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Thematic Dossier

# A Critical Analysis of the British Newspapers' Coverage of the *Underweight* and *Overweight*

## *Uma análise crítica da cobertura dos jornais britânicos sobre o* peso baixo *e o* excesso de peso

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**Abstract:** By triangulating Corpus Linguistics with Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper sought to discover how the British popular press and quality press represented two polar ends of body image with respect to weight which are: *underweight* and *overweight*. The discursive representation of the subcategories of *underweight* (skinny, size zero, thin, slim, and slender) and *overweight* (plump, curvy, fat, overweight and obese) was investigated thoroughly to find out related themes, arguments, and attitudes in the newspaper corpus built from news and opinion columns published in the *Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, *The Guardian*, and *The Times* over a three-year period. One of the most significant findings of this study is that regardless of the press genre, the weight related issues were identified with gender. The high frequency of lexis showing females is proof that body weight is labelled as a feminine issue. Another noteworthy observation is the link established between body mass and socio-economic status. While higher socio-economic status was marked with thinness, fatness was associated with lower economic status.

**Keywords:** body image; British press; Corpus Linguistics; weight; gender; social class.

**Resumo:** Ao triangular a Linguística de Corpus com a Análise Crítica do Discurso, este trabalho procurou descobrir como a imprensa popular e a imprensa de qualidade britânica representam dois extremos polares da imagem corporal no que diz respeito ao peso, que são: *o baixo peso* e *o excesso de peso*. A representação discursiva das subcategorias de *baixo peso* (magro,

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tamanho zero, fino, esguio e esbelto) e *excesso de peso* (rechonchudo, curvilíneo, gordo, com excesso de peso e obeso), foi investigada exaustivamente para descobrir temas, argumentos e atitudes relacionados no corpus jornalístico construído a partir de notícias e colunas de opinião publicadas nos jornais *Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, *The Guardian* e *The Times* durante um período de três anos. Uma das conclusões mais significativas deste estudo é que independentemente do gênero de imprensa, as questões relacionadas com o peso foram identificadas com gênero. A elevada frequência de léxis que mostra o gênero feminino é uma prova de que o peso corporal é rotulado como uma questão feminina. Outra observação digna de nota é a relação estabelecida entre a massa corporal e o estatuto socioeconômico. Enquanto um estatuto socioeconômico mais elevado foi marcado pela magreza, o excesso de peso foi associado com o estatuto econômico mais baixo.

**Palavras-chave:** imagem corporal; imprensa britânica; Linguística de Corpus; peso; gênero; classe social.

## 1 Introduction

Body dissatisfaction, which can be defined as an individual's negative perception of his/her own body image after a comparison with body ideals within a given society (Grogan, 2018), seems to be a critical issue in Britain since it is estimated that between 1.24 and 3.4 million people were affected by an eating disorder such as bulimia or anorexia (Priory, 2022). The shocking extent of body dissatisfaction in Britain was previously revealed by the Dove Global Beauty and Confidence Report (2016), which put forth that British women had the second lowest self-esteem in the world because of body image anxiety. In a similar vein, the Girls' Attitudes Survey (Girlguiding, 2016) showed that 47% of British girls between the ages of 11 and 21 said that their physical appearance held them back from doing things they would like to do such as doing sports, socialising with friends, or even speaking up in the class. Although body dissatisfaction is traditionally identified with females (Orbach, 1978), British males also feel physically inadequate and imperfect because of social media and celebrity culture (Why, 2022). A study on the use of anabolic steroids, which are utilized for higher physical performance, muscle growth, and aesthetic worries, has revealed that more than one million men in the UK have been excessively using performance enhancing drugs to change the way they look while completely ignoring their serious side effects (UKAD, 2019).

Apart from gender, social class also seems to be a determining factor in body weight related problems. It has been seen that a higher socio-economic position is associated with

a lower Body Mass Index (BMI) whereas a lower socio-economic position is linked to higher BMI in developed countries such as Britain (Tyrrell *et al*., 2016). According to the Policy Paper by the Department of Health & Social Care (2020), obesity rates are rather high among the most disadvantaged groups in society. In contrast to the peers living in rich neighbourhoods, children in the most impoverished regions of England are more than twice as likely to be obese. A recent briefing by NICE Health Inquiries (2023) also supports this finding since people in deprived areas of England were found to have serious weight management problems due to financial hardship, which obstructs access to affordable healthy food and exercising options. The correlation between weight and socio-economic status also works the other way around now that being overweight can be impoverishing (see Ernsberger, 2009), while being thin can be financially rewarding (see Fulwood, 2023). A LinkedIn survey with 4,000 workers from Britain found that overweight workers earn £1,940 less each year than their colleagues with a normal BMI. The pressure on female workers to lose weight is even more intense since losing 65 pounds could have the same impact on a woman's income as having a master's degree (Fulwood, 2023).

By defining an individual's body as a project to be worked on and perfected in terms of the normative prescriptions of the market and society, consumer capitalism is considered to be one of the main actors that lay the foundations for body dissatisfaction (Bourdieu, 1977; Shilling, 1993). It urges individuals to incessantly engage with "ascetic practices aimed at the achievement or maintenance of appearance of health, fitness, and youthfulness" (Dutton, 1995, p. 273). Bodies are seen as symbolic capitals that transmit messages about an individual's self-identity and self-worth (Shilling, 1993). Women are expected to be thin, fit, and young-looking (Bordo, 2003; Gracia-Arnaiz, 2010) while the body ideal for men is the lean but muscular look with "well-developed chest and arms, with wide shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist" (Pope; Phillips; Olivardia, 2000, p. 30). Conformity with these standards is seen as self-control and self-respect whereas deviation from these nearly unattainable body ideals is labelled as sloth, irresponsibility, or failure (Gard; Wright, 2005; Puhl; Heuer, 2009). The feeling of physical imperfection leads to self-surveillance (Bartky, 1990) which then triggers eating disorders, depression, low self-esteem, social reclusion, over-exercising, drug abuse, cosmetic surgery to correct perceived flaws or weight control (Hogan; Strasburger, 2008).

Previous research has shown the undeniable effect of the spread of body dissatisfaction through a bombardment of unrealistic standards of beauty with airbrushed images or news about scientized and marketized solutions such as miraculous diets, exercises, or products within market-driven media (Coupland, 2007; Levine; Murnen, 2009). As an important social institution, the media not only reflects but also contributes to the formation of culture, politics and social life in a way that is congruous with their commercial and industrial relationships (Fowler, 1991). In line with Fairclough (1989) who stated that the media tends to operate in accordance with the rules of the industrial-capitalist system, it is expected for the media to normalise specific mental frames such as *body-as-a-project* by continuously circulating and reinforcing particular causal links through identifications of weight-loss, fitness or muscularity with sexual desirability, happiness, or success. A good example for the effect of market-driven media can be seen in the parallelism between the increase of profits in the

American diet industry from $ 10 to $ 36 billion and the dramatic rise in the number of diet and exercise articles in women's magazines in the 90s (Nemeroff *et al*., 1994; Kilbourne, 1999).

Whilst the impact of the magazines on the dispersion of body image anxiety has been studied exhaustively (Harper; Tiggemann, 2008; Brown; Knight, 2015; Prichard *et al*., 2018), little attention has been paid to the role of the newspapers. This paper sought to explore the British newspapers' representation of body image for several reasons. The target audience of the newspapers is not only diversified but also considerably greater than the audience of the magazines. Contrary to the magazines which aim to a specific group through particular themes and expose their stance more explicitly through idealised role models, the representation of body image in the newspapers was hypothesized to be structured more intricately and covertly to maintain or increase the sales to a heterogeneous audience group. As Lombardi Vallauri, Masia and Cominetti (2022) explained, when compared to the explicit messages, an implicitly structured content is less likely to provoke a reaction since the readers lower their 'epistemic vigilance' (Sperber *et al*., 2010) and process the content rather superficially. Implicit messages are much more persuasive as they lead the reader to reach the target conclusion without challenging his/her egocentric bias (Reboul, 2011). The opaque nature of newspaper discourse was previously pointed out by Burchill (2000), who stated that the *Daily Mail* created more anorexics than *Vogue* because it continuously draws a link between the weight issues of famous women and their success through implicit associations.

By drawing upon Corpus Linguistics, this paper sought to discover how the British popular press and quality press represented two polar ends of body image with respect to weight which are: *underweight* and *overweight*. The linguistic representation of the subcategories of *underweight* (skinny, size zero, thin, slim, and slender) and *overweight* (plump, curvy, fat, overweight and obese) was investigated thoroughly to find out related themes, arguments, and attitudes. With reference to the circulation figures and editorial styles, four British newspapers, the *Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, *The Guardian*, and *The Times*, were selected. Whilst the former two are considered popular press, the latter two are seen as quality press (Richardson, 2007). Texts containing the search terms 'size, body, weight and shape' were collected through the LexisNexis database. Body image issues were widely discussed in British society through highly mediatized stories whose data collection were specified as the period between 01.01.2014 and 31.12.2016. Since the dataset is large-scale for an efficient manual analysis, Corpus Linguistic software Wordsmith 8.0 (Scott, 2022) was used to analyse the collocations and concordances to understand semantic preference and discourse prosody related to the lexis showing *underweight* and *overweight*. There are three main research questions: 1. Which topics and arguments were associated with the *underweight* and *overweight*? 2. What is the general stance towards the *underweight* and *overweight*? 3. Is there an attitudinal distinction between the popular press and quality press?

## 2 Literature Review

Acknowledging the impact of mass media on opinion formation about social and political issues (Entman, 2004; Wise; Brewer, 2010) in a way that serves the interests of the dominant ideology (Talbot, 1995; van Dijk, 1995), the intricate link among mass media, ideology and body image perception has been extensively investigated (Irving, 1990; Levine; Smolak, 1996;

Durkin; Paxton, 2002; Brown; Witherspoon, 2002; Dohnt; Tiggemann, 2006). Evidence from previous research (Botta, 2003; Hargreaves; Tiggemann, 2004; Grogan, 2008; Levine; Murnen, 2009) has suggested that the major cause of body image concerns and preoccupation with physical appearance for both sexes is the continuous exposure to the 'body ideal', which was expressed overtly or covertly in the advertisements, sponsored editorials, news texts or opinion columns. This section reviews relevant studies that focussed on the impact of neoliberalism, gender, and social class in media representation of body image issues.

Since the late 1970s, neoliberalism not only has changed the economic policies but has also promoted the culture of individualism and consumerism in a rather privatised social system (Meeuf, 2015). Neoliberalism advocates healthism (Crawford, 1980), which positions the problems of health and disease as a matter of individual responsibility and enterprise. This means that if an individual suffers from a health problem, this happens because of his or her moral failure (Fox, 1993). Obviously, this perspective obscures the effect of institutions and social practices on public health whilst deeming the individual as a failed and irresponsible citizen for not taking care of his/her individual health (Lupton, 1999; Metzl; Kirkland, 2010). Neoliberalism upholds the idea of a lean and fit body as a precondition of a good citizen while fat is characterised as morally transgressive and abject (Forth, 2013). The most persistent narrative of neoliberalism is self-vigilance and self-transformation which advocates constant preoccupation with body and image through excessive consumption (Ayo, 2012). Because of commercial pressures, the media, to some extent, functions as the mouthpiece of the diet and fitness industries which make a huge profit from the bombardment of 'pursuit of healthiness' and 'self-improvement' stories in the news (Grogan, 2008; Levine; Murnen, 2009). It is even seen that the mainstream media frame anorexia compassionately as an individual's effort to transform the body to conform to the thin ideal of the society (Rozin, 1996; Ferris, 2003; Saguy; Gruys, 2010). On the other hand, obesity is stigmatized as a threat or burden for the society. For instance, obesity was represented as a security concern in terms of military readiness (Severson, 2003), cost to businesses in terms of lower worker productivity (Goettler; Grosse; Sonntag, 2017) and even weight-load problems for the airlines in terms of fuel costs (Yee, 2004). The media rarely portray the overweight as leaders or achievers whilst they were generally represented as the object of ridicule, pity, or disgust (Greenberg *et al.*, 2003). For instance, a study by Glenn, McGannon and Spence (2012) which investigated the link between the media representation of bariatric surgery and neoliberalism found out that obese patients who went under gastric surgery were identified as failed citizens for not taking care of their health and putting a burden on social welfare. The media framing of *the obese as a sinner, fat as an enemy* and *obesity as an epidemic* reinforce particular ways of causality and responsibility which leads to victim blaming (Cotter; Samos; Swinglehurst, 2021). Besides overlapping with the findings of previous studies which put forth obesity as a failure, a large-scale obesity news corpus research of nearly 36,000,000 words by Brookes and Baker (2022) revealed that the right-leaning newspapers and especially tabloids were more prone to stigmatize and shame the *obese* through euphemistic and ironic language while the broadsheets especially the left-leaning ones, tended to frame obesity as an outcome of neoliberalism and governmental policies.

Considering the link between gender and body image representation in the media, numerous studies have revealed that body image issues are generally identified with women, as they are expected to be much more preoccupied with their appearance to please

the male gaze (Frederickson; Roberts, 1997). The pressure to maintain self-objectification and body surveillance even continues in the pregnancy and postpartum period (Groesz; Levine; Murnen, 2002). Since Demi Moore's maternity pose on Vanity Fair cover (Collins, 1991) with a neat bump, glowing skin, energized appearance and well-supported breasts, the media have become obsessed with pregnancy and postpartum body to promote the new 'good mother' ideal (Warin; Moore; Zivkovic; Davies, 2011). For instance, a study by Gow, Lydecker, Lamanna and Mazzeo (2012) which analysed the representation of celebrities' pregnancy and postpartum periods in magazines reveals that there was more of an emphasis on *pregnancy weight gain* than *pregnancy weight* while *postpartum weight loss* was more frequently mentioned than *postpartum weight*. Besides that, the images accompanying the news stories showed celebrities pregnant or postpartum bodies in the most idealised ways. Another study by Roth, Homer, and Fenwick (2012) examined Australia's major women's magazines' representation of the postpartum body through celebrity stories. The overarching theme in the stories of these 'exemplary women' was the importance of returning to the pre-pregnancy weight and body as soon as possible as physical changes associated with pregnancy were represented as 'unhealthy' and 'unnatural'. The media as the mouthpiece of neoliberalism urge expectant or postpartum women to master control over their body in a short time to comply with this new definition of the 'good mother' (Warin; Moore; Zivkovic; Davies, 2011).

Apart from maintaining self-governance and individual responsibility to conform to the body ideal of society, women are also urged to pay attention to the weight issues of their husbands and children. A study by Maher, Fraser, and Wright (2010) shows that the media represent childhood obesity as an inevitable consequence of the mothers' negligence to perform their maternal responsibilities (also see Murphy, 2003). The extent of mother blaming has reached such a point that failed mothers with overweight children were even criticized for putting the future of the nation at risk (Blum, 2007). Another instance of stereotyping women as caregivers can be seen in the surprising number of articles about men's health in women's magazines (Elliott, 1994; Lyons; Willott, 1999). A study by de Brún, McCarthy, McKenzie and McGloin (2012) perfectly reveals how body image issues were associated with each gender in Irish media over the obesity debate. In addition to representing women in terms of high body perception through exaggerated portrayals and evocative vocabulary, they were also positioned as gatekeepers to their male partners' and children's diet issues by means of emotive lexis. On the other hand, men were represented as unaware and unconcerned about health issues, which not only victimised them as a needy group to be taken care of but also liberated them from parental responsibility concerning their children's weight problems.

Media attitude towards the association between socio-economic status and body weight is also worth a discussion, as representation of weight related body image issues with respect to asymmetrical class relations has the potential to harden social stratification by drawing links among wealth, weight, and success. A study by Rich (2011) reveals how reality TV shows such as *Jamie's Ministry of Food* or *Honey, We're Killing the Kids* contributed to the stigmatization of the working class by weaving strong links between unhealthy eating practices, overweight, abjection and social category. Both TV shows reinforce the principles of the neoliberal health discourse by means of downgrading the problem of obesity to the individual's irresponsibility while overlooking socio-economic disparities which provoke health inequalities. Brookes and Baker (2022) investigate the relation between obesity and social class by focussing on the ways in which the upper, middle, working and under class

were represented with regard to obesity in left-leaning and right-leaning British broadsheets and tabloids on obesity between 2008 and 2017. In the left-leaning press, the broadsheets were mainly seen underlining the importance of social inequalities in the generation and maintenance of uneven rates of obesity among social classes. Government policies and other powerful institutions were criticized for the increase of obesity among the working and under class. Despite unanimity in the left-leaning press, a much more complicated picture emerges in the right-leaning British press, with its coverage of obesity in relation to social class tending to represent obesity as independent of social class. When obesity is acknowledged as the problem of the underclass, the group is described as socially deviant because they do not listen to the health advice by experts and personally choose to adopt harmful habits. The right-leaning press is also noted to strongly resist against the idea of state intervention in people's lives to develop healthy eating and exercising practices. With an objective to explore the impact of language in public opinion formation about health and illness, Brookes (2023) investigated the discursive constructions around social class in the British press coverage of obesity by searching persistent patterns around the keyword (social) class. The findings of the research are congruous with the results of the previous research by Brookes and Baker (2021), as it is noted that left-leaning press tends to emphasize the correlation between precarious conditions that stem from lower socio-economic status and obesity. On the other hand, the right-leaning press represents obesity as a personal problem regardless of social class with an intention to fend off criticism towards neoliberal policies.

## 3 Data

In order to have a manageable, balanced, and representative dataset about the representation of *underweight* and *overweight* in British media, news articles printed between 01.01.2014 and 31.12.2016 in four British dailies and their Sunday editions, namely *The Sun*, the *Daily Mail*, *The Times*, and *The Guardian* were chosen. The selection criteria for the newspapers were the circulation figures, readership, and editorial styles. The four newspapers were elected as they strongly exemplify the market segmentation in the UK by positioning the sensationalist mass press against the quality press which addresses a higher socio-economic and intellectual readership (Hallin; Mancini, 2004; Cole; Harcup, 2010). Both *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* can be classified as popular press because of their editorial style which rather presents the news in a shorter, flashier, and sensational way with powerful emotive vocabulary and close-up photographs. Both of the newspapers had the highest circulation figures in Britain between 2014 and 2016 (Ofcom, 2017). On the other hand, *The Times* and *The Guardian* are examples of the quality press because they have a more objective and fact-based journalistic style. Considering the readership patterns, Day, Gough and McFadden (2004) and Boykoff (2008) noted the target group of the quality press is the educated and professional middle class whilst the popular press addresses the working and lower middle classes.

The data were downloaded from the LexisNexis database by means of using the search terms *shape*, *size*, *weight,* and *body* to understand how body image issues were represented by the newspapers. Rather than using keywords like *fat*, *obese*, *slim*, or *thin* which might have narrowed down the scope of the research, semantically more comprehensive words were intentionally chosen to get a thorough look into the issue. The timeline for data collection was

specified as the period from 01.01.2014 to 31.12.2016 as these years were marked by important discourse moments of weight related body image issues. In addition to the findings of the Dove Global Beauty and Confidence Report (Nathan-Tilloy; Shann; Skea, 2016) and the Girls' Attitudes Survey (Girlguiding, 2016), several important events led me to choose this period. In 2014, the Be Real Campaign (Government Equalities Office, 2015) put forth that 10.2 million British women felt insecure about finding a good job, having a relationship, and doing exercise because of their physical appearance. The same year, a governmental report (Orbach; Rubin, 2014), which discussed the expectant or new mothers' unconscious transmission of body image anxiety to their babies, fuelled the debate about social pressure on women. In 2015, the world-renowned magazine *Sports Illustrated* had a plus-sized model on its cover for the first time in its history. This was seen as a historic move for the acceptance of different types of body shapes and sizes in the media industry (Ledbetter, 2015). On the other hand, the controversial TV personality Katie Hopkins, who is known for her offensive remarks about the overweight people, prepared *My Fat Story* with the intention of debunking the excuses around obesity (Deen, 2015). The same year, a group which called themselves Overweight Haters handed fat-shaming cards to the commuters on London metro and claimed that the fat people were a burden on society (Quinn, 2015). In addition, fierce social media criticism about the physical appearance of celebrities like Selena Gomez, Kate Middleton, Jamelia, and Ariana Grande heated the media debate about the extent and impact of body shaming (Shatzman, 2015). This year also witnessed the entrance of the term 'fat-shaming' in Oxford Dictionaries (Steinmetz, 2015). In 2016, because of the huge public reaction to Protein World's "Are you beach body ready?" advertisement in the London underground, the London mayor Sadiq Khan decided to ban any type of advertisements that promote unattainable goals about body image and demean women (Jackson, 2016). The report on Children's Worlds Survey (Rees; Andresen; Bradshaw, 2016), which compared children's views on their lives and well-being in 16 countries, showed that British children were among the least happy in the world after South Korea and Nepal due to anxiety about their appearance.

The downloaded data were reviewed to omit unrelated data as the search words could also be found in texts irrelevant to the body image issues. Table 1 shows the number of words in each daily over the three-year span. The total number of the words in the whole corpus is 3,456,560. The *Daily Mail*, *The Sun* and *The Times* roughly had similar number of words while *The Guardian* had the smallest size of corpus with a number of 607,590 words.

Table 1 – The size of the newspaper corpus

| **Years** | **Newspapers/ The number of words** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ***The Sun*** | ***The Daily Mail*** | ***The Times*** | ***The Guardian*** |
| **2014** | 338.488 | 376.830 | 318.650 | 195.256 |
| **2015** | 341.502 | 299.428 | 285.907 | 211.693 |
| **2016** | 280.875 | 300.693 | 306.597 | 200.641 |
| ***Total Number of words*** | 960.865 | 976.951 | 911.154 | 607.590 |
| | 1,937,816 | | 1,518,308 | |
| ***Total Number of words in the whole corpus*** | | **3,456,560** | | |

Source: own elaboration.

## 4 Methodology

Now that the purpose of this research was to analyse the discursive representation of body image issues in four British newspapers over a three-year period, it was decided that the best method to adopt for this investigation is the Corpus Linguistic approach, to perform an efficient linguistic analysis of a large dataset. Corpus linguistics can be defined as the computer-based study of large bodies of electronically encoded texts, which are composed of instances of natural language, to explore repeated patterns in language use (McEnery; Wilson, 1996; Baker; McEnery, 2005; Baker, 2006). As Adolphs (2006) noted, a corpus is a purposeful collection of texts which is gathered to make enquiries and statements about a specific language variety. The exploration of repeated linguistic structures is critically important as they show that "[...] evaluative meanings are not merely personal and idiosyncratic, but widely shared in discourse community. A word, phrase or construction may trigger a cultural stereotype" (Stubbs, 2001, p. 215). Through discourse, which can be defined as "practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972, p. 49), cognitive and emotive frames about a particular social group, action, or phenomenon such as *skinny*, *weight loss* or *obesity* are divulged, reinforced, and circulated. Fairclough (1989, p. 54) noted the media effect is cumulative and operates through reiteration of "particular ways of handling causality and agency, particular ways of positioning the reader, and so forth". The audience, whose communication is restricted by norms dictated by the media on behalf of the dominant ideology (Blommaert, 2005), tends to see social groups, actions or phenomenon in a way that serves the interests of the power elites. For instance, Baker's (2020) corpus-based study about the representation of the *obese* and *obesity* in the *Daily Mail* over a four-year period reveals that *obesity* was identified with negativity through lexical associations showing a problem (timebomb, epidemic, crises) which required an urgent solution (strategy, tackle, combat) because of being on the rise (spiralling, soaring, rising).

The first tool of corpus analysis is exploring the *concordances* which are also known as Key Word In Context (KWIC). They enable the researcher to see large sets of examples for one search term in the small amount of the original context to the left and to the right. Corpus software presents the concordance lines of a search term in an organized way so the researcher can have a better understanding of repeated patterns or associated tendencies (Evison, 2010). For instance, a closer look at the concordance lines of the *obese* in the subcorpus of the popular press has shown that the term was associated with semantic fields showing extremity (severely, dangerously, morbidly, extremely), disgust (gross, grotesque, shame) and contagion (epidemic, outbreak).

The second step is finding out *collocations* of the search terms. When particular words consistently and frequently appear together in a given context such as *slim* with *happy* or *fat* with *miserable*, this concurrence is referred to as a collocation (Baker, 2006). Collocations provide us the most noteworthy linguistic patterns around a search term, which leads to the identification of prevalent discourses and ideologies. The statistical significance of a collocation shows how powerful its cognitive associations are in a particular society. Stubbs (1996, p. 194) noted that "by searching for frequent collocations, we can glimpse the recurrent wordings which circulate in the social world, and glimpse how linguistic categories become social categories". I took advantage of Mutual Information (MI) score to calculate the

collocational strength of the relation between two words. Following Hunston (2002) who suggests an MI score of 3 or higher to be considered as a proof of collocational relationship between two words, I only considered the content words with an MI score of 3 or above to shape the collocate list of each search term. Since MI measure is acknowledged to disproportionately overvalue infrequent words, I opted for limiting the collocational profile to the top 25 with the highest frequency of occurrence, and a minimum frequency of 5 (see Lee; Liu, 2009). The function words were excluded from the list of the strong collocates since content words have more potential to provide insight about the discourses surrounding search terms.

Concordance and collocation analyses were oriented towards the identification of semantic preference and discourse prosody. S*emantic preference* is defined as "the relation, not between individual words, but between a lemma or word form and a set of semantically related words" (Stubbs, 2001, p. 65-66). In other words, semantic preference refers to a category of words that share a common semantic feature. For instance, a quick search in the corpus has shown that *slim* frequently co-occurs with *women*, *she*, *proud*, *confident*, *happy*, *fabulous*, and *beautiful* which suggests that its semantic preferences are the fields of *femininity*, *beauty*, and *self-satisfaction*. The collocational meaning originating from the interaction between the node and its consistent collocates is referred to as *discourse prosody* which shows "the speaker's evaluative attitude" towards a social group, action, or phenomenon (Stubbs, 2007, p. 178). Sinclair (1991) put forth that words and phrases tend to appear in certain semantic environments as exemplified by the word *happen* which is associated with *unpleasant things* like *accidents* or *unfortunate incidents*. The discourse prosody of a search term hints if it is seen as favourable or unfavourable by the society. Considering the abovementioned examples from the corpus, it can be said that being *slim* is labelled as acceptable and normal whilst being *fat* is identified with being unacceptable and deviant. As Xiao and McEnery (2006) note, semantic preference and discourse prosody are two different yet interdependent collocational meanings. While discourse prosody shapes the surroundings of the node item by limiting its preferential choices, semantic preference plays a key role in the construction of discourse prosody (Partington, 2004, p. 151). Studying concordances, collocations, semantic preference, and discourse prosody in a large media corpus compiled with the help of the search terms *shape*, *size*, *weight,* and *body* enables us to uncover "the wider socio-political structures of power and domination" within that discourse community over body image issues (Kress, 1990, p. 85).

## 5 Analysis

In this section, the patterns around the lexis showing *underweight* and *overweight* in the popular press and quality press were examined in detail.

## 5.1 Analysis of the Lexis Showing *Underweight* and *Overweight* in the Popular Press

Table 2 below shows us the distribution of the lexis surrounding *underweight* in the popular press corpus. The least frequent search word *size 0 (size-zero)* was used in a negative way, such as "Today I launch a campaign for the fashion world to fatten up and stop their *sick* reliance on *skeletal size-zero* models who are very clearly *ill*" (*The Sun*, 2.10.2014) aimed to direct criticism at the fashion industry. *Size-zero*, which was associated with lexis related to fashion industry (models, celebrity, figure), sickness (sick, ill) and marginality (extremely, skeletal, alarming, horrific), was represented as unhealthy and ugly.

Table 2 – Lexis showing *underweight* in popular press

| Word | Frequency | Collocates |
|---|---|---|
| **Size 0** | 43 | models, perfect |
| **Skinny** | 505 | model(s), jeans, being, super, girl(s), women, ultra, looking, size, toned, reallly |
| **Thin** | 474 | stick, model(s), young, legs, girl(s), people, women,ultra, painfully, naturally, extremely,stay |
| **Slender** | 122 | frame, size, figure, models |
| **Slim** | 772 | be(ing), stay(ing), look(ing), keep, healthy, women, fit, super, help, fat, girl, sexy, beautiful, happy,pretty,help |
| ***Total*** | 1916 | |

Source: own elaboration.

A similar trend was observed in the contextualisation of the word *skinny*. The concordances have demonstrated that being *skinny* was linked to ugliness (old, miserable, hollow-looking), illness (unhealthy, sick, heroin-chic), extremity (dangerously, ultra, very, strikingly, super) and masculinization (boyish, flat-chested, infertile). Social media, celebrity culture and fashion industry were blamed for establishing a causal link between success and underweight, which then creates pressure on women and girls to be *skinny,* as in "I fear she [Amal Clooney] has become the victim of the *invidious pressure* most women in the public eye seem to be falling victim to these days: that the only way to be seen as truly *successful* is to not only be super-glamorous, but *super-skinny*, too" (*Daily Mail*, 23.05.2015).

Likewise *size-zero* and *skinny*, the search word *thin* was identified with extremity (alarmingly, dangerously, horrifically, insanely, extremely, painfully), masculinization (like pre-puberty schoolboy, lack of femininity, straight up and down like a boy), illness (stick-thin, sick, anorexic) and mental problem (insane, abnormal, madness, fixation). Although there are only few instances, it was seen that the *Daily Mail* acknowledged the causal link between being underweight and belonging to the upper social class (also see the excerpt above). Here, we can observe that being *underweight* was erroneously considered to be a sign of success and richness for women:

> It's no coincidence Vogue boss Anna Wintour and Mrs Beckham have shrunk in the past ten years. Being *thin* is, first and foremost, *a marker of wealth*. As Catherine Riley, spokesperson for the Women's Equality Party, established last year to

> campaign for gender equality, says: There is almost an *exclusivity* around *thinness it has become aspirational* (*Daily Mail*, 22.09.2016).

Contrary to the adversity around *size zero*, *skinny* and *thin*, both *slender* and *slim* were represented quite favourably. The collocations and concordances of the search word *slender* have revealed that the word has positive associations such as being young, attractive and successful as seen in "The 27-year-old has remained coy about how she *achieved* her *slender* new frame..." (*The Sun*, 16.02.2016). *Slim* was also allied with attractiveness (pretty, fabulous, superb, stunning, sexy, desirable, beautiful, perfect), normativity (healthy, normal), joy (happy, ecstatic), a path to self-realization (self-control, determined, motivated, dedicated), as exemplified by the concordances of *slim and* listed in Table 3 below.

Table 3 – The concordance lines of *slim*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| beyond physical appearance. But I can't express how good it feels to be | ***slim and*** | **attractive.** It's wonderful knowing my partner is really attracted to me'. |
| which has in the past been accused of look-ism' - only employing young | ***slim and*** | **attractive** assistants. February 19 |
| Blunt wrote: Why would you even mention Gemma's weight? She's gorgeous | ***slim and*** | **beautiful** and probably has a complex now!' Linzi Murphy said: Did I |
| and I couldn't take my eyes off her. "It was amazing to see her looking so | ***slim and*** | **beautiful."** The loved-up couple also say losing weight has made them better parents |
| extra weight that no diet can help her' and that liposuction makes people | ***slim and*** | **beautiful'**. The game |
| I kept it all this time because I was determined that one day I would be | ***slim and*** | **confident** like I was the last time I wore it but I just never seemed |
| it has now become a way of life for me. About a year later when I was feeling | ***slim and*** | **fabulous** I bumped into Tim's mum in the local pharmacy |
| I lapped up all the compliments and plastered the page with pictures of a | ***slim and*** | **happy** Ursula. Now my profile picture is of my feet the only part of |
| whole box though. "For the first Christmas since I can remember i feel | ***slim and*** | **happy** and ready to enjoy the party season - I couldn't wish for a be |
| Without even realising it Trudy is playing a huge role in helping her kids remain | ***slim and*** | **healthy** by achieving the daily recommendation of at least 60 minutes |
| gone to wrong wedding after we lost 12st 13st; S2 'I was desperate to be | ***slim and*** | make her **proud'** EVERYONE expected a big wedding when Laura and Chris |
| I think he will be less likely to run away with someone else if he has a | ***slim and*** | **pretty** wife at home. "I'm always comparing myself to other women and |
| would only be to mock me. It was so humiliating. My friends were all so | ***slim and*** | **pretty** and I was just the fat one in the corner." Aged 21 Hazel had |
| constipation." JUINCE DIET Salama Hayek WHAT is it: Salma Hayek credits her | ***slim and*** | **sexy** shape to the juice cleanses she started doing 15 years ago. The |
| or sizzle in a little black dress this Christmas you'll want to look as | ***slim and*** | **sexy** as possible. But forget about starving yourself into shape and |

Source: own elaboration.

Although there were few instances of negativity around *slim* as in "Add to that society's infatuation with being *slim*, and it's no wonder disordered eating is on the rise" (*The Sun*, 6.07.2014) or "[...] while women feel under pressure to follow the example of *slim* celebrities who appear to have effortlessly regain their pre-pregnancy shape [...]" (*Daily Mail*, 30.12.15), slimness was widely praised by the popular press through celebrity stories, diet tips, personal narratives about physical transformation to take revenge on an ex or to look good on the Big Day. Whilst these newspapers condemned social media, fashion industry and celebrity culture for enforcing the thin ideal through *size zero*, *skinny* and *thin*, the concordances of *slim* and *slender* were at variance with this standing as even the most unusual examples of weight loss were extolled, like

> But the svelte appearance of Prince George's mother, who cut a startlingly *slim* figure as she larked about on the grass beside him, *attracted just as much attention*. Just six weeks after giving birth to Princess Charlotte, the Duchess of Cambridge appears to have completely regained her pre-pregnancy body (*Daily Mail*, 16.06.2015).

An overview of the discourse surrounding *underweight* in the popular press has shown that both newspapers indeed communicated very contradictory messages. Both *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* denounced the thin ideal through negative discursive constructions around *size zero*, *skinny* and *thin*. Although few instances of negativity around *slender* and *slim* were

observed, the narrative on the whole around these two terms is predominantly positive. The popular press took advantage of this positivity to dictate the preconditions of an acceptable physical appearance. Here, the popular press functioned as a mouthpiece of the market forces as it bombards the audience with exemplary narratives of physical and psychological improvement thanks to weight loss. These personal accounts were masterfully structured with emotive vocabulary, real life figures and marketized solutions. Fenton (2011, p. 66) noted that "In a neoliberal free market economy, news has no right to exist if it cannot pay its way" and these 'the new me' stories not only reinforce a neoliberal view of the relation among the citizen, state and society but also encourage personal investment in products and services to obtain a better version of the self.

After investigating the representation of *underweight*, the following section examines the popular press' stance towards *overweight* by means of studying the collocates and concordances of the search terms *plus-size, curvy, fat, overweight* and *obese*. Table 4 presents the frequency and collocations of these search words.

Table 4 – Lexis showing *overweight* in popular press

| Word | Frequency | Collocates |
|---|---|---|
| **Plus-size** | 325 | model (s), fashion, women, modelling, first, clothing, market, shop(s),agency, bloggers |
| **Curvy** | 263 | size, women, girl(s), figure, healthy, model(s), lingerie |
| **Fat** | 3844 | body,being, people, shaming, diet, lose, loss, girl, belly, man, children, woman, person, reduce, lazy, old, ugly, kids, mum, bride, unhealthy, fighting |
| **Overweight** | 1131 | obese, seriously, dangerous, extremely, officially, people, women, children, men, adults, patients, risk, unhappy, obesity,help ,dangerous, categorized, uncomfortable, miserable, daughter, mother(s) |
| **Obese** | 1059 | overweight, morbidly, people, being, patients, children, women, classed, adults,clinically, severely, men, BMI, risk, study, research, clinically, grossly, officially,mums,dangerous |
| ***Total*** | 6622 | |

Source: own elaboration.

The most noticeable difference between the tables of the *underweight* and *overweight* is the total frequency of the terms. The words showing *underweight* were used 1916 times (see Table 2) whereas the lexis showing *overweight* was utilised 6205 times (see Table 4). The collocations and concordances of the search terms *plus-size* and *curvy* showed that they were generally used in a positive way in the popular press to praise the recent body acceptance movement promoted by the social media influencers and fashion industry. Both newspapers underlined that this new trend must be encouraged to make women feel more confident and socially approved, "The fact that there are beautiful, *plus-size* women who are not only embracing their size but also showing it off to the world with no shame is incredible" (*The Sun*, 20.08.2014) or "[…] her *curvy* figure still shows a hint of what she calls mum tum", but Miss Kelly is delighted with her look and is now on a mission to help other women feel confident about their bodies" (*Daily Mail*, 3.06.2015). On the other hand, the tabloids sometimes

underlined that *plus-size* and *curvy* must be seen as a euphemism for *fat* and criticized this usage for aggravating the obesity problem as in "It is *fat* and it's as simple as that. Words such as *curvaceous*, *plus-size* and other soft titles are just adding to the problem. We are scared and, before long, political correctness will be making us all *fat*" (*The Sun*, 9.08.2014).

In spite of the mixed messages conveyed through *plus-size* and *curvy*, the popular press communicated its negative stance explicitly and firmly through *fat*, *obese* and *overweight*. They opted for validating their standing with statistical data from official or scientific reports to substantiate the gravity of the issue. This tactical move typifies legitimation through rationalization which aims at persuading by means of cognitively valid data (van Leeuwen, 2008). Unsurprisingly, the discourse on *overweight* was marked with negativity through vocabulary like *epidemic*, *spread*, *alarming(ly)*, *dangerous(ly)* and *extreme(ly)*. Such adversity can be explained by a negativity bias which states that "negative events are more salient, potent, dominant in combinations, and generally efficacious than positive events" (Rozin; Royzman, 2001, p. 297). From the evolutionary perspective, it is quite normal for people to respond more attentively to negative stimuli as it is perceived as a threat to survival (Hibbing; Smith; Alford, 2014). Both the volume of the vocabulary related to obesity and the negativity surrounding it showed that the popular press deems *overweight* as a threat to British society.

The tone of the popular press was very harsh towards the *overweight* whom they blamed with gluttony, sloth, and even lack of intelligence as in "The fact is, any adult with an IQ above room temperature knows what makes them *fat*" (*Daily Mail*, 3.04.2014). Table 5 below shows the concordances of *fat and* displayed the negativity surrounding the term through vocabulary like *disgusting*, *greedy*, *horrible*, *lazy*, *miserable*, *ugly*, *unattractive,* and *worthless*.

Table 5 – The concordance lines of *fat and*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| self-loathing reached a new level when an ex called her " | ***fat and*** | **disgusting**". She says: "He cheated on me and told me I was so fat I'd |
| she found solace in unhealthy snacks. She says: "I felt | ***fat and*** | **disgusting** and was lacking motivation. I'd only ever leave the house if |
| My tummy spilled over my jeans and I felt | ***fat and*** | **frumpy**. Going back to work after maternity leave is nerve-wracking |
| she says it makes her feel energised'. Even I, lazy, | ***fat and*** | **greedy** as I am, have succumbed to this pressure though I would describe |
| victims by any stretch of the imagination. They are just | ***fat and*** | **greedy** and won't stop stuffing their faces |
| recently, is always tired and feels depressed. I feel | ***fat and*** | **horrible**. He was the perfect fiancé and a brilliant dad but it's all gone |
| the cold, hard fact that in most cases we are big, | ***fat and*** | **lazy** because we eat too much and don't move enough |
| the doctor basically said, 'You're not sick, you're just | ***fat and*** | **lazy**'." Rochelle claims to be eating healthier foods in a bid to lose weight |
| enjoy it. I also joined Slimming World. When I was | ***fat and*** | **miserable**, I'd chopped off all my hair but I let it grow and bought some |
| wedding anniversary, after months of feeling | ***fat and*** | **sluggish**. As I glanced down at the bulge, I said to Alan, 'I'm going to join |
| school in tears after being bullied for having a ' | ***fat and*** | **ugly** mummy.' It was a turning point and I had a gastric bypass in 2013. |
| the woman she once was. For so long I'd I felt | ***fat and*** | **ugly.** I couldn't bear for my partner to see me undressed,' says Janet |
| making normal-sized women like me feel | ***fat and*** | **unattractive**? Eventually, I give up and see if I fare better in the cheaper |
| The truth was I didn't want one. I knew I was | ***fat and*** | I was utterly **miserable** about it |
| I wish I had not seen him again. I feel he saw me as | ***fat and*** | **ugly** and is probably laughing at me. He always could be mean and cruel |
| Carpenter, 18, was "stunning" but "thought she was | ***fat and*** | **worthless**", her father said.Clothes shop worker Hannah took thousands |

Source: own elaboration.

In line with the aforementioned research on media representation of obesity (Glenn; McGannon; Spence, 2012; Cotter; Samos; Swinglehurst, 2021; Brookes; Baker, 2022), obesity was recurrently represented as an individual's irresponsibility and failure. Consider "You can't catch *obesity*. It isn't inflicted on people by dark forces beyond their control. These *selfish individuals* are *grotesquely overweight* because they *lack willpower and moral fibre*. They have the option to diet or die, but they do not deserve special treatment funded by taxpayers" (*Daily*

*Mail*, 24.01.2014). Framing indolence of an individual as the only cause of obesity exemplifies causal reductionism which, as a logical fallacy, assumes a single cause as the only trigger of a complex problem (Burkett, 2019, p. 288). Oversimplifying the cause and putting the citizen in the limelight whilst obscuring other potential motives such as the food industry may stem from the market-driven policies (LeBesco, 2011). This view was reinforced through the frequent recurrence of *cost*, *burden*, *taxpayer*, and *fund* while explaining the medical consequences of obesity since it was represented as a heavy load on the welfare system for causing extra medical expenditure: "We should part-privatise the *NHS* and make chubsters *pay*. Currently every *taxpayer* bears the *cost* of *fat* people's decision to eat until their hips give way and their pancreas is fried into a diabetic coma" (*The Sun*, 14.08.2015).

While reading the concordances of the *overweight*, *fat*, and *obese*, a very interesting pattern which is highly concerned with social class was noted. Although it is not the real aim, the association between being *overweight* and belonging to a lower social class is indirectly and involuntarily acknowledged through the criticism directed at the weight problems of the unemployed British citizens who live on benefits. While the popular press aimed at displaying the moral failure of the *overweight* by underlining their social class, they unintentionally reinforced the typification of fatness as the marker of lower class. Consider "A *MOTHER* is demanding that the Government pay for her ten-year-old to attend a *fat* camp' to lose weight. […]. The *unemployed* 34-year-old has contacted Jeremy Hunt saying the Department for Health *should provide funds for Holly-Ann to go to a weight loss camp*" (*Daily Mail*, 1.02.2016). Throughout the popular press corpus, it is observed that the popular class opted for representing the *overweight* as failed underclass citizens who do not have jobs, live on social benefits, and put strain on the Welfare System. Even though the real intention of the tabloids is to draw attention to the exploitation of responsible tax-paying citizens, these 'parasitic groups of people' whose irresponsibility not only causes them to be overweight but also live on State benefits, are repeatedly framed as the problem of the lower social class. The personal accounts which put emphasis on the role of cheap yet fattening junk food in the high obesity levels of this class are contextualised in a way to ridicule them. In the following excerpt, a single overweight mother receiving state benefits and living in a council house is criticized not only for being overweight and belonging to a lower class but also shamed for drawing a link between low income and fat. Similar to the excerpt above, the weight related criticism is directed at a woman from lower socio-economic status, which leads us to the conclusion that there is an intricate relation between weight, gender, and class.

> *A SINGLE mother* who *weighs 25 stone* and *receives £20,000 in state benefits* has made a plea for more money from the taxpayer to buy healthier food and a gym membership. Christina Briggs, 26, says she does not exercise because she cannot afford entry to a gym and that *her weight problem is partly due to the fact that she can only afford junk food*. *Unemployed*, she *lives in a council house* in Hindley, near Wigan, with her two children, aged ten and two, *by different fathers* (*The Sun*, 26.09.2014).

## 5.2 Analysis of the Lexis Showing *Underweight* and *Overweight* in the Corpus of the Quality Press

Table 6 below illustrates the recurrence and collocations of the search words in the category of the *underweight* in the quality press. The first search term *size-zero* was associated with fashion industry and celebrity culture (models, fashion, celebrity, catwalk) through negative constructions showing controversy (debate, furore, infamous, ban) and harm (damaging, bombarding, fuelling, pressure), as in "Teenagers are *under immense pressure* to attain the perceived ideal body shape-with images of *size zero* women *bombarding* their screens" (*The Guardian*, 8.09.2015). In a similar vein, the linguistic constructions around *skinny* are also negative as the search term was identified with excessiveness (ultra, unhealthily, ridiculously, dangerously, unrealistically, unnaturally) and media pressure (shaming, oppression, body fascism, scrutiny) on females (girl (s), she, women). Consider "It is far easier to recognise what is not a normal body type: impossibly *skinny*, taut, hard, tanned, with breasts that defy gravity - the kind you see all the time in magazines, on television, and in films" (*The Guardian*, 17.01.2014). Perhaps, one of the most interesting discoveries about *skinny* is its pairing with whiteness as we can see in "Charged with propagating an impossible '*skinny* white girl' ideal, brands such as Lululemon and the magazine Yoga Journal have been lambasted for focusing on one particular body type in their marketing" (*The Times*, 28.06.2015). According to the quality press, the thin ideal circulated by mainstream media not only dictates specific benchmarks of beauty but also disfavours body diversity.

Table 6 – Lexis showing *underweight* in quality press

| Word | Frequency | Collocates |
|---|---|---|
| **Size 0** | 45 | models, fashion |
| **Skinny** | 359 | models, look, jeans, mannequin, girls, naturally, bitch, women, strong, super, ultra, shaming |
| **Thin** | 541 | models,being, stick, fat, women, white, people, ideal, body, young, tall, ultra, dangerous, unhealthily |
| **Slender** | 38 | body |
| **Slim** | 240 | people, fit, healthy, woman ,stay,boyfriend, legs |
| ***Total*** | 1223 | |

Source: own elaboration.

The search word *thin*, which has the highest frequency in Table 6, follows a similar pattern with *size-zero* and *skinny*, as discrimination of the bodies which do not conform to the thin ideal of society was criticized through associations of *thin* with extremity (ultra, unnaturally, unrealistically, artificially, stick, rake), being unhealthy (ill, sick, unhealthily, painfully) and media influence (fetishisation, thinspiration, idealized, obsessed) as exemplified by "CALLS for a new law to protect models who face *pressure* to become dangerously *thin* will be debated in parliament after a successful petition campaign" (*The Times*, 29.11.2015). A careful reading of the concordances of the *thin* revealed the quality press' negative judgement of the hegemonic beauty standards mandated by the media and market. Table 7 below shows the instantiations of this normative through pairings of *thin* with whiteness, beauty, elegance, youth, success, and higher social status. Being *thin* and relevant beauty related physical attributes illustrated in Table 7 were considered as a

woman's symbolic capital which provides her "a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 291). According to the quality press, the pursuit and maintenance of *thinness* was not only gendered, racialized, and associated with youth, but also framed as a form of personal empowerment to climb the social ladder. The quality newspapers considered the enforcement of *thinness* as body fascism which "tends to denote an infatuation with the body beautiful at the expense of substance, a celebration of physical fitness, muscular self-control, and lavishness to style to the detriment of intellect and spiritual self-awareness" (Gottlieb, 2011, p. 111).

Table 7 – The concordances of *slim*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| that they must strive to emulate the **tall**, | ***thin*** | , **white**, **large-breasted**, **long-legged**, **glossy-haired**, **perfect-skinned** models they see everywhere in adverts |
| will follow their graduation. Being | ***thin*** | , it seems, is an unspoken requirement **if you're after a fatter paycheck**. And the thinner you are,the better |
| in their sameness: mostly **white**, **tall** and | ***thin*** | , **blonde**, **sun-kissed**, and being Australia- perpetually bikini-clad. |
| their weight. "Pressures on girls to be | ***thin*** | in order to be **beautiful** and **socially valued** have been in place for many decades now, with the major shift |
| but widespread belief in fashion that | ***thin*** | is **good**, **thinner is better**, and **thinnest is best**. The industry dutifully wrings its hands when it thinks we're all |
| always been the more **beautiful** and | ***thin*** | and **elegant**, but it didn't seem to do the damage it does to some people. She thinks perhaps it is because " |
| of myself in my 34-year-old prime: | ***thin*** | , **great hair**, **good skin**, etc. I will never take a selfie and my children will be denied photographs of me from |
| will work for you. You had to be | ***thin*** | first, after which you would become **more successful**, **more reliable**, **more punctual**." |
| over and over again. Usually a **young**, | ***thin*** | , **white**, **toned**, **large-breasted**, **long-legged**, **non-disabled body**. Funnily enough, that's not what most women's |
| they can be **attractive** and **smart** and | ***thin*** | . The brand's founder, Chris Lindland, proudly commented: "Our designers cooked up a collection of smart |
| members of the audience want to see | ***thin*** | , **white**, **young** models. They're all at fault. A longer version of this article appeared in Newsweek Men with |
| or Heidi or Kate. Having **smart**, | ***thin*** | , **attractive** women as the unique selling point of a new ad campaign isn't progressive. It's actually quite restrictive. |
| only be **cool** and **attractive** if you're | ***thin*** | Aimed primarily at men in their 30s and 40s, the first issue of Mr Babe had sold over half of its 50,000 print run - |
| be overwhelmingly peopled by the very | ***thin*** | , very **tall**, **white** and **young**. In January, when she signed with the British agency Milk Model Management, 29-year |
| that someone who was not **beautiful**, | ***thin*** | and **white**, could only ever exist on the margins of a story - sometimes in the background, occasionally the sidekick |
| The Girard sisters are **tall**, | ***thin*** | , **elegant**, **blonde** and **sophisticated** - and both say they harbour a secret admiration for British women (with the |

Source: own elaboration.

The concordances of the search word *slender*, which has the lowest frequency with 38 occurrences, are also loaded with pairings which equate *slender* with whiteness (white), personal effort (yearn, dedicated, achievement, maintenance), youth (young) and beauty (attractive, glamour, elegance). The last search word from Table 6 is *slim* which was used 240 times throughout the quality press corpus. Despite being contextualised relatively positively in contrast to the other search terms, when paired with beauty related physical attributes and placed between apostrophes such as 'slim and attractive', 'slim and healthy' and 'slim and toned', the quality press criticized the objectification of female body as it happened in "The game, which was available through Apple's tightly regulated App Store, urges players to slice open a girl's face and stomach to make her '*slim* and beautiful' and is described as suitable for children aged 9 and over" (*The Times*, 15.01.2014).

Similar to the popular press, the quality press also considers *underweight* as the epitome of upper social class. In addition to the pattern observed about social class in the concordances of *thin* in Table 7 through "fatter paycheck, socially valued, more successful, sophisticated", the excerpts "The compulsory extreme *slimness* of *women of a certain age and lifestyle is a sign of their success*, which usually means their husband's" (*The Times*, 12.05.2015) and "An image search for yoga confirms the stats: yoga is white, *wealthy*, female and really *skinny*; the Goop-reading, Hilaria Baldwins of this world" (*The Guardian*, 11.10.2014) reinforced the idea that the membership to the upper social class comes with a package of being *underweight*, good looking, rich and successful. Being *underweight* is also marked as

prerequisite for being feminine. Needless to say, the tone of the quality press in the coverage of this equation is rather critical.

In the following section, the discursive construction around the *overweight* lexis in the quality press is presented. Table 8 below shows the distribution and collocations of the vocabulary in question. Similar to the stark contrast between the frequencies of the *underweight* and *overweight* lexis in the popular press, the total recurrence of *overweight* vocabulary with 5526 is considerably greater than the *underweight* lexis with 1223 in the quality press. Parallel to the pattern observed in the popular press, the quality press gave more coverage to the issue of the *overweight*.

The search word *plus-size*, which was repeated 287 times, was connected with fashion (models, modelling, fashion) and social media (bloggers, influencers) as this new concept was an outcome of the body diversity initiative advocated by social media celebrities and accepted eagerly by the fashion industry to increase its profits. A clear example of this can be seen in an excerpt from *The Times*.

> A mantra of acceptance for people who aren't a size zero is a growing hum. Maybe it's just the demographics of the market. With more than half of British women now a size 16, it's not just Green who can spot a lucrative trend. '*Plus size* is a big part of the market, it's an important part, we need to embrace it' he told me after the Evans show (*The Times*, 26.10.2014).

Although the term was generally used in a positive manner as the quality press considered that step as a turning point in a thin-obsessed fashion industry, there were also few instances through which the use of the term *plus size* was labelled as a euphemism to rebrand the negatively connotated *fat* as in "People use the *obfuscating* term '*plus size*' when really they mean 'fat'" (*The Times*, 10.04.2016).

The term *curvy*, with 127 occurrences, generally has positive connotations (confident *curvy* woman, gloriously *curvy*, enthusiasm for the *curvy*, natural body type, Mattel's makeover of curvy Barbie) as it was identified with the acceptance and celebration of the body positive movement which defends the positive evaluation of different body types and sizes (Markula, 2022). Though instantiated rarely, the term *curvy* was also associated with political correctness of the fashion industry which only sought to increase its sales.

Table 8 – Lexis showing *overweight* in quality press

| Word | Frequency | Collocates |
|---|---|---|
| **Plus-size** | 287 | model(s), male, first, women, modelling, fashion, clothing, bloggers |
| **Curvy** | 127 | women, Barbie, body, girl(s), size, petite, tall |
| **Fat** | 2986 | body, people, diet, low, high, diet, weight, burn(ing), sugar, muscle, women, shaming, loss, eat(ing), ugly, kids, female, feminist, reduce, harmful, activism, activist |
| **Overweight** | 1064 | obese, be(ing), WHO, people, women, children, adults, obesity, men, patients, risk, parents, mothers, dangerous, seriously |
| **Obese** | 1062 | overweight, people, WHO, patients, adults, morbidly, men, children, women, severely, smokers, surgery |
| ***Total*** | 5526 | |

Source: own elaboration.

Although both *plus size* and *curvy* were distinctly gendered, the other three terms namely *fat*, *obese*, and *overweight* were used to refer to both women and men despite the more visibility of the females. In contrast to the popular press which tended to put the blame on mothers for childhood obesity, both parents were mentioned in the quality press without any sort of accusation. Furthermore, the argument related to the latter three terms was always justified with statistical data and scientific studies from prestigious institutions. The problem of *overweight* was deemed as an epidemic through an alarming tone since it was seen as a threat to social well-being.

The linguistic constructions around the term *overweight*, which has the frequency of 1064, can be grouped in four main headings, which are social actors (people, children, adults, teenagers, parents, child, volunteers, women), an increasing threat (seriously, dangerously, severely), medical issues (clinically, surgery, cancer, heart disease, patients) and discrimination (misery, blaming, haters, outrageous judgements). Both newspapers underlined the role of the market forces which not only deny any sort of responsibility through victim blaming but also condition the consumer to invest more in dieting products and services to conform to the body ideal. Consider the following example in which the food industry was accused of imprisoning the *overweight* in a vicious circle of social discrimination, self-disgust, and more consumption in a way that serves the interests of the market.

> The *food industry* and *its friends* and *collaborators* would like us to think it is *all our fault*. You can eat whatever you like, they insist - there is no such thing as bad food. It is your fault if you overeat and get *fat*. They are partly responsible for a blame culture that delivers the *overweight*, burdened with *shame* and *self-loathing*, into the hands of the *diet gurus* (*The Guardian*, 21.06.2014).

The term *obese*, which was used 1062 times, was contextualised in a way that shows a rising threat (severely, super, morbidly, excessively, increasingly, unhealthy, risk), medical treatment (clinically, NHS, surgery, smoker(s), patient(s), health, diabetes, treatment, WHO) and social actors (people, population, Briton(s), British, parents, mothers). A careful reading of the concordances showed that the quality press opted for focussing on the underlying causes of the obesity problem through referrals to the policies of the food industry and sedentary lifestyle. There was also call for a government action to regulate the food production such as putting higher taxes on high sugar content. Another striking finding is the identification of the socio-economic status with *overweight* especially by *The Guardian*. The following excerpt perfectly typifies *The Guardian*'s stance towards the obesity debate: "The Tories must tackle *the real cause of obesity*: inequality. *Fat is a class issue*. Most of the seriously *obese* are *poor*. Offer a diet of self-esteem, good jobs and social status, and the pounds will fall away" (*The Guardian*, 18.08.2016). According to *The Guardian*, obesity is the problem of the socio-economically lower classes that have to live on cheap and fattening food as healthy food is beyond their financial capacity. Despite *The Guardian*'s very clear standing on the socio-economic causes of obesity, *The Times* adopts a rather complex attitude towards it since the underlying reasons of obesity are generally identified as the food manufacturers or else the wrong policies. Despite occurring rarely, the individuals are sometimes accused of their poor choices by *The Times*. As the excerpt shows "So let us park the glib assumption that *poverty* is a factor in our alarming obesity statistics. The inconvenient truth is that, *in most cases, it is down to laziness*. It *takes effort*

*and money to produce* a *fat* child, and *to sustain obesity in adulthood*" (*The Times*, 10.05.2015), poor socio-economic status is less frequently framed as the trigger of obesity.

The last search term *fat* has the highest frequency with 2986. The linguistic patterns around it can be summarized in five main headlines, which are the nutritional terms (calories, intake, sugar, cholesterol), weight loss (burn, diet, surgery, BMI, NHS, diet, loss), social pressure (blaming, shaming, humiliating, bullied, psychological problems, haters), major triggers of the obesity problem (food manufacturers, government, industry) and possible solutions (higher taxation, more state-funded bariatric surgeries, regulations, state control). The excerpt below demonstrates the critical view of the quality press about the food manufacturers who took advantage of science to manipulate the consumers.

> Simply *blaming* the *fat*, however, ignores what has been happening in the food industry for decades. It is like *shaming* the loser in a game long rigged against them. Yes, some of us have more discipline, and make more effort to cook from scratch, *but there can be other reasons for failure to do this than just idleness*. In That Sugar Book, Damon Gameau says food companies employ hundreds of scientists to understand why we crave things and what makes foods addictive. The industry lingo includes terms such as "moreishness", "craveability", "mouthfeel", "vanishing calorific density" (allowing the consumer to keep stuffing food without feeling full). Make the *overweight* take responsibility for themselves, by all means. *But let's remember that some of these addictions were, quite legally, orchestrated* (*The Times*, 1.08. 2015).

In comparison to the popular press which persistently defines the *fat* through stereotypes, the quality press, especially *The Guardian*, rarely correlates *fat* with laziness or individual's irresponsibility. There are even a few instances to break the stigma around *fat* as in "I am a healthy, beautiful, intelligent, active and creative fat woman. I'm doing what I love for a living. I have friends and family who love me" (*The Guardian*, 10.05.2016). Furthermore, fat-shaming, which entered Oxford Dictionaries in 2015 (Steinmetz, 2015), was strongly denounced for aggravating the problem by using a humiliating language towards people with excess weight. Fat-shaming, which originated from healthism advocated by neoliberalism, promotes 'facts over feelings' to urge the overweight to internalise that they are both physically and morally unfit (see Spratt, 2023). The concordances of fat-shaming listed in Table 9 below show that the neoliberal ideology that views obesity as self-inflicted is fallacious as it deliberately ignores the socio-economic status, genetic factors, and the impact of market mandated media. The quality press described fat-shaming as useless, psychologically destructive, and discriminatory.

Table 9 – The concordance lines of *fat-shaming*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Dr. Sarah Jackson, thinks that the UK should have legislation to **protect people against** | ***"fat-shaming"*** | , similar to our legislation about race and sex. |
| The slim and sanctimonious are behind our **obesity crisis**: | ***Fat-shaming*** | isn't just **morally wrong**, it's **counterproductive** too. If weight is a health risk, ridicule won't help |
| her British Vogue cover debut in January's issue, **snapped back at critics** | ***fat-shaming*** | her size 6-8 frame. "Yeah, I'm an athletic person. But I love my body because I know what it's been |
| the changes in lifestyle that might have prevented it are unlikely to be of use in curing it. | ***Fat-shaming*** | is **worse than useless**. Another paper found that the more weight-conscious people are, the more |
| Curves and flesh are far more beautiful than skin and bones. It is | ***fat-shaming*** | that's **ugly, grotesque and bullying**. The term entered the Oxford dictionaries this year. |
| Horrified relatives said **I would need years of therapy** to forgive my mother for; | ***'fat-shaming"*** | ; me into anorexia, that I would eventually turn to drugs and cutting to heal my crippled psyche |
| from being hooked, by restricting the pushers - or to continue a programme of | ***fat-shaming*** | , **bullying** and compulsory treatment, whose only likely outcome is unhappiness. Now ask yourself |
| Obesity is an incurable disease. So why is the government intent on punishing sufferers?; | ***Fat-shaming*** | is **worse than useless**. David Cameron points his finger at the afflicted, but food manufacturers |
| Silly magawho zines claim they are "inspired"; by fat women when really they are | ***fat-shaming*** | them **on the sly**. Magazines make money out of women who pity-ogle infinitesimally fatter other |
| loses weight, whilst exploring the broader issues of body image in our society." Katie Hopkins | ***fat-shaming*** | the obese is **pointless** – we already blame ourselves. The former Apprentice star's new TV show will |

Source: own elaboration.

## 6 Conclusion

The present study set out to discover the discursive representations of the lexis showing two dichotomous ends of the body weight in British popular and quality press over a three-year period. Although previous literature on the media representation of body image with respect to weight displays an almost complete unanimity for the glorification of *thinness* in line with the neoliberal system (Bordo, 2003; Grogan, 2008; Levine; Murnen, 2009; McGannon; Spence, 2012), a rather fragmented picture emerges from the findings of this study since instances of counter hegemonic discourse are detected in both corpora. Taking advantage of the connotative nuances enabled by the lexis showing different spectrums of the *underweight* and *overweight*, the popular press kept indicating what is physically and socially acceptable and unacceptable in a relatively more inclusive and implicit way. While positioning itself firmly against the thin idealisation dictated by the industry through the negatively loaded *size zero*, *skinny*, *thin* and positively charged *curvy*, *plus-size*, the popular press maintained circulating the traditional body ideal either explicitly through favourable associations of *slim* and *slender* as well as unfavourable identifications around *fat*, *obese* and *overweight* or implicitly through temporal juxtapositions and causal links with the help of the inspirational new-me stories or stereotypical frames. Despite the attempts to appear more inclusive, the gist of the contradictory messages of the popular press is in congruence with the body ideals of the neoliberal ideology. Both the tradition of identifying *thinness* with self-confidence, self-worth, achievement, and self-satisfaction and framing *overweight* with laziness, irresponsibility, and misery is preserved. The circulation of these sorts of frames in the popular press through *before and after stories* narrating an individual's ambitious transformation from a desperate overweight person to a self-assured and content person with a slim figure must be evaluated within the framework of neoliberal policies which shift the responsibility of health from the State and hand it over to the citizen (Spratt, 2023). The concept of "ideal neoliberal citizen" refers to an individual who is a "rational, self-determined agent" and whose "identity is secured by autonomy and choice" (Shugart, 2016, p. 11). Through juxtapositions of the thin body with life success in contrast to the eternal fat loser stereotype, the popular press underlined that the readers have all the autonomy and choice to realize their best versions by investing more in themselves in a way the free market compels.

The implications of counter hegemonic discourse are also detected in the quality press which acknowledges the importance of the acceptance of body diversity as both newspapers, in general, are overtly standing against the dictation of the beauty ideals. The quality press considers the problems related to body weight as a public health concern and therefore demands state intervention to shift the onus of responsibility from the individual to the State (Welch, 2018). Both *The Guardian* and *The Times* deemed the obesity epidemic as an inevitable outcome of the obesogenic environment formed by the food industry and lack of governmental control. New legislations by the state were urged to force the food manufacturers and marketers to reformulate their services and products. As opposed to the popular press which adopted a satirical and sometimes humiliating tone towards the *overweight*, the tone of the quality press is rather constructive and solution-seeking. Considering the category of the *underweight*, the quality press considers media, market forces and lack of governmental control as the main triggers of the thin body idealism. While any sort

of body shaming was criticized, body diversity was praised by the quality press. Except for *The Guardian*, which is known to have a progressive stance on contemporary issues and expected to have a more inclusive language, striking differences were surprisingly found between the previous research and this investigation, which might be due to the period the data was collected for this study. This research focused on the news texts printed after the emergence and spread of the Body Positivity Movement in 2012 on social media (Griffin; Bailey; Lopez, 2022). The tone of change from the overt dictation of a body ideal to a seemingly inclusive mode can be seen as an attempt of the traditional media to keep up with the irrepressible rise of social media which has been increasing its influence on shaping public opinion by providing more space to diverse voices through a variety of platforms.

Another significant finding to emerge from this study is that regardless of the press genre, the weight related issues were marked with gender. Both the high frequencies of *her*, *she*, *mum*, *wife*, *husband*, and *baby*, along with the inspiring *new-me* stories of women in the popular press, show that women continued to be relegated to traditional roles such as the pleaser of the male gaze or nurturer. Such reiteration leads to the reinforcement of body weight as a feminine issue (Orbach, 1978). The quality press, on the other hand, unintentionally did so by re-contextualizing this traditional approach in their criticism of the mainstream media attitude. The final noteworthy observation about the media discourse on weight concerning body image is the link established between body mass and socio-economic status. Whilst thinness was identified with higher socio-economic status in both corpora, fatness was involuntarily associated with lower economic status by the popular press, while *The Guardian* sees poverty as one of the main triggers of the problems. The most important conclusion to drawn from this research is the intertwined relation between gender, socio-economic status and weight which not only sees weight as a feminine issue but also draws a sharp line between social classes in terms of it. By means of focussing on different lexical spectrums showing *underweight* and *overweight* in the popular and quality newspapers, this study differs from previous investigations which tend to limit the scope of research by focussing on frequently investigated press genres i.e. magazines or advertisements (Gow; Lydecker; Lamanna; Mazzeo, 2012; Roth; Homer; Fenwick, 2012) or concentrating on a single notion such as the representation of *obesity* in the newspapers (Brookes; Baker, 2022; Brookes, 2023). It contributes to the existing literature by comparing the representation of two polar ends of weight by newspapers which are not only less studied but also urged to reconstruct their discourse on weight to keep up with social media.

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## Use of AI

The author declares that this paper has not used AI for any purposes.