicative of trustworthiness and compassion (Goldstein and Johnson 1997). Nonetheless, these positive associations are consistent with the labeling of people as different. Taken together, these studies suggest that there are social consequences for associating with a person who may be viewed as deviant (Whitley and Kite 2006).

Prior research suggests that qualitatively distinct, psychological processes may be evoked by scenarios in which socially esteemed and socially derogated people interact. A compelling case can be made for considering the context within which stigma-relevant impression processes occur. Solomon (1999) found that balance theory can be applied successfully to understand consumer behavior and to design effective marketing strategies that may counter stigmatization. The present research assesses the importance of appearance cues in the formation of brand impressions based on the body of research which establishes that people use employee appearance cues to judge organizations (e.g., Dawar and Parker 1994; Rafaeli 1993). If the physical characteristics of one individual can alter impressions of a firm, then it follows that the stigmas associated with a person may also affect firm evaluations. The present research addresses the corporate consequences of stigmatization, which is an understudied phenomenon. Stigmatized individuals are entering society in unprecedented numbers due to changes in building codes, judicial decisions, and institutional mandates for diversity (Hebl and Kleck 2000). The increased prevalence of stigmatized people requires better insight on stigma transference so that firms can fully capitalize on the diversity and resources of those who may possess what are perceived to be undesirable characteristics (Hebl and Mannix 2003). Obesity is one such characteristic.

### **Obesity and Psychical Attractiveness**

Physical appearance cues habitually trigger stereotype and stigma application. Attractiveness functions as an evaluative cue (Webster and Driskell, 1983) causing people to determine that attractive people will fare better than their unattractive counterparts in nearly every aspect of life success and satisfaction (Dion, Bercheid, and Walster 1972). Attractiveness stereotyping occurs throughout adulthood (Johnson and Pittenger 1984) and leads observers to attribute positive personality traits to people they view as attractive (Dion and Dion 1987). Rubin and Peplau (1975, pg. 67-68) find that the attribution of these positive traits exemplifies

observers' inclinations to view "beautiful" people as deserving of the rewards they receive. As such, there is a positive bias toward attractive people based heavily on cultural portrayals of attractiveness (Eagly et al. 1991). Taking these findings in aggregate, Dion and associates (Dion, Bercheid, and Walster 1972) conclude that in the eye of the beholder, what is beautiful is good. Following this rationale, one could logically reason that what is unattractive is bad. Thus, a person may receive negative personality ascriptions as a mere consequence of his or her perceived unattractiveness.

In addition, less physically attractive people are more heavily stigmatized than their more attractive peers (Eagly et al. 1991). Since obesity is often associated with unfavorable and unattractive physical appearance (Pingitore et al. 1994), obese people are often the victims of physical attractiveness stereotyping. Furthermore, the attractiveness stereotype has self-fulfilling properties in that it biases the stereotype holder's behavior toward a target and elicits stereotype confirming behavior from that person (Snyder, Tanke, and Bercheid 1977). The research reveals that people who are perceived to be physically attractive receive better treatment from others and reciprocate with behavior that is more friendly, likeable, and sociable than people regarded as unattractive. These outcomes highlight serious managerial concerns, which include how service firms can justifiably convey positive brand images through personnel selection without discriminating against unattractive employees (McAdams, Moussavi, and Klassen 1992).

Now that thinness has become associated with attractiveness in Western cultures (Millman 1980), distinctions between the attractive and less attractive have been extended to assessments of body size (Young and Powell 1985). Researchers have found that obese job applicants receive negative evaluations due to the perceived unattractiveness of increased body size (Rothblum, Miller, and Garbutt 1988). The physical unattractiveness of an obese salesperson has also been shown to impede customer patronage of an associated store (Everett 1990).

Since obesity is often associated with physical unattractiveness, and unattractiveness is commonly shunned by the public, it follows that the physical unattractiveness of an obese employee may have dire consequences for the hiring firm. This may be particularly true when transactions involve extensive customer/provider interface, as is the case in many service sectors. Of particular interest is the fact that the impact of an obese worker on the perception of a service encounter seems to be related to the worker's perceived unattractiveness (Klassen and Clayson

1996). Specifically, findings from several literary streams across numerous contexts provide evidence that unattractiveness and obesity are related and both lead to unfavorable customer evaluations (Everett 1990; Fallon 1990; Pingitore et al. 1994). Thus, it is hypothesized:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Customers will perceive an obese frontline service employee to be less attractive than an average-weight frontline service employee.

### **Weight Stigma and Discrimination**

Differential treatment in the marketplace based on group membership rather than individual differences is noted to occur across many consumption contexts, ranging from automobiles and real estate sales to browsing in retail establishments and even hailing a taxicab (Feagin and Sikes 1994; Williams, Henderson, and Harris 2001). Members of the dominant group in a society often benefit from an unearned, preferential standing based solely on the presence of race, gender, or another demographic variable (McIntosh 1998) The dominant group has the power to dictate which other groups share their favored status. To the ingroup, this preference seems natural and is often accepted as a social norm. For stigmatized groups, preferential treatment is seldom realized.

Obesity stigma has a “master status” that supersedes the effects of all other stigmas (Canning and Mayer 1966; Larkin and Pines 1979). It is so potent that even obese people ascribe to it and believe the resulting discrimination is warranted (Crandall 1994). Members of other stigmatized groups tend to gain solidarity by fostering group pride and by recognizing that negative outcomes are often caused by illegitimate bias from outgroup members (Crocker and Major 1989). Obese people do not follow this pattern but instead adopt the stereotypes of the outgroup, which manifests as ingroup denigration (Lewis and Sherman 2003). In addition, unlike other stigmatized groups, obese women do not have a sense of collective identity, which fosters both an awareness of discrimination and a sense of group pride (Crocker and Luhtanen 1990).

It seems counterintuitive, but as the number of obese individuals increases, weight stigma is intensifying (Latner and Stunkard 2003). Goffman (1963) concludes that unlike any other group, the obese carry the stigma of both physical and moral offense. The former is an abomination of the body that elicits immediate, negative affective responses based on its

aesthetically displeasing qualities (Jones et al. 1984) whereas the latter is a character stigma that implies some inherent moral failure (Lyman 1978). To be stigmatized, individuals must have a characteristic that is devalued by the dominant group and that sets them apart from the primary group. Obese people are perceived to have both of these afflictions. Therefore, they are often viewed as second rate citizens and receive public disparagement.

Reports of weight discrimination have nearly doubled in the U.S. in the past decade. One study finds that weight discrimination is common in both institutional and interpersonal situations. In some cases, it is even more prevalent than gender and race-based discrimination (Puhl, Andreyeva, and Brownell 2008). In fact, weight-based discrimination has increased 66% in the past decade, up from 7% to 12% for U.S. adults (Puhl, Andreyeva, and Brownell 2008). Approximately 28% of men and 45% of women who are severely obese say they have experienced discrimination because of their weight (Puhl, Andreyeva, and Brownell 2008). Obese people report significantly more daily discrimination, work-related discrimination, and health-related discrimination compared to average weight individuals (Carr and Friedman 2005). Individuals in the highest obese categories were 40–50% more likely to report any type of discrimination than average weight people (Puhl, Andreyeva, and Brownell 2008). In general, there is credible evidence of the existence of weight discrimination.

Both laboratory and field research show that negative perceptions of obese individuals exist in employment settings (Roehling 1999), health care settings (Teachman and Brownell 2001), and in educational institutions (Crandall 1995). Obese individuals are viewed as undesirable interaction partners (Fallon 1990; Miller et al. 1995) and unlikeable patients (Allon 1982; Hebl and Xu 2001). In the workplace, obese managers are rated as less worthy of recognition (Decker 1987) and obese salespeople are viewed as less trustworthy, punctual, energetic, and well mannered than are average-weight salespeople (Zemanek, McIntyre, and Zemanek 1998). Solvay (2000) notes that negative attitudes toward obesity can arise for numerous reasons including fears about productivity, safety, insurance, attendance, customer and co-worker acceptance, costs of accommodation, accessibility, or worker's compensation costs. Accordingly, business settings may foster an atmosphere for obesity stigma, because even the employer may have apprehensions about the presence of an obese employee.

Service personnel are very important in high-contact industries, as they are one of the last ways a firm can truly differentiate itself (Bush et al. 1990). When a service is difficult to

evaluate, consumers often look to other cues, such as aspects of the interaction, in assessing service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985). The behavior of a frontline employee plays a critical role in shaping customers' perceptions of the service interaction (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990). Customers' perceptions of employee performance are important drivers of customer satisfaction (Winsted 1997) and to many customers, the social aspect of the service encounter is crucial in the formation of evaluations of service quality (Gremler and Gwinner 2000). In fact, Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner (1998) found that consumers rated social benefits as more important than special treatment considerations in their determination to interact with service firms. When considered in combination with the literature on negative obesity stereotypes and stigmas, one concludes that frontline service interactions will be influenced by the presence of an obese employee.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** Customers will expect a better service interaction with an average-weight employee than with an obese employee.

**H<sub>3</sub>:** Customers will expect greater satisfaction from their interaction with an average-weight employee than with an obese employee.

### **Negative Obesity Stereotypes**

In a seminal article, Devine (1989) establishes that a stereotype is a well-learned set of associations that link a set of characteristics with a group label. Three key aspects of stereotypes are thought to exist. First, stereotypes emanate from shared beliefs that are an integral part of culture (Jones 1997). Second, they may be either accurate or inaccurate, in that they can be accurate for the group as a whole, but inaccurate for any single group member. Men, for instance, weigh more than women, so it is highly probable that a specific man will weigh more than a specific woman. Yet, it is possible that using this belief as a benchmark will result in an inaccurate characterization of a particular group member, as some women weigh more than most men.

The third aspect of this tripartite theory implies that stereotypes describe the characteristics group members are believed to possess (a descriptive component) as well as characteristics they should have (a prescriptive component). For example, it is true that most



airline pilots are male (a descriptive stereotype), but in the minds of some people this may mean airline pilots should be male (prescriptive stereotype) (Whitley and Kite 2006). As stereotypes become increasingly prescriptive, they erect stringent boundaries on members of the stereotyped group and shape the expectations of out-group members about the characteristics and capabilities of others.

Obese people elicit almost uniformly negative responses from others (Allon 1982) and are frequently blamed for their condition (Weiner, Perry, and Magnusson 1988). Empirical research concludes that the obese are frequently stereotyped as unattractive, morally and emotionally impaired, and socially inept (Crandall and Biernat 1990). Other researchers find that obesity connotes ugliness, laziness, and personal failing (Puhl and Brownell 2001) to many people. Obese individuals are placed at an intellectual disadvantage because of the bias that results from these negative stereotypes (Elias et al. 2003) and may be disproportionately inclined to a low socio-economic status (Sobal and Stunkard 1989) as compared to non-obese persons. It is important to acknowledge that obese people experience many levels of bias that result in social and economic hardships.

In addition, there is convincing evidence that stereotypes are well established in memory before children develop the cognitive ability to question or critically evaluate their validity (Allport 1954; Porter 1971). An indication of the severity of obesity stereotypes is the young age at which the negative attitudes become evident. Children as young as three years old associate obesity with meanness, stupidity, unhappiness, and unfriendliness (Brylinsky and Moore 1994) and as they mature these negative beliefs seem to intensify. Ehrlich (1973) stated that stereotypes are part of the social heritage and no one can escape learning the prevailing stereotypes assigned to major groups. As such, it is very difficult for those in Western culture to avoid exposure to the negative stereotypes associated with frequently stigmatized groups, such as obese persons.

Richardson and colleagues (1961) conducted one of the most highly cited studies on children's attitudes towards obesity in which they noted that obese children are ranked last among children with crutches, in wheelchairs, with amputations, and with facial disfigurements in terms of who other children most desire as a friend (Richardson 1961). Latner and Stunkard (2003) replicated the study only to find that in spite of greater exposure to obese people in daily life, the bias is stronger now than reported in the original research. Furthermore, college students

describe obese people as more self-indulgent, less self-disciplined, and less attractive than average weight individuals (Perez-Lopez, Lewis, and Cash 2001). These negative stereotypes associated with obesity are learned during youth and seem to linger through adulthood.

In comparison to memberships in other stigmatized groups, such as homosexuals or alcoholics, obesity is immediately discernable and cannot be suppressed from the public. Evaluation by others is irrepressible and is therefore thought to effect most social interactions (Crocker, Cornwell, and Major 1993). Thus, it is hypothesized:

**H<sub>4</sub>:** Customers will attribute more negative traits to an obese frontline service employee than to an average-weight employee.

So strong are the stereotypes associated with obesity that obese and non-obese people are equally likely to dislike obese people and to blame them for their situation (Allon 1982; Crandall and Biernat 1990). For example, many obese people display negative weight attitudes and react to stigma by applying negative stereotypes to themselves (Crocker, Cornwell, and Major 1993). In contrast to members of other stigmatized groups, obese people are particularly apt to fault themselves for the negative reactions their weight elicits rather than attribute outcomes to the prejudice that others hold (Cahnman 1968). This point is demonstrated by Crocker et al. (1991) who find that obese women who experience rejection from an attractive man tend to internalize the blame for the male's negative response rather than hold him liable for weight discrimination. Unlike other stigmatized groups, such as ethnic minorities (Crocker, Cornwell, and Major 1993), obese women do not blame the male's evaluation on his prejudice against them.

Several studies suggest that obese people have difficulties with self-regard (Rodin, Silberstein, and Striegel-Moore 1984; Wadden et al. 1984) and do not show in-group bias because they may harbor little group identification. This may occur because group identification does not enhance self-esteem (Tajfel and Turner 1985). In addition, obese people may see themselves as capable of leaving the group through dieting and exercise (Crandall 1994), while group exodus is not a normal option for most members of other stigmatized groups. Thus:

**H<sub>5</sub>:** Evaluations of obese frontline service employees will not vary as a function of customer weight.

## **Impact of Frontline Employees**

There is increased recognition of the importance of the person-to-person encounter between customer and service provider in the overall success of the marketing effort. This is especially true for “pure” service providers such as hairstylists and physicians who are distinguished by a high degree of person-to-person contact (Solomon et al. 1985). In these instances, evaluating a service encounter is a complex process. Customer satisfaction, quality perceptions, and behavioral intentions may hinge wholly on the perception of employees (Solomon et al. 1985) rather than the actual service outcome. From this perspective, all frontline employees are marketers in that they define the product and promote it directly to consumers (Shostack 1977).

Empirical research in service quality and customer satisfaction establishes the importance of the quality of customer/employee interactions in the assessment of overall quality and/or satisfaction with services (Brady and Cronin 2001). Rigorous research by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) identifies five independent dimensions of service quality, the majority of which pertain to the human interaction element of service delivery. Other research validates the importance of the human interaction component of services in customer evaluations of retail outlets (Westbrook 1981), medical services (Swartz and Brown 1989), and professional services (Quelch and Ash 1981). Finally, Solomon and associates (Solomon et al. 1985) determine that the interaction between a service provider and a customer is an important determinant of the customer’s global satisfaction with the service. Since the prevailing view in the services literature suggests that employees *are* the organization in the minds of customers (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996), it is likely that customers view the characteristics of the frontline employee as indicative of the quality of the entire service firm. Therefore, one might anticipate that the prominent stereotypes that the obese are emotionally impaired, lazy and selfish may lead to negative outcomes for the firms that employ them.

Booms and Nyquist (1981) surmise that the employee-customer interface is key in differentiating between good and bad service organizations. If a customer leaves a business with a negative impression of the employee, that negative view tends to taint other aspects of the experience such as perceptions of the service environment and service promptness, even if these elements were satisfactory. Likewise, it is suggested that people readily generalize from one person in a group to other group members (Kahneman and Miller 1986). Within a service

context, this means that generalizations about one service provider could extend to others in the organization (Folkes and Patrick 2003). For instance, if a bank teller is courteous, customers will tend to believe all tellers at that branch are courteous until proven otherwise. Thus, service customers may draw inferences about a firm's general performance based on the behavior of an individual employee.

Prior researchers have analyzed the effects of information valence on product inferences but not service inferences. In line with prospect theory and associated frameworks, negative information about a product has been found to influence brand perceptions more than positive information (Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991). Applying this rationale to a service exchange, researchers have found that when one employee displays a negative characteristic, the tendency to transfer that characteristic to all employees of that firm is more immediate than when a positive characteristic is displayed. Customers are more likely to form unfavorable opinions and less likely to patronage the service provider in the future (Folkes and Patrick 2003). This suggests that when consumers have access to credible information, they are prone to display a negative bias toward services just as they would for products.

Employers correctly believe that consumers frequently judge an entire firm from the impression left by one or a few personnel. This argument is supported by survey results that suggest that physical attractiveness plays a major role in the selection of women for highly visible positions (Kaslow and Schwartz 1974). Another study shows that the presence of an obese salesperson negatively contaminates the image of the employer in the minds of students to the extent that the business is seen as less successful than its competitors (Klassen and Clayson 1989). Moreover, respondents doubt a firm's ability to make sound hiring decisions when an obese person is hired for a highly visible position (Klassen, Clayson, and Jasper 1996). Finally, employee-customer interactions have been found to affect customers' assessments of a firm's service quality (Hartline and Ferrell 1996). Therefore:

**H<sub>6</sub>:** Customers will display lower evaluations of a service firm with an obese frontline service employee than for a service firm with an average-weight employee.

### **Mediating Effect of Interaction Quality**

Some employers may contend that obese employees are poor role models who reflect negatively on the corporate image and elicit negative reactions from customers. This argument is based on the belief that people are generally averse to physical unattractiveness and disfigurement (Berchied and Walster 1974) and favor physical characteristics that are positively correlated with attractiveness. Studies of this aversion and its correlates in the labor market reveal that (1) more attractive men and women earn higher incomes than their unattractive peers (Quinn 1978), (2) attractiveness is positively correlated with starting and subsequent salaries of MBA graduates (Frieze, Olson, and Russell 1991), and (3) attractiveness increases the likelihood that a worker will be chosen for a professional position (Hatfield and Sprecher 1986). In general, attractive people are believed to have better social skills and be more productive workers than unattractive people (Dion, Bercheid, Walster 1972).

Obesity, which is highly correlated with unattractiveness, is also relatively undesirable in employment settings. Numerous studies have linked obesity to labor market outcomes, and much emphasis has placed on wages. Baum and Ford (2004), Cawley (2004) and Averett and Korenman (1996) all find a wage penalty for obesity in the range of .6 – 12% (Han, Norton, and Stearns 2009). Another author (Everett 1990) finds that the presence of an obese salesperson impedes customer patronage of the associated store. The often-reported negative relationship between BMI and wages is greater in occupations requiring interpersonal skills with presumably more social interactions (Han, Norton, and Stearns 2009). Everett (1990) and Puhl and Brownell (2001) demonstrate that obese people are viewed as unfit for public sales positions and are more appropriate for telephone sales involving little face-to-face contact. These findings are explained by either consumers' or employers' distaste for interaction with obese workers. Since obesity is often shunned by the public, it follows that these negative perceptions impact social (Latner and Stunkard 2003) and professional (Miller et al. 1995) interactions with an obese person. Thus, it is hypothesized:

**H<sub>7</sub>:** Interaction quality will mediate the effect of employee obesity on customer evaluations of a service firm.

## TRANSFERENCE OF THE OBESITY STIGMA

Study One exposed subjects to a service scenario and varied exposure to a service employee who was depicted before and after significant weight loss. Details of the study are provided next.

### Subjects and Design

Hypotheses were tested using a main effect, between subjects design with two experimental conditions (employee weight: obese and average). Participants also responded to multiple qualitative tasks designed to assess their information processing modes. A pretest with 60 undergraduate students examined the weight manipulation prior to the main study. It was important to remove as many confounds from the weight stimuli as possible. Thus, an extensive Internet search was conducted to identify a photo pair with the greatest similarity in model appearance before and after a weight loss of at least 60 pounds. The objective was to identify a model that would be perceived as obese in one photo and average weight in an associated photo. The selected photo pairs depicted women with an obvious and significant weight change and who had similar clothing, hairstyles, facial expressions, and overall resemblance before and after weight loss. Caucasian women were targeted for the photo pairs in an effort to control the effects of ethnicity (e.g., Hebl and Heatherton 1998) and gender (Harris, Harris, and Bochner 1982; Stake and Lauer 1987).

A two-step process was employed whereby 30 students were shown before and after weight loss photos of five women taken from the Internet and asked to rank each woman on her resemblance before and after weight loss. The remaining 30 students were shown either the before or after photo of the woman with the highest ranking and asked to complete a survey composed of open-ended and Likert-scaled questions about the woman's appearance, expected job performance, and perceived attributes. Subjects were specifically asked to describe the body shape of the woman in their photo on a scale that ranged from 1 = "Very Underweight" to 5 = "Very Obese" as a manipulation check. All subjects correctly answered the manipulation check by identifying the body shape of the woman in their photo [ $F(1, 28) = 273.80, p < .001$ ] ( $M_{\text{Obese}} = 3.97$  vs.  $M_{\text{Avg}} = 3.00$ ). Thus, the highest ranked photo pair was retained for use in the main study.

Three trained coders classified the responses to the open-ended questions in terms of the subject's use of positive, neutral, or negative language. Negative responses were coded "1", neutral responses were coded "2", whereas positive responses were coded "3". The results were used to conduct an ANOVA, which revealed that negative language was used significantly more by subjects who were shown the photo of the obese woman than by those who viewed the photo of the average-weight woman [ $F(1, 28) = 9.58, p < .01$ ] ( $M_{\text{Obese}} = 1.28$  vs.  $M_{\text{Avg}} = 2.00$ ). Several subjects reported that the model's stance was "cocky" or "arrogant" when pictured at the average weight. These findings speak to the conservative nature of the hypotheses tested and the strength of obesity stereotypes if the hypotheses are supported.

One hundred sixteen undergraduate business students from the southeastern U.S. were recruited to take part in the main study and were awarded extra credit for their participation. Six respondents were eliminated from consideration due to their inappropriate responses to an embedded quality enhancement item, leaving a total of 110 usable responses. The item read, "If you are reading this, please do not respond to this question." Subjects participated in the study by visiting a website where they were assigned to one of the two conditions. A completely randomized design ensured the assignment of an equal number of subjects to each of the cells. This randomization was an effort to control for unmeasured factors in the experiment (Garson 1998).

## **Procedure**

Following random assignment, subjects were forwarded to a survey portal where they viewed a brief scenario and the obesity manipulation. Subjects were asked to envision themselves as patrons visiting a restaurant for the first time. Upon arrival, an employee greets them, shows them to a table and states that she will be their server. While reading the scenario, subjects were shown a digital photo ostensibly depicting the server. The photo showed either the before or after weight loss picture of the woman from the pretest standing in front of a blank wall dressed in a dark shirt and pants similar to the type of clothing worn by the wait staff in a casual dining establishment. Graphic design software was used to standardize the woman's clothing color and the background color in the photo. The woman, who was 5'6", was shown at approximately 245 lbs in the "before" photo and at approximately 159 lbs in the "after" photo. Photographic stimuli of this type have been used consistently in obesity research in the psychology and sociology literature (see Hebl and Turchin 2005; King et al. 2006; Shapiro,

King, and Quinones 2007). The stimuli are presented in Figure 2.1.

After reading the scenario, subjects completed a brief filler task about the aesthetics of the restaurant to conceal the true purpose of the study. Next, they were asked to envision themselves interacting with the server during the service encounter and to use that image to complete a thought listing and a series of validated scales. All scales had acceptable reliability scores ranging from .90 (negative traits) to .98 (repurchase intentions). A manipulation check assessed whether subjects accurately perceived the weight manipulations (“Which adjective best describes the body shape of the employee in the photo?”). The scale range was 1 = Severely underweight, 2= Underweight, 3 = Average weight, 4 = Obese, 5 = Severely obese). Results confirmed the effectiveness of the manipulation [ $F(1, 108) = 286.82, p < .001$ ] ( $M_{\text{Obese}} = 4.31$  and  $M_{\text{Avg}} = 3.00$ ). No subjects correctly identified the research hypotheses.

### **Dependent Measures**

The employee-level dependent measures were attractiveness, interaction quality, expected satisfaction with the server and negative traits. Firm-level measures included brand equity, service quality, repurchase intentions, and satisfaction. A social desirability scale was included as a control variable. All items were measured using seven-point Likert or semantic differential scales.

A seven-point, semantic differential scale with origins in Winstead (1997) was used to measure expected satisfaction with the server, (e.g., “As a result of my interaction with the waitress I would be:”). The scale included five positive anchors “Very Satisfied”, “Very Pleased”, “Very Favorable”, “Better Than I Expected”, and “Very Happy.” Next, subjects provided their assessments as to whether or not the server possessed six negative stereotypical traits. The traits (lazy, slow, unhealthy, lacking self discipline, insecure, poorly groomed) were adopted from an Obese Persons Trait Survey (OPTS) developed by Puhl and associates (Puhl, Schwartz, and Brownell 2005). During pretesting, the original 10-item scale was reduced to six items to obtain an acceptable measure of internal reliability ( $\alpha = .90$ ). Subjects rated the items on Likert scales anchored by 1 = “Not at all” to 7= “Extremely.” This scale included personality and performance traits and therefore is meant to test  $H_4$ . Next, perceived interaction quality ( $H_2$ ) was assessed by use of a two-item scale from Brady and Cronin (2001) (e.g., “The quality of my



interaction with the restaurant's employees would be high"). The scale anchors were 1 = "Strongly Disagree" and 7 = "Strongly Agree".

In the next section, subjects provided their firm-level evaluations. They began by providing thought listings about the restaurant and then completed validated scales for brand equity, service quality, repurchase intentions, satisfaction with the firm, and attitude toward the service provider, which all assessed H<sub>6</sub>. Five items were obtained from Rust, Zeithaml, and Lemon's (2000) measure of perceived brand equity (e.g., "Would you pay more for services from this restaurant than for other restaurant's services?"). The scale anchors were 1 = "No, Not At All" and 7 = "Yes, Very Much". Two items from Brady and Cronin (2001) assessed respondents' anticipated service quality (e.g., "I expect the general quality of the restaurant's service would be high"). The scale anchors were 1 = "Strongly Disagree" and 7 = "Strongly Agree". Six items with roots in a scale created by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) were used to measure repurchase intentions (e.g., "What is the probability that you would return to this restaurant?"). The positive anchors were "Likely", "Existent", "Possible", "Certain", and "Definitely Would". Three items from Mano and Oliver (1993) measured firm satisfaction (e.g., "My choice to eat at the restaurant was a wise one."). Three items (Day and Stafford 1997) measured attitude toward the service provider (e.g., "Would your impression of the restaurant be: Bad?, Unfavorable?, Negative?").

Subjects also answered the 13-item short form of the social desirability scale from Strahan and Gerbasi (1972) (e.g., "I have never deliberately said something that hurt someone's feelings."). The social desirability scale measures response tendencies as well as the impact of social desirability on self-report measures specific to the present research. Reynolds (1982) determined that this version of the original Marlowe Crowne social desirability scale (1960) is the most parsimonious and viable form for psychometric use.

Finally, subjects completed two single-item measures. The first inquired about their own perceived body size ("Which adjective best describes your present body type?") and was intended to assess H<sub>5</sub>. The second asked for a description of the server's body size, which was used as a manipulation check. Both scales were a five-point Likert format anchored by 1 = "Severely Underweight" and 5 = "Severely Overweight". In addition, two scales assessed H<sub>1</sub>, which had to do with the perceived attractiveness of the employee. The first attractiveness scale had four items (e.g., "Do you find the employee to be: "Elegant", "Sexy", "Beautiful" or

“Attractive”) that were borrowed from DeShields et al. (DeShields, Kara, and Kaynak 1996).

The second, single item scale asked subjects to choose an adjective that best described the person in this photo (possible responses were 1 = “Very Unattractive”, 2 = “Unattractive”, 3 = “Average Looking”, 4 = “Attractive”, 5 = “Very Attractive”).

## Results

Hypotheses 1-7 were tested in this study. One-way ANCOVAs were performed to compare means across groups for all dependent variables. The results are presented in Table 2.1 and depicted in Figure 2.2. The findings support the general hypothesis that employee obesity significantly effects customer evaluations. Preliminary results confirmed that social desirability was not significantly related to any dependent variable and so it was removed. Thus, there was no reason to believe that subjects’ answers were reflective of social or normative pressures instead of their true thoughts (Marlowe and Crowne 1960). It should be noted that a social desirability effect would have produced similar or higher evaluations for the obese employee as compared to the average-weight employee. As the data indicate, this was not the case.

H<sub>1</sub> was supported by the finding that the obese employee was rated less attractive than the average-weight employee [ $F(1, 108) = 90.47, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .456$ ] ( $M_{\text{Obese}} = 2.43$  vs.  $M_{\text{Avg}} = 4.35$ ). Moreover, 75% of the subjects in the obese condition rated the employee as “Very Unattractive” or “Unattractive” on the single item attractiveness scale whereas only 7% percent of subjects gave similar ratings to the average-weight employee [ $F(1, 108) = 69.17, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .390$ ]. Subjects also provided higher ratings of interaction quality [ $F(1, 108) = 11.93, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .099$ ] for the average-weight employee than the obese employee ( $M_{\text{Obese}} = 4.35$  vs.  $M_{\text{Avg}} = 5.25$ ), which supports H<sub>2</sub>.

A comparison of the average-weight and obese employee indicated a higher level of expected satisfaction with the average-weight employee [ $F(1, 108) = 10.03, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .085$ ] ( $M_{\text{Obese}} = 4.87$  vs.  $M_{\text{Avg}} = 5.58$ ), thus supporting H<sub>3</sub>. The obese employee was judged to have more negative traits than the average-weight employee [ $F(1, 108) = 37.38, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .257$ ] ( $M_{\text{Obese}} = 4.16$  vs.  $M_{\text{Avg}} = 2.62$ ), which supported H<sub>4</sub>. Additional analysis indicated that subject body weight did not significantly influence the allocation of negative evaluations for the server [ $F(2, 94) = .38, p = .68, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .007$ ] or the service provider [ $F(2, 94) = .25, p = .78, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .005$ ], thereby supporting H<sub>5</sub>.

As expected, there was strong support for the hypothesis that employee weight influences firm-level evaluations. Subjects provided higher ratings of brand equity [ $F(1, 99) = 13.35, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .110$ ], service quality [ $F(1, 99) = 14.37, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .117$ ], satisfaction with the service provider [ $F(1, 99) = 12.09, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .101$ ], and repurchase intentions [ $F(1, 99) = 10.40, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .088$ ] for the service provider with the average-weight employee. Thus,  $H_6$  was supported. The mean values for the obese and average conditions are illustrated in Figure 2.2.

The mediating effect of interaction quality on the relationship between employee obesity and firm evaluations (brand equity, service quality, repurchase intentions, and satisfaction with the service provider) was tested by use of the regression procedure developed by Baron and Kenny (1986). Four conditions for mediation were examined. The first condition is satisfied if the independent variable affects the mediator. The second condition is satisfied if the mediator affects the dependent variables. The third condition is satisfied if the independent variable affects the dependent variables with the mediator removed from the model. The fourth condition is satisfied if the direct relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variables become nonsignificant (i.e. full mediation) or reduced (i.e. partial mediation) when the mediating variable is added back to the model. Table 2.2 summarizes the results of the mediation and Sobel tests.

The first three conditions were satisfied by the significance of the regression coefficients ( $p < .05$ ) for the three paths in question. Results for the fourth condition indicated full mediation for all the firm-level dependent variables: attitude toward the service provider ( $p = .06$ ), brand equity ( $p = .17$ ), service quality ( $p = .08$ ), repurchase intentions ( $p = .44$ ), and firm satisfaction ( $p = .22$ ) when interaction quality is added to the model. In addition, the Sobel (1982)  $z$ -test was conducted to assess the relative size of the indirect paths. The  $z$ -test is significant if the size of the mediated path is greater than the direct path (Sobel 1982). The test results were significant for each of these dependent variables, thereby confirming the robustness of the indirect effect. The analysis of latent variables and the testing of indirect effects were used to control for possible shared method effects that can occur when measures are highly correlated (Kenny 2009).

Collectively, the mediation analyses indicate that the observed negative effect of employee obesity on firm-level dependent variables operates through interaction quality. Accordingly, H<sub>7</sub> was supported.

## **Discussion**

The goal of this study was to establish a relationship between employee obesity and customer evaluations of the employee and the service firm. A scenario-driven experiment was conducted and primary data were collected from a convenience sample of undergraduate students. Separate univariate ANCOVA tests were conducted to assess the effect of employee obesity on eight dependent measures. The empirical evidence suggests that service patrons are less satisfied with an employee's performance and form unfavorable impressions when an obese employee is encountered in a service setting. Customers in the average-weight condition were substantially more favorable towards interacting with their server than the subjects with the obese employee. Furthermore, the obese employee received higher scores on all negative character traits as compared to the average-weight employee. In general, subjects indicated a greater preference for interaction with the average-weight employee than with the obese employee, and the obese employee received more negative evaluations from subjects than the average-weight employee.

Study One also produced empirical evidence to demonstrate that service firms with obese employees receive lower customer evaluations than firms with average-weight employees. Subjects felt the firm that employed the average-weight employee had higher brand equity than the firm employing the obese employee. Additionally, firms employing the obese employee were perceived as providing low interaction quality and low service quality in general. Subjects also indicated greater satisfaction and purchase intentions for the restaurant with the average-weight employee. None of the observed effects varied as a function of the subject's weight.

Study One also investigated the mediating effect of interaction quality on the links between employee obesity and the firm-level dependent variables. The results reveal that interaction quality fully mediated all of the observed relationships. Thus, one can conclude that the presence of an obese frontline employee can worsen perceptions of interaction quality, which in turn lowers customer evaluations. These results expand on the previous findings that obese employees are penalized in the labor market (Lynn and Simons 2000; Quinn 1978). They also suggest that obesity not only impacts employee evaluations, it can also produce undesirable

consequences for an affiliated firm. Collectively, the findings indicate that customers are sensitive to the weight of the frontline service employee to the extent that it plays a major role in their enjoyment of the service experience.

Study Two will replicate and extend the results of Study One. The goal is to suppress negative obesity stereotypes in order to probe the boundaries of the Study One effects and to identify a strategy by which firms can manage stereotypes associated with obese frontline service personnel.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **STUDY TWO – CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND METHODS**

The remainder of this research focuses on the identification of managerial techniques that may reduce the occurrence of unfavorable customer evaluations caused by stereotypes associated with obese frontline service employees. Such knowledge may provide a competitive advantage and a valuable tool by which managers can shape customer perceptions. The implications are extensive in as much as they impact corporate planning, revenue generation, and customer decision-making. Study Two draws on signaling theory and utilizes environmental cues as a means to offset the negative effects of employee obesity within a services context.

#### **Environmental Cues**

Environmental psychologists argue that a critical role of the physical environment is its ability to facilitate or hinder the goals of people within an environment (Canter 1983). Likewise, prior research shows that consumers use a variety of cues to help them evaluate their surroundings. For example, signs (Mills and Paul 1982), lighting, color (Bellizzi, Crowley, and Hasty 1983), scent (Chebat and Michon 2003), and visible employees (Grewal et al. 2003) can all elicit positive customer responses in service environments. Environmental factors are said to be the most important cues used by consumers to evaluate restaurant quality (Rys, Fredericks and Luery 1987). Moreover, the presence and depiction of service personnel (a social cue) strongly impacts customer perceptions of an associated firm (Grewal and Sharma 1991).

If environmental cues can positively influence customer perceptions, it follows that they can also negatively influence customer perceptions. The effect may be particularly strong when perceptions are prone to be somewhat negative, such as when an obese employee is present. The results of Study One confirm that the presence of an obese employee may serve as a tangible indicator of poor service quality. It is proposed that the inclusion of positive environmental cues may be an effective way of reducing the discriminatory responses that follow this activation.

In Study Two, the author extends the research on environmental cues by using positive design cues to communicate high service quality in the presence of the negative social cue associated with employee obesity. In the absence of other information, subjects will use the

obesity stereotype to guide their thoughts. By adding a countervailing cue, the author expects to offset negative stereotypes associated with obesity. The next section contains a review of the signaling theory literature, which is the conceptual basis for Study Two.

### **Signaling Theory**

It is common for retailers to have full knowledge of the quality associated with their physical goods or services before making a sale, whereas buyers are seldom privy to the same amount of information. This imbalance is largely due to a product's experience properties, which are unobservable and can only be ascertained through product use (Nelson 1970). In an effort to balance the information asymmetry, consumers look for cues to help them differentiate between high-quality and low-quality firms. In response, firms may create pre-purchase signals to allay customer concerns over product quality (Boulding and Kirmani 1993). These signals take the form of extrinsic quality cues such as price (Milgrom and Roberts 1986), advertising (Ippolito 1990), warranties (Lutz 1989), and country of origin labels (Teas and Agarwal 2000). Consumers may heavily rely on these signals to make inferences, especially when direct observation is complex or impossible.

It is in the buyer's best interest to decipher between high-quality and low-quality sellers if for no other reason than to manage expectations. Yet, in the absence of severe and definite penalties for misrepresentation, all sellers will freely convey high-quality claims. When searching for quality indicators, buyers should look for credible signals, which are profitable for the high-quality seller to send but unprofitable for the low-quality seller to imitate. Imagine that a high-quality garage completes 95% of its oil changes in 15 minutes, while a low-quality garage completes 45% of its oil changes within that same timeframe. If initial costs are comparable, the high-quality garage has incentive to guarantee the completion of each oil change within 15 minutes. It is unwise for the low-quality garage to emulate the guarantee because its excessive completion time will result in lost corporate revenue, reputation or assets (Ippolito 1990). Thus, signals are a useful tool to resolve consumers' classification issues and the threat of potential deceit by low-quality sellers.

Several authors recently tested the effectiveness of signaling theory in influencing task response and offsetting negative perceptions. Signaling theory was used to successfully neutralize negative country of origin effects and elicit favorable product evaluations

(Magnusson, Haas, and Zhao 2008). Likewise, signaling theory was used to allay consumers' risk perceptions and facilitate product adoption (Shimp and Bearden 1982), while price cues were used to affect risk perception and purchase intentions (Erevelles, Roy, and Yip 2001). Drawing on this line of research, one can reason that the use of quality cues in a service context may suppress negative attitudes and attenuate adverse outcomes. The present study specifically tests the ability of signaling theory to defuse the effects of negative obesity stereotypes to the degree that customers will make fewer negative ascriptions for a frontline service employee and the service firm. The topic of stereotype activation is the focus of the next section.

### **Information Ambiguity**

Frish and Baron (2006) define ambiguity as “the subjective experience of missing information relevant to a prediction” (page 152). This interpretation suggests that decision makers may treat ambiguous, inexact, incomplete, or vague information as insufficient (Van Dijk and Zeelenberg 2003). Moreover, decision makers tend to discount ambiguous information when it is received (thereby rendering it of virtually no importance). As a result, the choices of people confronted with ambiguous information may resemble those of people who have no information at all.

In the presence of uncertainty, people are often reluctant to think through the implications of disparate outcomes and as a result may violate established choice processes. Shafir and Tversky's (1992) research on the disjunction effect finds that participants are less willing to purchase a service when given ambiguous information than when they receive definite results regardless of whether the results are positive or negative. Other researchers (Soman and Gourville 2001) find that people are less eager to consume in price bundling situations due to ambiguity with regard to the individual cost of each transaction. Both sets of researchers theorize that ambiguous situations may be cognitively complex in that ambiguity tends to complicate a person's understanding of the implications of possible outcomes (Soman and Gourville, pg. 36; Tversey and Shafir, pg. 306). This prior work provides both a cognitive and motivational rationale to bolster the argument that decision makers are not likely to base their judgments on ambiguous information (Van Dijk and Zeelenberg 2003).

In the presence of ambiguous information, the expectations of an individual are shaped by stereotypical beliefs about categories, such as the person's profession, ethnicity, or gender (Kunda and Sherman-Williams 1993). Once perceivers receive unambiguous and individuating



information about a person such as past behaviors, or hobbies, the stereotype no longer affects their impressions of that person (Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982). For example, a stimulus person's ethnicity can have significantly less impact on a subject's judgments than specific information about that person (Locksley, Hepburn, and Ortiz 1982). Other research confirms that stereotypes will affect judgments about an actor when only the context for a behavior is known but this effect diminishes when unambiguous information is provided (Gigerenzer, Hell, and Blank 1988). Furthermore, prior research suggests that unambiguous information is more important than ambiguous information in information sharing in organizational settings (Eylon and Allison 2002). Thus, stereotypes should have little or no effect on customer judgments when paired with specific, unambiguous information, because the behavior is not open to misinterpretation and should be understood similarly regardless of the person performing the behavior (Kunda and Sherman-Williams 1993).

The presence of quality cues throughout a service encounter should be viewed as unambiguous information. For example, most clients will form favorable opinions of a dentist who operates a pristine office, uses the latest dental technology, and phones patients following oral surgery to insure their recovery. Study One described a setting in which a customer had no individuating information about the employee. Thus, a prominent heuristic was used to arrive at judgments of the obese employee and the firm (Einhorn and Hogarth 1981; Kunda and Sherman-Williams 1993). When unambiguous quality cues are present in the service environment, however, customers should view them as individuating information about the firm and use them as a basis for impression formation. Thus,

**H<sub>8</sub>:** Quality cues will attenuate the negative effect of employee obesity on customer evaluations of frontline service personnel, but only when the cue is unambiguous.

**H<sub>9</sub>:** Quality cues will attenuate the negative effect of employee obesity on customer evaluations of an associated service firm, but only when the cue is unambiguous.

## BUFFERING EFFECT OF UNAMBIGUOUS QUALITY CUES

### Subjects and Design

An online portal was used to collect data for both a pretest and a main study. Thirty-seven undergraduate students participated in a mixed design pretest to confirm the robustness of the stimuli used for the weight manipulation in Study One and to identify effective quality cues for use in Study Two. Students were shown either the before or after weight loss photo of the woman from Study One and asked to answer a series of short questions about her expected performance as a service employee. All subjects correctly answered the manipulation check by identifying the body shape of the woman in the respective photo as either obese or average weight. The subjects made significantly higher employee-level evaluations [ $F(1, 34) = 5.49, p = .03$ ] and firm-level evaluations [ $F(1, 34) = 10.29, p < .01$ ] for the average-weight employee than the obese employee. Thus, the results of Study One were replicated and the photo pair was retained for use in Study Two.

In response to three separate questions, subjects provided a short list of environmental cues they found indicative of high service quality in a retail store, full-service restaurant, and professional office building. Subjects also indicated the extent to which they would patronize a service establishment if the woman in the respective photo was employed as a waitress, accountant, dentist, medical doctor, gym employee, or retail associate. Subjects were significantly less likely to select a service firm when the obese woman was employed in a labor intensive position such as a waitress [ $F(1, 35) = 5.71, p = .02$ ], a gym employee [ $F(1, 35) = 3.93, p = .03$ ], or a retail associate [ $F(1, 35) = 7.00, p = .01$ ]. The retail store context was chosen for Study Two as a conservative test of the hypotheses and to enhance the generalizability of the research. Most people regularly visit retail stores, as opposed to gyms, and are familiar with the activities that occur in this setting. Likewise, retail stores are commonly used in the design of service marketing research and are a realistic and reasonable option for service experiments (e.g., Simons and Kraus 2005).

When identifying service quality cues for a retail establishment, store cleanliness, organized merchandise, and well-lit displays were mentioned frequently by subjects. Clearly priced merchandise, amply stocked shelves, and short checkout lines were also cited as obvious

environmental cues for a high quality retailer. This feedback on expected quality cues was used to create a retail scenario for use in the main study.

One hundred eleven undergraduate business students were recruited from a large, public university in the southwestern United States as subjects for the main study. A plethora of academic literature suggests that ethnicity plays an important role in obesity perceptions and there is mounting evidence that White and minority subcultures may evaluate weight differently (Cunningham et al. 1995; Hebl and Heatherton 1997; Hebl and Mannix 2003). While much of the research in this area generally concludes that Blacks allow greater latitude in the body sizes they find attractive (e.g., Hebl and Turchin 2005), an evolving area of study looks beyond the Black/White divide to analyze the cultural perceptions of other races. For instance, Juarbe (1998) finds that in the Latino culture, an overweight body image is often accepted as a sign of wealth, good health, or motherhood. Furthermore, Latino cultural norms towards modesty may support heavier body weight among women and may curb motivation to lose weight (Padgett and Biro 2003).

The southwestern United States was chosen for Study Two because it offered a more ethnically diverse population than was available for Study One. In addition, the use of a diverse sample addresses concerns about the homogeneity of the Study One sample and the possibility that the observed effects were a result of cultural norms. A sample of subjects that is more amenable to body size provides a conservative test of the hypotheses and should allay these concerns. The sample contained 54.2% women and 45.8% men. With respect to ethnicity, 63.1% of respondents were Caucasian, 21.6% were Hispanic, 9.9% were African-American, 3.6% were Asian-American, and 1.8 indicated "other". As expected with the convenience sample, 87.4% of subjects were 18-24 years old and 11.7% were 25-35 years old. Students received extra credit toward their final course grades for their participation in the study. The hypotheses were tested using a 2(employee weight: average; obese) X 2(quality cue: ambiguous, unambiguous) between subjects experiment. None of the respondents were eliminated from consideration due to inappropriate responses to the embedded quality enhancement item.

## **Procedure**

Each subject read a scenario in which he or she was asked to imagine visiting a new retail store for the first time while running errands alone one Saturday afternoon. Upon entering the store, the subject noticed an award plaque posted on a wall just inside the main door, which read

“Welcome to Bartley’s, Voted #1 in Customer Service”. A photo of an actual plaque was embedded in the scenario for realism (See Figure 3.1). Bartley’s, a fictitious store name, was used to eliminate a priori attitudes that may arise from the use of an established retailer. The remainder of the scenario incorporated feedback from the pretest to describe a retail store environment with clear signals of high firm quality (clean floors, organized displays, short checkout lines, etc.) or an absence of high quality cues. The use of consistent, high quality cues throughout the scenario represented the unambiguous/certain condition. The absence of high quality cues following the initial cue (i.e., inconsistency) represented the ambiguous condition as it created uncertainty about the quality status of the retailer. (cf. Van Dijk and Zellenberg 2003) The subject browsed the main floor of the store and proceeded to the second floor to continue shopping.

At this point, each subject was shown one of the weight stimuli photos and told that the person in the photo was the retail associate assigned to the area of the store where the subject browsed. The associate in the unambiguous condition greeted the subject with a simple “Hello” whereas the associate in the ambiguous condition did not acknowledge the subject. The acknowledgement served as a quality cue because previous researchers have found that cues of positive interaction between customers and employees, such as acknowledging customers as they enter a store, may positively influence perceptions of interpersonal service quality (Baker, Grewal, Parasuraman and Voss 2002). Furthermore, in the unambiguous condition, the associate wore a badge with the store slogan “#1 In Customer Service” right below her name. In the ambiguous condition, the associate’s badge only listed her name.

After reading the scenario, subjects completed thought listings and the same survey items from Study One. All scales had acceptable construct reliability scores ranging from .92 (service quality) to .98 (attitude toward the service provider). A manipulation check confirmed that all subjects accurately perceived the weight manipulations. A separate manipulation check, “What level of service quality did you expect to receive from only reading the information in the scenario?” confirmed the effectiveness of the quality cue manipulation. Ninety-three percent of respondents correctly identified the level of service quality implied in their respective scenarios. Subjects finished the exercise by completing a separate, short survey about their retail shopping behavior as a means to avoid hypothesis guessing.

## Results

One-way ANCOVAs were conducted to compare means across groups for all the dependent variables. Initial analyses indicated that subject ethnicity, age, gender or perceived body type did not interact with any dependent variable [ $p > .11$ ] and the covariates were therefore removed from the model. As expected, subjects generally held higher impressions of the employee and the store when quality information was provided than when it was not ( $p < .01$ ). The obesity stereotype produced significant main effects for satisfaction with the server [ $F(1, 107) = 13.31, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .111$ ], repurchase intentions [ $F(1, 107) = 11.93, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .100$ ], brand equity [ $F(1, 107) = 3.98, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .036$ ], and service quality [ $F(1, 107) = 10.39, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .089$ ]. The main effects of employee obesity on attitude toward the service provider [ $F(1, 107) = .00, p = .96, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .000$ ], and firm satisfaction [ $F(1, 107) = .64, p = .43, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .001$ ] were not significant.

More importantly, all main effects were qualified by significant interactions. In all instances, evaluations of the obese employee were significantly higher when quality cues were present than when no quality information was provided. Specifically, subjects were more satisfied with the obese retail associate when quality cues were present in the retail environment than when absent [ $F(1, 107) = 6.62, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .058$ ]. Similarly, subjects gave higher ratings for repurchase intentions [ $F(1, 107) = 5.11, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .046$ ], brand equity [ $F(1, 107) = 6.40, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .056$ ], service quality [ $F(1, 107) = 4.34, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .039$ ], attitude toward the service provider [ $F(1, 107) = 4.32, p = .04, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .000$ ], and firm satisfaction [ $F(1, 107) = 7.20, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .063$ ] for the retail store with an obese employee and unambiguous quality cues than the store with an obese employee and ambiguous quality cues. Significant two-way interactions were observed for each of these dependent variables. Thus, the results of Study Two support  $H_8$  and  $H_9$ .

Collectively, the analyses indicate that the use of unambiguous quality cues attenuates the effect of obesity stereotypes on customer evaluations of frontline service personnel and the associated service firm. Mean differences for the average-weight and obese employee were not significant across the unambiguous condition. When quality cues are unambiguous, subjects rated the obese and average weight frontline employees similarly. When cues were ambiguous, the obese employee was rated lower. The mean values are presented in Table 3.1.

## **Discussion**

Study Two was inspired by the desire to reduce the negative inferences associated with obese frontline service employees. The inclusion of positive quality cues proved to be an effective method for suppressing obesity stereotypes. Specifically, the presence of unambiguous, high quality indicators in a retail environment successfully elevated subjects' perceptions of the store with an obese employee so that it was viewed as comparable to the store with an average-sized employee. Stores received significantly lower evaluations when high quality indicators were ambiguous in the retail environment, especially when an obese frontline employee was present. Thus, it appears that the unambiguous quality cues attenuated subject's unfavorable judgments of the obese employee and the affiliated retail store. One subject stated during debriefing: "The fat employee gave me a bad impression of the store at first. But, I could tell from the store characteristics that I had entered a quality place. I assumed that if she was working in this high quality store she must be high quality too." It should be noted that these results were obtained with a relatively diverse sample that was expected to be somewhat amenable to obesity.

This finding builds on existing research by Erdem and Swait (1998) who determined that marketing mix elements not only provide direct information, they also convey indirect information on attributes about which consumers are imperfectly informed. Therefore, quality cues may be especially effective for new service firms or for first time patrons of an existing firm. In both scenarios, little a priori information exists that can be used to establish positive first impressions. Prominently displaying quality cues is a reasonable tactic for most, if not all, service providers that desire high quality images. Yet frequent mergers, budget cuts and downsizing has left serious service gaps in many sectors. Perhaps revisiting this simple practice will help to level the playing field for firms with obese frontline service personnel.

Study Three looks beyond the attenuation of the obesity stereotype to test the possibility of stereotype reversal. The background, hypotheses, and results for Study Three are provided in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **STUDY THREE - CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND METHODS**

Study Three investigates strategies by which positive, rather than negative, stereotypes of obesity may be activated. The author attempts to reverse the negative effects of employee obesity so that the presence of an obese frontline employee evokes positive trait evaluations for the employee and the hiring firm.

#### **CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND**

##### **Stereotype Activation**

Although commonly considered a social problem and an obstacle to be hurdled (Ashmore and Del Boca 1981), stereotypes are not always derogatory. Consider for instance that women are stereotyped as too conversational while also earning reputations as good communicators. In this instance, a single group is linked to a characteristic that has negative and positive associations simultaneously. Some prior research indicates that stereotypes are activated automatically on exposure to members of a stigmatized group (e.g., Bargh 1999; Devine 1989), whereas other research indicates that motivations and goals can facilitate or inhibit the stereotype activation process (Kunda and Spencer 2003). The latter research explains that stereotype activation is more likely to occur when stereotype application will satisfy individual goals. Alternatively, when stereotype application will thwart individual goal attainment, activation is obstructed. A synthesis of this information prompts two relevant questions: First, if both positive and negative stereotypes exist for a group, which stereotype is automatically activated upon exposure to group members? Second, given that numerous stereotypes exist for a group, is it possible to intentionally evoke one stereotype over another?

The first question is addressed in a study by Sinclair and Kunda (1999) in which the researchers demonstrate that self-enhancement goals may activate negative stereotypes when an outgroup member is motivated to disparage the stigmatized group. Conversely, positive stereotypes may be activated when outgroup members are motivated to hold others in high regard. For instance, a Caucasian shopper in an electronics store may be motivated to activate positive stereotypes of Blacks when complimented by a Black sales associate on his or her

knowledge of digital cameras. Activation of the positive stereotypes allows the customer to view the sales associate as credible and to fully appreciate the self-enhancing benefits of the compliment. The motivation to activate positive stereotypes about a stigmatized group is particularly fervent when there is reason to doubt the outgroup member's competence. Thus, the impetus to activate positive stereotypes over negative stereotypes may be especially strong if it results in positive affirmations for the ingroup member.

In any situation where positive and negative stereotypes exist, multiple motives may be at play. The effects of these motives can either reinforce or offset one another (Kunda and Spencer 2003). It may be very difficult to predict which stereotype will be activated in this instance. In Study Three, the author tests the effectiveness of joviality and self-disclosure of pseudo-relevant information as mechanisms to intentionally evoke a positive obesity stereotype that may offset - or perhaps reverse - the negative implications associated with negative obesity stereotypes. The conceptual background for these processes is presented next.

### **Jolly Fat Hypothesis**

Empirical evidence suggests that the obese not only suffer public ridicule, they also experience many psychological side effects. These effects include life dissatisfaction, reduced self-esteem (Stunkard and Sobal 1995) and heightened risks of depression (Rosmond 2004). Depression is the most pervasive mental disorder within Western society (Costa-Font and Gil 2006). Like obesity, depression is believed to largely contribute to the deterioration of society's physical health (Costa-Font and Gil 2006), to societal woes such as significant productivity losses, and to increased medical costs (Thomson and Richardson 1999). Simultaneous increases in obesity and depression have led some researchers to hypothesize a link between the physical state (e.g., obesity) and a mental state (e.g., depression). This link is quite controversial with some studies showing a positive relationship (Onyike et al. 2003; Puhl and Brownell 2001), some producing a null effect (e.g., Friedman and Brownell 1995), and still others showing a surprising, inverse relationship (Palinkas, Wingard and Barrett-Connor 1996). The lack of reliable findings across studies clearly suggests the need for additional research in this area.

Building on the idea that obesity is inversely related to depression, the "jolly fat" hypothesis purports that obese people of both genders have low levels of anxiety and obese men are less likely to have depressive symptoms as compared to the general population (Crisp and McGuinness 1976). These findings support the results from very early researchers (e.g., Simon



1963), who determined that obese men are at least more content than others. Many clinicians have stated that overeating may help to console some people, especially those who are insecure and lonely (Crisp and McGuiness 1976). Eating high fat and high carbohydrate comfort foods is known to induce happiness and may make them feel and function better (Cannetti, Bachar and Berry 2002). People also eat comfort food in an attempt to reduce the activity in the chronic stress-response network with its attendant anxiety (Dallman et al. 2003). The central theme here is that periodic overeating by obese people may sometimes be a protective mechanism against the experience and display of anxiety and depression (Dallman et al. 2003). Consequently, obese people may have a brighter disposition than their thinner peers.

In a follow up test of the jolly fat hypothesis, Crisp and associates replicated their results for men 40+ yrs of age. The results for women were weaker but still substantial with respect to an association between obesity and low anxiety in older working class women and between obesity and low depression in younger middle-class women (Crisp, Sittampaln, and Harris 1980). Other authors have replicated these results such that obese people were found to be less neurotic and more extroverted than nonobese people (Kittel et al. 1978) and less anxious and less depressed (Li et al. 2004; Stewart and Brook 1983). Obese people also exhibited lower anxiety and depression than average weight and thin subjects (Jasienska et al. 2005; Segers and Mertens 1974). Finally, a correlation between increased BMI and decreased suicide rates has been documented (Mukamal et al. 2007). Collectively, these studies support the jolly fat hypothesis and imply that obesity is associated with at least one positive attribute.

Happy, obese people are often described as “jolly” and personal obesity has launched successful careers for many comedians and comedic actors. Joviality is perhaps best personified in obese characters such as Santa Claus, John Belushi and Chris Farley. Likewise, “fat” is the adjective most commonly given by subjects in the pretest to Study Three to describe a jolly person. In addition, research findings indicate that some aspects of humor are related to obesity and individuals with a keen sense of humor may be more prone to engage in unhealthy lifestyle behaviors such as overeating (Martin 2004). Freud developed the idea of humor as a defense mechanism and “a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of distressing affects that interfere with it; it acts as a substitute for the generation of these affects” (Freud 1905, pg. 228-299). Therefore, humor may be used by obese people as an attempt to deflect the negative affect that accompanies obesity discrimination. This may explain the observed correlations between

obesity and joviality. In the present research, humor is used to operationalize joviality. The use of humor should accentuate a service employee's personality, thereby diminishing the importance of body type.

### **Effect of Stereotypes on Brand Personalities**

Stereotypes and brand personalities are similar in that both may cause consumers to develop beliefs about the characteristics of typical group members, which are subsequently used to evaluate individuals belonging to these groups (Wetzel 2009). Consumers may form expectations about the exemplary appearance and behavior of a "typical" employee of a brand in much the same way as general stereotypes are formed about the exemplary appearance and behavior of a "typical" member of a social group (Aggarwal 2004; Matta and Folkes 2005). Brand personality impressions and brand attitudes are often updated after interacting with a brand's employees. The impact of an employee's behavior depends on how the employee is categorized in a customer's mind. When an employee is regarded as an exemplar of the brand, the individual's behavior is abstracted into a general impression that is transferred to the entire brand (Crawford et al. 2002). Alternatively, when the employee is viewed more as an individual with a unique set of characteristics, the employee is disassociated with the stereotype and the behavior is not fully generalized to the brand. The latter process is referred to as subtyping or "fencing off" (Kunda and Oleson 1995; Yzerbyt, Coull, and Rocher 1999).

Consumers may be motivated to engage in employee subtyping when there is a real or perceived dependency on an employee for the successful outcome of an economic exchange (Cowley 2005). Outcome-dependent consumers have a great need to accurately understand and predict a partner's behavior (Fiske and Neuberg 1990). Since individuating attributes are normally considered a more precise indicator of behavior than group membership (Kunda and Thagard 1996), that information is used to evaluate the employee and form personal, rather than brand, impressions. The behavior of an employee who is viewed as an individual should exert little impact on brand attitudes (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). Wetzel (2009) finds that the degree to which consumers subtype an employee is heavily determined by the extent to which they depend on the employee, their motivation to form an accurate impression, *and* the amount of information they possess about the employee.

Frontline service employees commonly reveal personal information to customers in an attempt to improve customer/employee interaction (Crosby et al. 1990; Price and Arnould 1999).

If an employee likes a customer and enjoys their interaction, the employee may reveal personal information (Wetzel 2009) that may be totally immaterial to the completion of the transaction yet reflective of the employee's personal experiences and interests (Price and Arnould 1999). This type of information is referred to as "pseudo-relevant" information (Hilton and Fein 1989). When pseudo-relevant information (individuating information) is shared, consumers do not generalize an employee's behavior as strongly to perceptions of the brand as compared to when pseudo-relevant information is withheld (Klein and Snyder 2003). Consumers who are not outcome-dependent do not subtype an employee after receiving pseudo-relevant information. They generalize the behavior to the brand regardless of other information available to them (Wetzel 2009).

Consumers rarely enter a service encounter without an a priori impression of the firm or its brand. Prior to a customer's first visit, perceptions of brand personality are formed by advertising, media reports, and word-of-mouth. In particular, a new customer is likely to consider a frontline employee primarily as an exemplar of a service firm (Wetzel 2009). Accordingly, the employee's appearance and behavior should exert a powerful impact on brand personality impressions (Klein and Snyder 2003). In the case of an obese frontline employee, the customer may draw on the negative stereotypes of obesity to negatively update the brand impression. If the obese employee shares pseudo-relevant information during the interaction, however, impression updates to the brand may not occur. In this instance, the original brand impression is maintained and the employee is evaluated as an individual. If the pseudo-relevant information references the employee's weight, it may also affect the customers' expressions of prejudice if the employee is obese. That topic is addressed in the next section.

Furthermore, connecting behavior and information sharing are used by frontline employees to build rapport with customers in retail settings (Gremler and Gwinner 2008). Connecting behavior consists of an employee's attempt to relate to customers through humor, pleasant conversation, and friendly interactions. This is the strategy most frequently used by retail employees to establish rapport, as it is quite effective at placing customers at ease during a service transaction (Gremler and Gwinner 2008). Likewise, Gremler and Gwinner (2008) explain that information sharing in this context entails offers of advice to the customer, sharing knowledge on a subject of mutual interest with the customer, or asking detailed questions to understand the customer's needs. The purpose is to address the customer's specific situation,

which creates an opportunity to develop rapport. Thus, both connecting behavior and information sharing are antecedents to customer rapport. As a result, researchers recommend that managers encourage employees to engage in pleasant conversation, offer advice, probe to clarify customer needs, and use humor (i.e., joviality) during customer interactions.

### **Justification Suppression Model**

The justification suppression model (JSM) proposes that once a genuine prejudice (a negative evaluation of a social group or individual that is significantly based on group membership) is experienced, justification or suppression factors will cause an individual to express or constrain this prejudice (Crandall and Eshleman 2003). Social norms, beliefs, values, and personal standards are a few suppression forces. Suppression processes reduce the public display of prejudice and minimize the private experience of prejudice. Conversely, justifications are a releasing mechanism that permit the expression of an otherwise suppressed prejudice without the distress of shame or guilt. Beliefs in social hierarchies, dispositions attributions, stereotypes, and threat are all justification sources (Crandall and Eshleman 2003). Sufficiently justified prejudices are legitimized to the degree that the prejudice expression can seem deserved by the targeted group (e.g., prejudice toward pedophiles, prejudice towards terrorists). Thus, the JSM provides a definitive structure for understanding why discrimination occurs (King et al. 2006).

The JSM implies that removal of a perceiver's justification for expressing prejudice should reduce the likelihood of discrimination towards an obese person. Across several experiments, King and associates (2006) found that when justifications for prejudice expression existed, covert, interpersonal prejudice was expressed toward obese shoppers. In a sample of actual shoppers, obese individuals were also more likely to report interpersonal discrimination than average weight individuals. A perception of weight controllability was the mechanism for the observed reduction or increase in interpersonal discrimination aimed specifically toward obese women. These findings suggest that interventions aimed at decreasing interpersonal discrimination should target justifications for prejudices. Perceptions of weight controllability should be targeted when obesity discrimination is of concern (King et al. 2006).

In summary, the disclosure of individuating information should have greater impact on customer evaluations of a frontline employee than stereotypes about a stigmatized group to which the employee belongs (Kunda and Thagard 1996). An expression of joviality and the

disclosure of pseudo-relevant information are both individuating information about an employee. Therefore, both should be effective in buffering against the generalized effects of negative obesity stereotypes. The presence of an obese frontline employee may activate negative obesity stereotypes. Information disclosure concerning weight controllability should confine customer impressions to the individual level (King et al. 2006) thereby suppressing negative updates of the firm (Klein and Snyder 2003). Joviality expression, such as the use of humor, should evoke the positive “jolly” stereotype (Freud 1905). More formally:

**H<sub>10</sub>:** Disclosure of pseudo-relevant information will attenuate the negative effect of employee obesity on customer evaluations of frontline service personnel (H<sub>10a</sub>) and of an associated service firm (H<sub>10b</sub>) when the information eliminates justifications for obesity discrimination.

**H<sub>11</sub>:** Expressions of joviality will evoke a positive obesity stereotype, which will attenuate the negative effect of employee obesity on customer evaluations of the frontline service employee (H<sub>11a</sub>) and the associated service firm (H<sub>11b</sub>).

The obesity stereotype is potent, pervasive, and supersedes the effects of all other stigmas (Canning and Mayer 1966; Crandall 1994; Larkin and Pines 1979). It is therefore possible that neither joviality nor information sharing alone is capable of reversing negative obesity stereotypes. However, a combination of joviality and pseudo-relevant information might prove more effective because the two provide independent, specific, sources of information that the frontline employee is an individual worthy of unique consideration rather than an exemplar of negative obesity stereotypes. Therefore:

**H<sub>12</sub>:** A three-way interaction is predicted where the combination of a joviality cue and pseudo-relevant information are expected to reverse the negative effects of employee obesity.

## REVERSAL OF NEGATIVE OBESITY EFFECTS

### Subjects and Design

A group of twelve non-students completed a pretest as a filler task while participating in a focus group for another marketing study. The pretest was presented as the first phase of the focus group. Participants were not compensated for completion of the pretest but each person earned \$50 for their involvement in the focus group. Participants answered open-ended questions to indicate the job type where joviality expression is most appropriate, the type of joviality expression that is most appropriate for personnel in these positions, and the set of traits that best describe a jovial employee. They answered two seven-point Likert scaled questions to indicate whether their interaction with a jovial employee would result in more positive evaluations of the employee or more favorable repurchase intentions towards the associated firm than an interaction with a more stoic employee. Participants also read the proposed justification manipulation adapted from research by King and associates (2006) that described an employee's disclosure of pseudo-relevant information that either justified or did not justify obesity discrimination. Participants indicated whether, or not, this information would affect their perceptions of the employee.

The feedback revealed several prominent themes. A preponderance of the respondents felt that it was appropriate to express joviality in most public service jobs, especially restaurant, retail, and customer service positions. Wearing brightly colored apparel, wearing a "smiley" shirt/button, or having humorous dialogue with the customer were all mentioned as realistic ways an employee could express joviality while at work. The terms most frequently used to describe a jovial employee were "fat", "friendly", "laughing" and "positive attitude". Participants indicated only a slight preference for interacting with the jovial employee rather than the non-jovial employee [ $F(1,10) = 3.014, p < .07$ ] ( $M_{\text{Jovial}} = 4.90$  vs.  $M_{\text{Stoic}} = 4.62$ ). However, purchase intentions for the firm with the jovial employee were significantly higher than those for the firm with the even tempered employee [ $F(1, 10) = 5.77, p < .05$ ] ( $M_{\text{Jovial}} = 5.00$  vs.  $M_{\text{Stoic}} = 3.98$ ). All participants in the discrimination justification provided condition stated that the information would lead to unfavorable evaluations of the employee. Five of the six participants in the condition where the pseudo-relevant information did not justify obesity discrimination stated that

they would have favorable or neutral evaluations of the employee. The information from the pretests was used to create manipulations for the main study.

Two additional pretests were held to examine the effectiveness of specific joviality manipulations. All participants were graduate students in business courses at a university in the southeastern United States. The second pretest was a within-subjects design, which exposed subjects to the joviality manipulations proposed by subjects in the first pretest. Thirty-three students rated the manipulations on their perceived joviality and appropriateness for a service environment. Participants viewed either the before or after weight loss photo from the previous studies and rated the woman on her perceived joviality. None of the proposed manipulations received high ratings on joviality. Significant results were not observed for the difference in joviality perceptions for the before and after pictures.

Graphic design software was used to superimpose the joviality cues in the before and after weight loss photos and a third pretest was conducted. Fifty-seven graduate students were randomly assigned to one of ten conditions: 2(employee weight: average; obese) X 5(joviality: smiley face button, smiley face T-shirt, humorous T-shirt, bright colored clothing, control). Their answers to the individual and firm level scales from Studies One and Two indicated significantly higher evaluations for the employees wearing the humorous T-shirt [ $F(3, 49) = 4.70, p < .05$  ( $M_{\text{Jovial}} = 3.87$  vs.  $M_{\text{Control}} = 3.01$ )], but only when the employee was obese. The humorous content of the T-shirt (“Never Ask A Skinny Person Where To Eat”) was deemed insensitive and offensive when worn by the average-weight employee. The smiley face button was the most effective joviality manipulation for the average-weight employee but not the obese employee [ $F(3, 49) = 6.15, p < .05$  ( $M_{\text{Avg}} = 4.11, M_{\text{Obese}} = 3.61, M_{\text{Control}} = 3.51$ )]. Thus, it was determined that joviality is person specific and customers may find it acceptable for an obese and an average weight employee to express joviality differently. The humorous T-shirt was adopted as the most effective way to operationalize joviality for the obese employee and the smiley face button was adopted as the most effective way to operationalize joviality for the average-weight employee in the main study.

Sixty-seven undergraduate students in a business course at the same university received class points for their solicitation of three non-student adults to participate in the main study. Students were explicitly instructed to not take the survey themselves and they had the option of completing another simple assignment to obtain class credit if they were unable to solicit

subjects for participation. No students chose the assignment. Student recruiters identified potential respondents, provided a description of the study, and emailed a link for the online experiment to them. The students were blind to the true purpose of the study and the hypotheses being tested. When respondents reached the home page for the experiment, they were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions and forwarded to the appropriate survey instrument.

A total of 191 subjects completed the survey. Twenty people were omitted from the sample due to failed quality checks, incomplete surveys, falsely submitted surveys or student status. This left a total of 171 usable responses. The study was a between subjects 2(employee weight: obese, average) X 2(joviality: present, absent) X 2(pseudo-relevant information: justified, not justified)

The sample contained 59.5% women and 40.5% men. With respect to ethnicity, 76.2% of respondents were Caucasian, 13.1% were Hispanic, 3.6% were African-American, 2.4% were Asian-American, and 1.8 indicated "other". The sample was well educated, with 15.0% with a graduate degree, 4.2% with professional degrees, 46.1% with a college degree, 12.0% with an associate degree, 15.6% had some college, 6.6% had a high school diploma, and 0.6% had not graduated high school. The majority of subjects, 36.9%, were 45-54 years old. Management (37.7%), services (13.2%), and sales (11.4%) were the job types most identified by respondents. With the exception of an over-representation of graduate and college degrees, the sample was representative of the regional population, which is largely comprised of seasoned business professionals, educators and government workers.

## **Procedure**

The context from Study One was adapted for Study Three. Subjects read a scenario where they visited a casual, dine-in restaurant for the first time. They are seated by a hostess and told that their waitress will be with them soon. The waitress arrived and brought water and warm rolls to the table. She then said, (discrimination not justified condition) "Today's special is the Double Cheese Lasagna. Our customers love it. It's our most popular dish, but I don't eat it anymore. I am dieting and exercising to control an under active thyroid. I eat mostly vegetables and fish these days. Plus, I exercise six days a week. I've lost 30 lbs already." or (discrimination justified condition) "Today's special is the Double Cheese Lasagna. Our customers love it. It's our most popular dish and my personal favorite. I eat it at least three times a week. It's very rich



and very heavy. Yummy." She pats her tummy to emphasize the goodness of the dish in the latter condition.

The stigma of obesity has more negative consequences when obesity is presented as controllable through diet and exercise than when it is presented as a function of genetics and external means (Amato and Crocker 1995). The combination of dieting and exercise was identified as the best way to convey attempts at weight control in recent research on obesity stigmatization (King et al 2006). Therefore, the mention of diet and weight was incorporated in the present study as a strong manipulation of the employee's desire to control her weight in the not justified condition (see King et al 2006, pg. 586).

In the obese, joviality conditions the waitress wore a shirt with a slogan that read "Never Ask A Skinny Person Where You Should Eat". In the average weight, joviality condition the waitress wore a smiley face button. In the joviality absent conditions, the waitress wore a plain shirt with no button or slogan. In the joviality conditions, she laughs at the end of the scenario before saying, "Enough about me. What would you like to order?"

The remainder of the experiment mirrored Study One. Subjects completed the thought listings and the validated scales from the previous studies. All scales had acceptable reliability scores ranging from .91 (service quality) to .96 (attitude toward the service provider). A joviality scale (8 items; e.g., happy, enthusiastic, energetic) was adopted from the 11-factor analytically derived PANAS-X affect scale (Watson and Clark 1994) for use in this survey. A perceived controllability measure was adapted from (Russell 1982) that asked subjects: "To what extent do you believe (poverty, marital bliss, good health, weight gain, job success, drug addiction, educational attainment) is caused by factors a person can control or by factors outside of a person's control?"

## **Results**

A 2 (employee obesity) x 2 (discrimination justification) x 2 (joviality) ANCOVA was computed for each dependent variable. Means are presented in Table 4.1. Initial analyses indicated that neither the perceived controllability nor ethnicity, gender, or education were significant covariates [ $p$ s >.28] for any of the dependent measures. These variables were removed from the model. Age was a significant covariate for brand equity and service quality [ $F$ s(1,159) = 11.48, 4.58,  $p$ s < .04], while job type had a significant impact on satisfaction with

the server, satisfaction with the service firm and repurchase intentions [ $F(1,159) = 8.82, 7.13, 4.12, p < .05$ ]. Accordingly, age and job type were retained in the analysis for the respective dependent measures. Both employee obesity ( $p < .05$ ) and discrimination justification ( $p < .05$ ) produced significant main effects for all the dependent variables. Specifically, results confirmed that employee obesity reduced customer evaluations of the employee and the associated service firm, while discrimination justification improved those evaluations. Discrimination justification thereby suppressed the negative effects of employee obesity on all the dependent measures [ $F(1,163), p < .05$ ].

Joviality produced main effects for service quality [ $F(1, 163) = 6.34, p = .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .037$ ], which means that the employee's perceived joviality was relevant in customer evaluations of the firm's service quality. In essence, subjects determined that the joviality of both the obese ( $M_{\text{Jovial}} = 4.44$  vs.  $M_{\text{Control}} = 3.48$ ) and the average-weight ( $M_{\text{Jovial}} = 4.84$  vs.  $M_{\text{Control}} = 3.97$ ) frontline employee enhanced the quality of the service experience. This type of joviality seems especially relevant and appropriate during informal service transactions such as restaurant dining. The results indicate that many customers appreciate attempts at light heartedness from service personnel with whom they interact. That appreciation can manifest into more favorable evaluations of the service firm.

$H_{10}$  predicted that the disclosure of pseudo-relevant information would attenuate the negative effects of employee obesity on customer evaluations. ANOVA results showed that the employee weight X discrimination justification interaction was significant for satisfaction with the server ( $H_{10a}$ ) [ $F(1,158) = 7.08, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .043$ ] and satisfaction with the firm ( $H_{10b}$ ) [ $F(1,158) = 5.72, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .035$ ] only. Customer evaluations were significantly higher when the obese frontline employee disclosed pseudo-relevant information that did not justify negative obesity stereotypes ( $M_{\text{Justify}} = 3.78$  vs.  $M_{\text{NoJustify}} = 4.87$ ). Customer evaluations were positive, but not significant, when a similar disclosure was made by the average-weight employee ( $M_{\text{Justify}} = 4.83$  vs.  $M_{\text{NoJustify}} = 5.07$ ). In other words, the no justification condition elevated customer perceptions of the obese employee to a level commensurate with those of the average-weight employee. (See Figure 4.1 for plots of the means.) It appears customers' awareness of the employee's attempt to control her obesity through diet and exercise attenuated negative evaluations such as "laziness" or "gluttonness" that are often associated with obesity.

The employee's confession of over indulgence of fatty foods confirmed the negative stereotypes and gave customers permission to discriminate against her. Thus,  $H_{10a-b}$  were supported

$H_{11}$  predicted that joviality would evoke a more positive obesity stereotype in the presence of an obese frontline employee. The obesity X joviality interaction was not significant for any of the dependent variables ( $ps > .21$ ). However, directional support of the positive relationship between joviality and obesity was observed for the service quality variable (See Table 4.1.) Thus,  $H_{11a-b}$  were not supported. Joviality alone was incapable of combating the negative effects of employee obesity on customer evaluations.

$H_{12}$  predicted a three-way interaction wherein the combination of joviality and pseudo-relevant information would be particularly effective in reversing the negative effects of employee obesity. However, the three-way interaction was not significant for any of the dependent measures ( $ps > .42$ ). Therefore,  $H_{12a}$  was not supported. The mean values for the obese conditions are presented in Table 4.1

## **Discussion**

Self-disclosure of pseudo-relevant information successfully suppressed the negative outcomes of employee obesity in Study Three. This occurred when the obese frontline employee provided personal information to remove justification for obesity discrimination. However, the expression of joviality did not evoke a positive obesity stereotype and significant results were not observed for any dependent variable. Results indicate that the joviality manipulation was too weak to produce the anticipated results. The combination of pseudo-relevant information and joviality expression failed to reverse customers' negative evaluations of the frontline employee or the service firm. Thus, a second buffering technique was identified in Study Three but a reversal of the negative obesity stereotypes did not occur.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **SUMMARY AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The primary objectives of this research were to extend the services literature by (1) providing an empirically supported theoretical explanation for the effects of obesity on customer evaluations of frontline employees and associated service firms, (2) establishing the transference of the obesity stigma from a frontline employee to the firm, and (3) indentifying actionable tactics for attenuating and perhaps even reversing the effects of negative obesity stereotypes during service encounters. Several theories contributed to the development of this research. However, stigma by association theory (Neuberg et al. 1994) was the foundation for the present investigation. In Study One, the basic tenets of stigma by association theory were tested to document the assignment of the obesity stigma from a stigmatized employee to an associated service firm. In Study Two, environmental design cues were employed to mitigate the effects of negative obesity stereotypes on customer evaluations of an obese frontline employee and the associated service firm. In Study Three, the author attempted to reduce obesity discrimination by evoking a countervailing “jolly” obesity stereotype (Crisp and McGuiness 1976) instead of the negative stereotypes often activated with the encounter of an obese person.

Consistent with stigma by association theory, Study One demonstrated that people do not only derogate individuals who are perceived to be in a social relationship with a stigmatized person, they derogate firms that are professionally linked to a stigmatized person as well. In a scenario-driven experiment, an obese frontline employee received significantly lower customer evaluations compared to an average-weight frontline employee. Furthermore, the service firm for which the obese frontline employee worked also received lower customer evaluations than the service firm that employed the average-weight frontline employee. The observed effects were mediated by the perceived lack of interaction quality from contact with the obese frontline employee. This study is the first to empirically document the transference of an obesity stigma from an individual to the firm level.

Study Two and Study Three examined possible mechanisms for managing the transference of negative obesity stereotypes. Both studies replicated Study One’s findings that the obese frontline employee received lower evaluations than the average-weight frontline employee. In Study Two, signaling theory was employed to introduce quality cues in a service

environment to attenuate the negative effects of employee obesity. As a result, customer evaluations of the service firm with an obese employee were more favorable when environmental cues were present than when environmental cues were absent. In Study Three, an employee's self-disclosure of pseudo-relevant information and expression of joviality were analyzed singularly, and in combination, as methods for discrimination remediation. Self-disclosure was expected to discourage the activation of negative stereotypes and to eliminate justifications for obesity stigmatization. Pseudo-relevant information concerning the employee's diet and exercise regime was shared with subjects to signal the obese employee's attempt to control her obesity (Amato and Crocker 1995; King et al. 2006). Jovial expression was expected to prime positive stereotypes of obesity.

Joviality alone was ineffective in influencing impression formation. Self-disclosure resulted in significantly higher customer satisfaction with the obese employee and the associated service firm than when information was withheld. However, the combination of self-disclosure and joviality expression was not sufficient to reverse customer evaluations of the obese frontline employee or the service firm. In other words, the obese (vs. average weight) employee was denigrated consistently regardless of her perceived joviality or the lack of justification for obesity discrimination.

### **Managerial Implications**

Across three experiments in two different service contexts, results consistently showed that the presence of an obese employee in a service encounter can negatively influence businesses that are professionally linked to the obese person. These findings extend stigma by association theory by suggesting that a stigma can spread across business alliances as well as across social relationships. Despite gainful employment in a fast-paced industry (which refutes negative obesity stereotypes such as laziness), the obesity stigma invoked a spreading phenomenon from the frontline employee to the service firm. These results provide further evidence of the profound influence employee physical characteristics have on impression formation processes. Brand impressions are most certainly associated with a myriad of information that is beyond the physical elements of the service firm.

The present research makes several critical contributions to the existing literature on impression formation and customer choice. First, it determines that stereotyping leads to negative evaluations of an obese frontline employee *and* the service firm the employee

represents. Second, it demonstrates that quality cues may be an effective technique for reducing some of these negative evaluations. Most service providers want customers to form quality inferences about their organization. Extra attention to facility cleanliness, merchandise neatness, and inventory backfilling may be enough to attenuate the negative effect of employee obesity and improve these inferences. These procedures are indicative of excellent service quality and may cause customers to align their perceptions of an obese employee with the apparent quality cues rather than reduce their brand impressions to the level of the negative obesity stereotypes. In many instances, even upscale stores have foregone their customer orientation in pursuit of higher returns and reduced cost. Yet, a preponderance of patrons appreciate a personal acknowledgement or pleasant interaction with service personnel while visiting a service establishment. Since products and even services are easily replicated in this post-modern society, a return to true customer centricity may provide a competitive advantage to employers of obese and average weight employees alike.

Additionally, the disclosure of pseudo-relevant information led to significant improvements in customer satisfaction with obese frontline employees and their affiliated firms in Study Three. Altman and Taylor (1973) conclude that self-disclosure serves a valuable symbolic function and communicates more than the actual content of the verbal expression. Likewise, self-disclosure is an antecedent of customer trust and performance satisfaction in service settings (Price and Arnould 1999). This is especially true for services that require close contact with customers, such as hairstyling, medical services, or physical therapy. Customers surmise shared norms through self-disclosure, which subsequently allows the customer and the employee to match objectives (Price and Arnould 1999). The results of Study Three imply that self-disclosure can foster a sense of closeness between the frontline employee and the customer, which may lead to disregard for the employee's weight.

The lack of a significant three-way interaction in Study Three suggests that obesity stereotypes may be manageable but possibly intractable. Prejudice and stereotype suppression are two of the most active areas in social-personality psychology, and these areas of research have lengthy histories (e.g. Myrdal 1944). Yet, the few experimental studies investigating obesity destigmatization amongst adults have yielded mixed results. Prior researchers evoked empathy (Teachman et al. 2003), provided information on internal controllability of weight (Crandall 1994; Puhl et al. 2005), provided educational intervention (Hague and White 2005;

Wiese et al. 1992), and used social consensus (Stangor et al. 2001) in attempts to reduce obesity stigmatization. The fact that obesity bias persists in the face of bias-reduction interventions reveals the intricacy of this issue. Crandall and Eshleman (2003) posit that prejudiced attitudes often transcend suppression and manifest in the less controlled aspects of our communication such as nonverbal expression and behavior in ambiguous situations. The present results confirm previous findings that even the application of multiple stigma suppression strategies does not reverse obesity stereotypes (Rukavina, Li, and Rowell 2008).

Although insignificant, the effect of joviality expression and self-disclosure of pseudo-relevant information on customer evaluations of obese frontline employees is notable. The inability to reduce weight bias highlights the fact that customers consider the weight of a frontline employee pertinent to judgments about a service firm. Some products and services may be closely associated with a salesperson's body image (Everett 1990) and therefore more readily lend themselves to attribute transference. For example, the sale of health-related products (e.g., pharmaceuticals) may be more adversely affected by a salesperson's obesity as opposed to other products (e.g., construction equipment) (Bellizi and Hasty 1998). Therefore, a firm's reluctance to hire a certain person for a job may be justified on the grounds that customers may transfer negative associations from the employee to the firm. In its harshest form, customers may simply refuse to transact business with an atypical person (Bellizi and Hasty 1998). Puhl and associates (2008) suggest that weight discrimination is not likely to decrease unless public attitudes change and laws are created to address it. To date, no federal laws against weight discrimination exist, although San Francisco, CA, Santa Cruz, CA, Seattle, WA, Washington, D.C., and the state of Michigan have enacted local bans on weight and height discrimination.

The jolly fat hypothesis is the sole positive obesity stereotype published in the academic literature. The existing studies have yielded positive, inverse, and null results for the relationship between obesity and reduced anxiety. Findings of positive correlations appear to be linked to samples of predominantly middle-aged men (Crisp and McGuinness 1976; Segers and Mertens 1974; Stewart and Brook 1983) whereas studies of women and youth revealed either no association between obesity and mental well-being (Faubel 1989; Hällström and Noppa 1981; Istvan, Zavela, and Weidner 1992) or elevated depression relative to body weight (Roberts et al. 2002; Ross 1994). These studies typically applied regression analysis to secondary data collected from government health agencies and did not involve experimental techniques.

Appearance in general, and weight in particular, are more emphasized for women than for men (Millman 1980). Moreover, the societal stereotype of an overweight woman is more negative than that of an overweight man (Harris, Walters, and Waschull 2006). The present research extends previous findings to conclude that the presence of an obese, female employee during a service encounter may elicit harsh customer responses.

### **Limitations**

While these three experiments have important implications for services marketing, they are not without limitations. The young woman in the weight stimuli may have been incongruent with subjects' ideals of joviality. Many of the most popular comedians in Western culture are male and certain types of humor are arguably more appropriate for male indulgence than for female indulgence. In the pretest to Study Three, several subjects listed Santa Claus or another obese male personality for their "description" of a jovial person, which indicates that an obese male may have been a more effective model of joviality expression. In addition, nonverbal cues are critical for effective communication and play a major role in the conveyance of conversational humor (Martin 2004). Perhaps an audio, video, or live expression of joviality would have been more effective in soliciting the hypothesized responses. Feedback from the pretest led to the adoption of different jovial cues for the obese and average weight conditions in Study Three. Perhaps consistency of jovial stimuli across conditions would have resulted in more favorable results.

Furthermore, the low involvement of the convenience sample could have added to the lack of significance in Study Three. The lack of involvement was evidenced by the number of subjects omitted from the study due to failed quality check questions. There was also concern about contamination of the sample because some students may have completed the study to earn their course credits instead of soliciting non-students to participate on their behalf. Finally, several of the interactions in Study Three had power less than .30. Use of a true non-student sample and development of a stronger research design may increase power and reduce the reoccurrence of these situations in future research on this topic. In general, an improvement in the study 3 manipulations may produce significant results in future research.



## **Future Research**

Plans for a fourth study are in preparation. A 2 (employee weight: obese/average weight) X 2 (Threat to non-prejudiced self-concept: yes/no) laboratory experiment employing the procedures from Dutton and Lake (1973) is planned in another attempt to reverse the negative effects of employee obesity. Within the prejudice literature, Allport (1954) observed that people continued to respond to members of a stereotyped group in negative or stereotypic ways, often unintentionally, after they had deliberately decided they should not be prejudiced. Allport (1954) posited that the inner conflict between how one believes one should respond and how one actually responds would lead to feelings of compunction (i.e., guilt and self-criticism). Dutton and Lake (1973) use this research as a foundation for prejudice threat theory, which simply states that people will exhibit reverse discrimination to avoid the appearance of behaviors that seem prejudicial because they threaten their egalitarian self-concepts.

In addition, future research in this area should consider other reversal strategies such as self-regulatory strength (Gailliot et al. 2009) or discrimination reversal as the theoretical framework for the management of stereotypes in the service domain. New research should identify other stigma-reduction strategies that can lead to positive behavioral changes. Researchers should apply these strategies to different service industries and across other stereotypes. Finally, future research should evaluate the longevity of the impressions and behaviors that follow stereotype suppression.

If employing a person who is perceived to have undesirable qualities exerts such negative influence on customer perceptions, what effects do other stereotypes (e.g., ethnicity, gender) or personal disabilities (physical impairment, mental challenge) have on the formation of customer evaluations? For instance, service organizations such as Wal-Mart and Publix habitually hire employees with developmental challenges in customer contact positions. Although their motives may be noble, these service providers may be harming their reputations if stigma transference occurs for these stigmatized groups. Insight on the presence of more than one obese employee or employees with more than one stigma (obese, Asian, woman) may add value to this research stream. Individuals who share the stigma of obesity quickly find that weight-related stigmatization affects nearly every aspect of their lives (Han, Norton, and Stearns 2009). It appears service firms who employ obese workers may have a similar experience.

## **Conclusion**

In general, it is important for managers to understand how customers perceive frontline service employees and to take steps to positively influence the formation of customer attitudes whenever possible. Obesity is chosen as the topic of analysis based on its global importance, increased prevalence, and salient stereotypes. This research is intended to generate knowledge on the aspects of the service environment that foster or thwart consumer patronage. More readily, it is intended to initiate meaningful dialogue among researchers and practitioners on the best practices for attracting and satisfying customers.

Understanding consumer reactions to obese employees seems vitally important given the increase in obesity rates. This research introduces a timely and relevant topic, which is of great interest to health-care providers (obesity-related diseases lead to increased health care demands), politicians (abundant resources have been allocated to address obesity issues among American adults and youth), lawmakers (obesity is a protected disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act), marketers (exercise and weight-loss are multi-billion dollar industries), and employers (concern with obesity-related work absences and employees' lack of energy). Moreover, nearly 13% of American children are obese and obesity tends to follow children into adulthood. Thus, this research may have managerial implications for the present and future workforce. The findings in these studies may also allow firms to tactfully deal with this sensitive issue before harsh consequences manifest. Firms may not be able to overturn the present obesity trends, yet they should understand the role employee obesity plays in customer evaluations.

The present research answers the call for additional research on understudied stigma categories and to build the general knowledge base of stigma-related phenomenon (see Hebl and Dovidio 2005; Hebl and Mannix 2003). A consistent body of research suggests that the obesity stigma works differently than other stigmas (e.g., Crandall 1994; Crocker et al. 1993; Miller and Downey 1999). The present results support this in finding that a professional alliance can trigger the stigma-by-association phenomenon. Managers must therefore consider employing strategies to address any negative repercussions of hiring an obese worker for direct customer interface. The present research identifies several such suppression strategies and supports the hypothesis that the negative stigma of obesity will not only pass from individual to individual, it will also pass from an individual to a firm. The implications of such an occurrence are critical, as they

imply that the negative obesity stigma associated with one person can influence evaluations of an entire business entity.

## APPENDIX

**Table 2.1: Measures**

<p>Attractiveness Scale - DeShields et al. (1996) (scaling from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”)</p> <p>Do you find the employee in the photo to be:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Elegant</li> <li>2. Sexy</li> <li>3. Beautiful</li> <li>4. Attractive</li> </ol>
<p>Interaction Quality - Brady and Cronin (2001) (scaling from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Overall, I'd say the quality of my interaction with the restaurant's employees would be excellent.</li> <li>2. I would say that the quality of my interaction with the restaurant's employees would be high.</li> </ol>
<p>Satisfaction with the Server - Winstead (1997)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. As a result of the my interaction with the waitress I would be: (“Very Dissatisfied” to “Very Satisfied”)</li> <li>2. My feelings about the waitress' interaction with me would be: (“Very Displeased” to “Very Pleased”)</li> <li>3. My impression of the interaction of the waitress with me would be: (“Very Unfavorable” to “Very Favorable”)</li> <li>4. My encounter with the waitress would be: (“Worse than I Expected” to “Better Than I Expected”)</li> <li>5. My feelings about being served by this waitress would be: (“Very Unhappy to “Very Happy”)</li> </ol>
<p>Obese Persons Trait Survey – Puhl et al. (2005) (scaling from “Not at all” to “Extremely”)</p> <p>I expect that the waitress in the photo would be:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Well Groomed</li> <li>2. Lacking in Self Discipline</li> <li>3. Lazy</li> <li>4. Slow</li> <li>5. Unhealthy</li> <li>6. Emotionally Secure (reverse coded)</li> </ol>

Table 2.1 Continued

<p>Brand Equity - Rust, Zeithaml, and Lemon (2000) (scaling from “No, Not At All” to “Yes, Very Much”)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Would you be a loyal customer to this restaurant?</li> <li>2. Would you have a positive attitude about this restaurant?</li> <li>3. Would you think the restaurant portrays a positive image?</li> <li>4. Would the restaurant's workers deliver high quality service?</li> <li>5. Would you pay more for services from this restaurant than for other restaurants' services?</li> </ol>
<p>Satisfaction with the Service Provider - Mano and Oliver (1993) (scaling from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My choice to eat at the restaurant was a wise one</li> <li>2. If I had to do it again, I would eat at this restaurant.</li> <li>3. I would recommend this restaurant to an interested person</li> </ol>
<p>Repurchase Intentions - Ajzen and Fishbein (1980)</p> <p>What is the probability that you would return to this restaurant?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. (“Unlikely” to “Likely”)</li> <li>2. (“Nonexistent” to “Existent”)</li> <li>3. (“Improbable” to “Probable”)</li> <li>4. (“Impossible” to “Possible”)</li> <li>5. (“Uncertain” to “Certain”)</li> <li>6. (“Definitely Would “ to “Not Definitely Would”)</li> </ol>
<p>Service Quality - Brady and Cronin (2001) (scaling from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I believe that the general quality of the restaurant's service would be low.</li> <li>2. Overall, I expect the restaurant's service would be excellent.</li> </ol>
<p>Attitude Toward Service Provider – Day and Stafford (1997) (scaling from “No, Not At All” to “Yes, Very Much”)</p> <p>Would your impression of the restaurant be:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Bad?</li> <li>2. Unfavorable?</li> <li>3. Negative?</li> </ol>

Table 2.1 Continued

<p>Controllability Scale - (Russell 1982)          (scaling from “Totally Outside Of A Person's Control” to “A Person Can Totally Control It”)</p> <p>To what extent do you believe _____ is caused by factors a person can control or by factors outside of a person's control?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Poverty</li> <li>2. Martial Bliss</li> <li>3. Good Health</li> <li>4. Weight Gain</li> <li>5. Job Success</li> <li>6. Drug Addiction</li> <li>7. Educational Attainment</li> </ol>
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**Table 2.2: Study One Transference of Obesity Stigma from Employee to Firm**

Dependent Variable	ANOVA Results	Means (Std. Error)	
	F (partial $\eta^2$ )	Obese	Average
Interaction Quality	11.92 (.10)*	4.35 (.261)	5.25 (.184)
Negative Traits	37.38 (.26)**	4.16 (.251)	2.62 (.178)
Satisfaction w/Server	10.03 (.09)*	4.87 (.222)	5.58 (.157)
Repurchase Intentions	10.40 (.09)*	4.53 (.266)	5.39 (.188)
Brand Equity	13.35 (.11)**	4.15 (.244)	5.04 (.172)
Satisfaction w/Service Provider	12.09 (.10)*	4.23 (.251)	5.10 (.177)
Service Quality	14.37 (.12)**	4.81 (.341)	6.11 (.241)
Attitude Toward Service Provider	14.14 (.12)**	4.90 (.266)	5.90 (.188)
Attractiveness	90.28 (.46)**	2.43 (.186)	4.35 (.132)

\*p <.01, \*\*p <.001

**Table 2.3: Study One Mediating Effects of Interaction Quality on Firm Dependent Variables**

Dependent Variable	Direct and Total Effects			Indirect Effect
	$b(YX)$	$b(YM.X)$	$b(YX.M)$	Z
Attitude Toward Service Provider	1.009**	.624**	.438	3.15**
Brand Equity	.891**	.756**	.211	3.35**
Satisfaction w/ Service Provider	.873**	.736**	.211	3.32**
Repurchase Intentions	.858**	.804**	.135	3.33**
Service Quality	1.291**	.958**	.429	3.29*

Note: \*p <.01, \*\*p <.001.  $b(YX)$ = standardized coefficient for the total effect of X on Y.  $b(YM.X)$ = standardized coefficient for the effect of the mediator on Y, controlling for X.  $b(YX.M)$ = standardized coefficient for the effect of X on Y, controlling for the mediator.  $b(MX)$  = is the effect of X on the mediator. The standardized coefficient for the  $b(MX)$  relationship = .900\*\* for all dependent variables.

**Table 3.1: Study Two Interaction Effects of High Quality Cues and Employee Obesity**

	<u>Obese Employee</u>		<u>Average-Weight Employee</u>	
	Cue Present	Cue Absent	Cue Present	Cue Absent
Satisfaction w/Server	5.04 (.92)	2.63 (1.26)	5.27 (1.25)	3.93 (.84)
Repurchase Intentions	5.18 (1.16)	2.44 (.90)	5.40 (1.14)	3.52 (.72)
Brand Equity	4.93 (.87)	1.82 (.59)	5.34 (.86)	2.91 (.94)
Satisfaction w/Service Provider	5.03 (1.10)	1.96 (.96)	5.31 (.96)	2.83(1.10)
Service Quality	5.23 (.45)	2.42 (.94)	5.68 (.27)	3.80 (.65)
Attitude Toward Service Provide	5.32 (1.40)	1.70 (.71)	5.73 (1.10)	2.88 (.95)

Note: All dependent variables were significant (p <.05) except, Satisfaction w/Service Provider, which was significant (p <.01).

**Table 4.1: Study Three Interaction Effects by Experimental Cell**

	<u>Obese Employee</u>				<u>Average-Weight Employee</u>			
	<u>Joviality Present</u>		<u>Joviality Absent</u>		<u>Joviality Present</u>		<u>Joviality Absent</u>	
	<u>Discrim.</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>Discrim.</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>Discrim.</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>Discrim.</u>	<u>No</u>
	<u>Justif.</u>	<u>Justif.</u>	<u>Justif.</u>	<u>Justif.</u>	<u>Justif.</u>	<u>Justif.</u>	<u>Justif.</u>	<u>Justif.</u>
Satisfaction w/Server*	3.60	4.63	4.03	5.16	4.86	5.00	4.83	5.03
Repurchase Intentions	4.24	4.94	4.34	4.93	4.71	4.91	5.15	5.25
Brand Equity	3.65	4.20	3.62	4.48	3.83	4.31	4.51	4.78
Satisfaction w/Service Provider*	3.40	4.57	4.05	5.12	4.59	5.02	5.00	5.26
Service Quality	3.93	4.96	3.00	3.96	4.52	5.15	3.83	4.10
Attitude Toward Service Provider	2.52	3.58	1.97	3.11	2.21	3.33	2.06	2.78

\*p <.01





**Obese Condition**



**Average-Weight Condition**

Note: The model's face was shown in the experiments but it is excluded from the manuscript for legal reasons.

**Figure 2.1: Photographic Stimuli For Weight Manipulation**

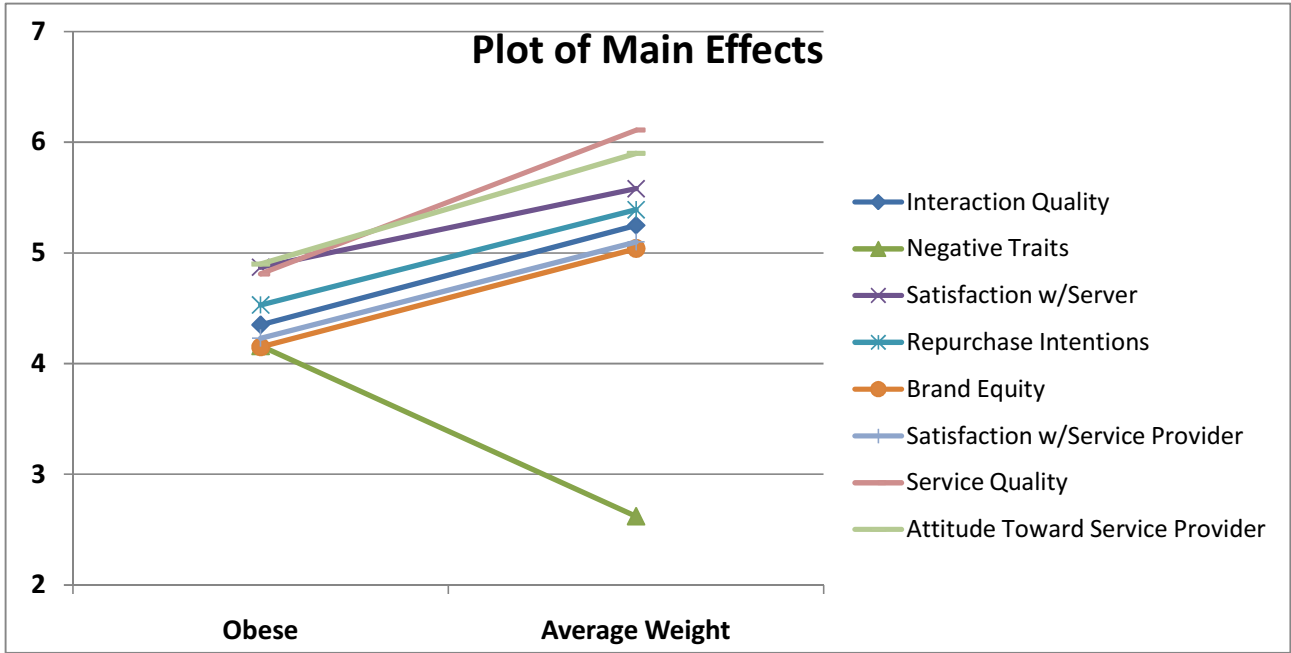
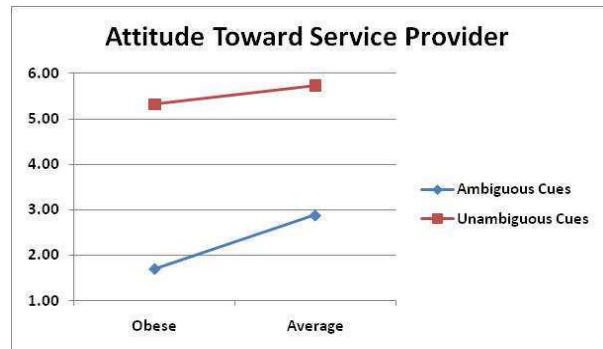
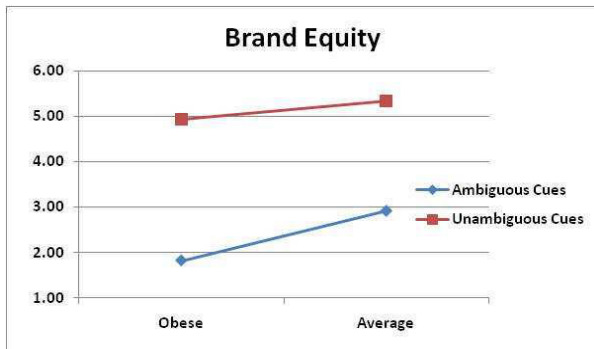
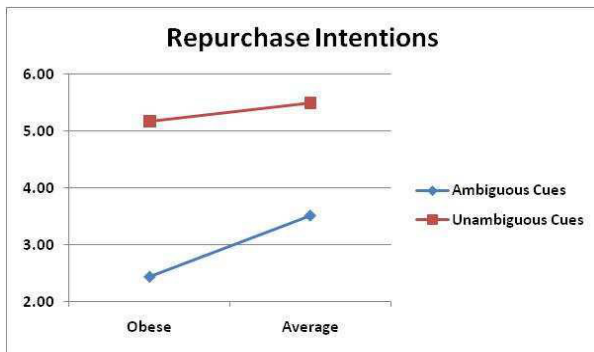
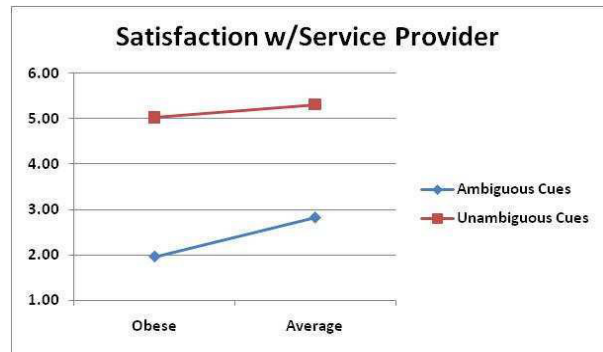


Figure 2.2: Study One Means Plot



**Figure 3.1: Study Two Photographic Stimuli For Quality Cue Manipulation**



**Figure 3.2: Study Two Means Plots**



Figure 4.1: Study Three Means Plots

Office of the Vice President For Research  
Human Subjects Committee  
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742  
(850) 644-8673 · FAX (850) 644-4392

RE-APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 11/25/2009  
To: Kelly Cowart

Address: Rovetta Business Annex, Room 307,  
P.O. Box 3061110, Tallahassee,  
Florida 32306-1110  
Dept.: COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Re-approval of Use of Human subjects in Research  
The Effect of Obesity on Evaluations of the Service Provider

Your request to continue the research project listed above involving human subjects has been approved by the Human Subjects Committee. If your project has not been completed by 11/22/2010, you are must request renewed approval by the Committee.

If you submitted a proposed consent form with your renewal request, the approved stamped consent form is attached to this re-approval notice. Only the stamped version of the consent form may be used in recruiting of research subjects. You are reminded that any change in protocol for this project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee prior to implementation of the proposed change in the protocol. A protocol change/amendment form is required to be submitted for approval by the Committee. In addition, federal regulations require that the Principal Investigator promptly report in writing, any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the Chair of your department and/or your major professor are reminded of their responsibility for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in their department. They are advised to review the protocols as often as necessary to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

Cc: Michael Brady, Advisor  
HSC No. 2009.3050

## LETTER OF CONSENT

I am a Ph.D. student in the Department of Marketing at Florida State University. I am conducting a research project as part of my dissertation and am inviting your participation in this short survey. Specifically, the purpose of this survey is to understand how you feel about customer service. It will take about fifteen minutes to complete this questionnaire. The survey poses no risks to your well-being. You will be eligible to win a \$50 gift certificate to the store of your choice (WalMart, Target, or Home Depot) if you complete the survey. (Students will receive extra credit. Non-students are eligible for the drawing.) However, there are no negative consequences for not completing the survey. Your responses are extremely valuable to furthering my research.

You must be at least 18 years old to participate, but your participation is purely voluntary. You may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Your responses will remain confidential and only aggregated results of the research will be published, with individual participants unidentified. Your answers will be kept strictly confidential because they will be combined with the answers of other participants. They will be used only for research purposes. The information obtained during the course of the study will remain confidential to the extent allowed by law.

If you have any questions concerning this research, please feel free to contact me or Dr. Michael K. Brady. I can be reached at (850) 644-4091 or via e-mail at koc05@fsu.edu. Dr. Brady can be reached at (850) 644-7853 or via email at mbrady@fsu.edu. You can also call Florida State University's Human Subjects Committee Hotline at 850-644-8836. Please check the following box to confirm your consent to participate in this study.



I have read the above statement and consent to participate in this study.

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## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Kelly Odessa Cowart earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Management from the University of Florida and a MBA in Organizational Behavior from Syracuse University. As a doctoral student at Florida State University, she studies the role of stereotypes in the formation of customer evaluations and marketing strategy. She has several manuscripts at various stages of the review process and has published research in *Psychology & Marketing* and *International Journal of Consumer Studies*. Ms. Cowart has earned numerous awards during her PhD program including the 2008-2009 College of Business Teaching Excellence Award and the 2008 Ewald Award for Academic Excellence & Human Service. She is also the recent recipient of the H. Naylor Fitzhugh Scholarship from the National Black MBA Association.

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