

The Research on the Construction of Obesity Stigmatization Issues in the British Paper Media in the Context of Frame Theory

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Abstract: Obesity in the UK has been on the rise in recent years, and the stigma attached to the term has been so strong that in July 2020, Prime Minister Boris issued a new ‘health promotion’ policy that set out to improve obesity in the UK at a regulatory level. Focusing on the UK, this study looks at the construction of obesity discourses in the mainstream UK media through two paper news reports, which is The Guardian and The Daily Mail, and explores how this ‘frame’ is subtly changing the perceptions of obese people. This paper defines three news frames for the identification of obesity coverage: the obesity stigma frame, the obesity transformation frame and the obesity stigma frame. In each of the three frames, the media have used different strategies to achieve different communication effects. Through the media’s coverage of the issue, the social context in the UK is analyzed. And the stigma of obesity in the media begins to diminish as a result of government promotion and ideological awakening. The arguments in media coverage of the stigma of obesity are also less convincing than those in coverage of helping the obese, which are fairer and stronger.

Keywords: obesity stigma, newspaper, COVID-19, anti-obesity program

1. Introduction

Obesity is a significant public health issue both internationally and in Britain. Normally, obesity is defined as having a BMI of 30 or higher. Being overweight is defined as having a BMI between 25 and 30, which are both linked to an increased risk of a variety of common diseases. According to the Health Survey for England 2019, 28.0% of adults in England are obese, while 36.2% are overweight, causing the appearance of obesity stigma [1]. Weight discrimination has been identified as the most prevalent type of prejudice in the UK. According to 2018 statistics from the British Liver Trust, 62% of Brits believe that others are likely to discriminate against someone who is overweight, and more than four in five UK citizens believe that persons with obesity are perceived poorly because of their weight [2].

After the spread of COVID-19, lockdowns, which have been implemented in many nations to stop the virus's spread, can make it more difficult for individuals to live healthy lifestyles unfortunately. According to the research from Dicken et al., the average BMI of UK adults has increased significantly during the pandemic's early months. Although the growth rate decreased in a degree during the latter month of 2020, the trend of BMI still rose in 2020, which is mainly due to snack intake and alcohol consumption. Thus, lockdowns after the pandemic indeed impact weight management for a long-term period. Besides, people with obesity are more likely to suffer from serious illness and death caused by the coronavirus, which enhance the weight bias once again. Commenters who blame the death of obese persons who have died from Covid-19 on the person's decision to be obese have attacked the obituaries of these individuals, and public personalities have pushed for stigmatizing obese people and holding them accountable for their body size [3-4]. Therefore, obesity is a health issue with great significance in the UK. And the government has put effort into framing how people comprehend and address obesity-related risks through media nowadays.

The newspaper is one of media channels. In this research, one newspaper in each of the categories of broadsheet and tabloid have been selected, which is The Guardian and The Daily Mail separately. The Guardian provides more angle on the public events compared to other broadsheets based on its radicality. The Daily Mail, whose readership is lower middle class, is the second most popular newspaper in the UK. On account of its popularity and reader diversity, narrative of The Daily Mail applies a more relaxed and variable perspective on obesity and obesity stigma. This research will review three stages of newspaper narrative towards obesity in the UK taking the anti-obesity program proposed by prime minister Boris Johnson, which is before the program, pre-program and post-program and explore the obesity stigma development in this process to summarize how newspaper discourse features balance the health attention and obesity discrimination and how it influences public attitude towards obesity.

2. Literature Review

Production, content, and effects are the three main components of news communication research. Through a 'relation' perspective, framing theory focuses on the interplay of media institutions, social culture, ideology, journalists, and audiences and their impact on news production.

Most scholars have drawn on the well-known four analytical paths when analyzing news frames. Among the four paths, Gamson and Lasch's 'interpretive packages' and Tankard's 'lists of frames' lean toward empirical research, which is concerned with deducing and inducing the framework of news reports using objective quantitative data. VanDijk's 'Discourse Analysis' and the structures of news discourse and framing devices of Pan and Kosicki's favor a critical research orientation, emphasizing the evaluation of news discourse through the structure of language and the way of discourse and criticizing the ideology and social and cultural values implicit in the framework [5].

The news frame of obesity presented in British newspaper reports is the subject of this study, which opts to adopt the analytical orientation of discourse analysis. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, a great number of researches have been conducted as for the obesity situation in the UK. According to research by Baker et al., the UK press adopts the report from medico-scientific researchers and medical practitioners more frequently from 2008 to 2017 [6]. However, the press tends to attribute obesity to the individual's behavior instead of powerful organizations such as the government and beverage and food producers, which accelerates the obesity stigma. Likewise, a paper from Brookes and Baker also discussed personal responsibility in the obesity topic and illustrated how it amplifies public's fears and malice towards the obese and obesity [7]. The research also summarized the difference between broadsheet and tabloid tendency on reporting obesity and political differences among broadsheets. Besides, there's a paper focusing on BMI

misperceptions. Around half of males and females at increased risk and almost one fifth of those at high risk, perceived their weight status as being 'about right', demonstrating that the effect of the UK press didn't play an active role in conducting public behavior [8]. With the increase of UK newspaper reports, obesity is not declining, at the same time, obesity stigma is becoming more of a problem, and news coverage needs to find a balance between decreasing stigma and increasing health awareness [9].

The stigma is getting worse after the outbreak of COVID-19. Due to the lockdown policy in the UK, the weight variability was closely related to diet [10-11]. Some research reviewed that a slight increase in BMI and mean weight happened during the initial month of the pandemic [12]. The increase went even smaller at the end of 2020. What's more, age, snack intake and alcohol consumption are found to be associated with increasing BMI, which emphasizes the pandemic's effects on weight change on long-term health [11]. In research from Brookes, the keywords of broadsheets and tabloids on obesity are collected and analyzed. Four effects on obesity stigma were shown. Due to the strong connection between COVID-19 and obesity, the stigma was aggravated again [13]. The public was requested for losing weight to reduce the burden of the National Health Service (NHS). Politicians began to prioritize obesity and used it as a starting point to build a positive image of themselves. But the research didn't show the benefits of this action. The whole article focuses on the negative impact of these policies. What's more, weight self-management in the era of COVID-19 becomes a patriotic obligation to the NHS that creates particularly acute forms of weight stigma [14]. And the group who suffered from discrimination was more likely to get mental problems like depression and loneliness. They tend to feel less satisfied and supported with their lives [15]. In total, most research realizes the situation of obesity stigma before and after the pandemic.

But so far, no research has appeared to show the detailed and systematic influence of government policy. Thus, the research will explore the narrative text of obesity in the newspaper from the Anti-obesity Program proposed by prime minister Boris Johnson and the reconstruction of the topic of obesity stigma after the program was enacted. The discourse on the 'obesity' issue in the paper media will be obtained through micro-text analysis and the deconstruction of the article's rhetoric. This will assist in addressing the UK's obesity issue, playing a positive role in the coverage of obesity in UK newspapers and attempting to reduce the tendency to stigmatize obesity in UK newspapers.

3. Methodology

Discourse employs a variety of key entities to position people as social subjects to show how discourse is shaped by the interaction of ideology and power, the beneficial effects of discourse on social identities, social relations, knowledge and belief systems. The anti-obesity plan announced by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is the starting point for this paper's discussion of how the social stigma associated with pre-pandemic news coverage of obesity influenced post-pandemic news narrative texts on obesity.

In this study, UK newspaper coverage of obesity before and after the obesity epidemic is compared, including The Guardian and The Daily Mail.

For this study, the period from January 1, 2018, to August 20, 2022 was selected for the coverage of "obesity" in the British newspaper for the obesity issue in the UK has changed since the 2020 epidemic and the UK government has issued a new policy to help overall weight loss. Therefore, the coverage of obesity issues during this period is more iconic.

For the sample collection of 'obesity topic reports', the following filtering conditions are set: 1. Belonging to the category of 'NEWS'; 2. The presence of 'obesity' or 'obese' in the news reports; 3. further screening of reports closely related to the topic of obesity discourse ('overweight', 'heavy'),

eliminating texts that are irrelevant or have little association and determining the final sample. Through collection and screening, this study finally identified all the eligible samples in the British newspaper between January 1, 2018, and August 20, 2022, which covered a total of 403 articles. In order to reduce the statistical volume, a total of 101 articles were sampled according to chronological order. After repeatedly examining and refining in the news texts, this study divided the observed obesity stigma reports into three frames based on time: obesity stigma frame, obesity transformation frame and obesity proper frame.

4. Result

From the overall distribution of the number of news reports in the three frames, the obesity transformation frame has the most reports, with the number of which is 52. accounting for 51.49% of the total number of reports. The reports of the obesity stigma framework were the second, accounting for 33.66%, with a difference of 18 reports compared to the number of obesity transformation frameworks, with a certain gap but not a disparity. The number of reports of the obesity correction framework was at the bottom, with 15 reports, accounting for only 14.85%, which is a significant contrast to the first two frameworks.

Subsequently, the study introduced the time dimension for examination. Firstly, regardless of the framework division, the number of reports on the topic of obesity tends to rise and then fall from 2018 to 2022. Because 2020 was the year when the government enacted the new policy, news coverage showed a spurt. This year alone accounted for 43.56% of the coverage. This distribution of coverage is closely related to the social policies in the UK, with more obesity policy activities in that year leading to more coverage of obesity and vice versa. Secondly, the number of obesity stigma frames occupied the first place before 2020, accounting for 80.91%, while obesity transition frames still appeared but in very small numbers, and there were no reports of obesity correction frames yet. From the promulgation of the Anti-obesity Program, the number of reports of obesity transition frames was the first in 2020, and during this period, obesity correction frames began to appear, but were less than the obesity stigma frames. The obesity stigma framework began to decrease subsequently. At the same time, the obesity correction frame began to appear gradually after the Anti-obesity Program. Although it did not occupy the mainstream of the reports, its proportion is gradually increasing.

5. Discussion

Before the Anti-obesity Program, the reports of obesity are framed in stigmatizing terms. Coverage during this period focused on linking obesity to food and social issues, usually attributing the obesity problem to the obese themselves. Most texts usually present a large portion of an expert's opinion against obesity, or some efforts or actions by the government or society as a whole to reduce obesity, while small portions present the attitudes and reactions of the public to events or opinions, mostly condemning obesity. Other texts simply state events without citing outside comments and reactions. The obesity crisis threatens to increase strokes and heart disease. Obesity rates in the UK are rising faster than in the US. The NHS says obese patients will not undergo surgery until they lose weight [16]. There is a growing body of scientific research on obesity that focuses on the causes of people's obesity. International studies have found that awareness of obesity can lead to overeating. A report stated in June of 2018 stated that the damage caused by overeating is so great that governments may have to limit how large a portion is or force retailers to charge more in an attempt to reduce consumption. Again, the journalist's position is evident in the language of his writing. For example, when describing the shape of obese people, the reporters use words such as 'obese', 'extra-large', 'morbidly obese' etc., reflecting their value judgment. The

reporter tends to evaluate obese people negatively. For example, in a news report, there is the following paragraph: 'If you are seriously overweight, you have to change your mentality, attitude and lifestyle.' The text uses the second person 'you' to address the reader, and the following quote repeatedly uses "you" to emphasize personal responsibility and to reinforce the personification of obesity by using 'obese' instead of 'having' obesity to reinforce the personification of obesity.

Overall, the reporter focuses on the strong stigmatization of obesity before the Anti-obesity Program. However, in the discourse, the journalists do not directly cite the attitudes of others toward obese people, the hatred of obese people or other events that help to confirm the view of the stigmatizing power, but rather embody it in news terms, including not only the use of inappropriate words to describe obesity, but also the use of the second person in the news.

After the Anti-obesity Program was firstly reported, which can be considered as a period called as pre-Anti-obesity Program, the obesity discourse are still accompanied with discrimination, but it began to transform. Thus, the report during this period is named as Obesity Transformation Framework. The obesity transition framework means that the media reports try to make a transition at this stage. During the critical period when the social stigma of obesity is serious and the new pneumonia is rampant, the British government desires to implement the new policy to change the public's attitude towards obese people as much as possible, which is the period when the news about obesity is in transition. During this period, the news coverage focused on increasing the motivation of obese people to lose weight, the difficulty of treating obesity under the pandemic background, and the consequences of obesity. After the epidemic swept through the UK, obesity became a major factor in delaying the treatment of COVID-19, and during this period the UK government and media gradually recognized the seriousness of obesity in the treatment of COVID-19, and therefore began to gradually change some of the rhetoric about obesity, but there was still a considerable degree of stigma attached to obesity. During this period, the terms 'death' and 'dying' were commonly used in such news to combine NCCP and obesity, and the newspapers during this period took advantage of the fact that obesity was due to the laziness of the obese people, as opposed to the previous description of the obesity as a result of the obese itself [13]. The threat of death due to obesity was given to the readers by the fear of death of the people. For example, in the Guardian, it is described that according to a comprehensive study using global data, 'Obesity increases the risk of dying of Covid-19 by nearly 50% and may make vaccines against the disease less effective, according to a comprehensive study using global data' [17].

It is worth discussing that both large and small newspapers are likely to report on the interaction between obesity and COVID-19. However, the difference is that large newspapers prefer to use scientific data such as percentages to assess risk. From the perspective of their officialness and credibility, citing studies and statistics helps to legitimize the discursive link between obesity and COVID-19-related deaths by invoking the authority of expertise [18].

Overall, the obesity transformation framework achieves meaningful presentation primarily through the selection and combination of viewpoint citations, using factual arguments less frequently relative to the obesity stigma framework.

In the logic of the obesity transformation framework, it begins to downplay the causes of obesity of the obese people themselves and begins to focus on the social level, and the causes of obesity are mainly shifted partly from their own causes to other factors such as society, family genes, family concepts, religious ideas, etc., and the motivation to lose weight is given to the obese people under this stage with some viewpoints being implied and threatened by using fear psychology and large newspapers use a lot of statistics. However, it may produce a much greater effect than expected. The link between the obesity epidemic and the likelihood that overweight people would be treated unfairly in society increased the stigma of being overweight or obese.

Long after the Anti-obesity Program launched, namely Post Anti-obesity Program, reports of obesity have slowly begun to take on a positive side. It's called as Obesity Correction Framework in our research. Compared to the first two frames, the obesity correction framework is much less conflictual, and the obesity stigma phenomenon and the threat-based reports begin to diminish, with the reports mainly showing the promising results of weight loss at the individual level, and the tone of the reports tending to be cheerful and bright, consistently showing the joy people reap from losing weight. In this framework, there are two kinds of reports that are more typical. The first type is the report on a specific individual, usually the person who has succeeded in losing weight. This type of report tends to show the person's life status positively, including the description of his or her occupation, achievements, feelings about love and marriage and so on. They are portrayed as having a positive outlook on life, a successful career, a stable and happy long-term relationship and a healthy and active voice. And these all began with weight loss. Thus, the media presents the public with a beautiful, healthy and positive image after losing weight. The second category is typically the coverage of 'big events', usually surrounded by a hopeful atmosphere. These stories either show the success of a study or report on the passage and implementation of laws related to 'healthy living'. In the text, reporters describe the reactions, feelings, and evaluations of all parties involved in the event. The positive and supportive expressions were chosen largely.

Later after the program was enacted, the obesity correction frame began to appear, but it did not occupy all the reports on obesity. In this frame, the rhetoric of the text is also noteworthy, as 'obese' in the obesity stigma frame is mostly replaced by 'person with obesity'. The frame focuses on the results of the Anti-obesity Program by choosing examples of successful careers and fulfilling lives after weight loss and a large number of pro-affirmative examples and statements to create a positive image of healthy people without revealing any disgust for obese people, aiming at continuing to increase the motivation of obese people to lose weight. The message conveyed to the audience is that the obese should not be discriminated against as a matter of human rights, but as a reflection of the progress of democracy and freedom in society. With the implementation of the policy, more and more people will pay attention to their own health and a free and peaceful society will follow.

News is not a natural product, but a process of constructing social reality. It is not simply an objective reflection of social facts, but a product of compromise between media organizations and social organizations, institutions and cultural groups, with social values influencing journalistic values. On the basis of social reality, the mass media selects and frames some of the facts to enter the reporting field, transforming social facts into media events and forming media reality. Therefore, the media's news reports can reflect a certain social and cultural context, but are wrapped in the construction of meaning, making it difficult to present the social reality in its entirety.

Political links accounted for 64% of the coverage of obesity in the UK across the print media, and it is also clear from the quotes from sources that statements from political bodies and government officials made up the largest proportion of the presentation of the issue. Obesity has gone from being a stigma to a gradual reduction in its stigmatizing effects, and it is undoubtedly not an effort made by the government to promote policy, but the media has assumed more of a medium in this.

6. Conclusion

When looking at the specific textual content of the sources cited in media reports on obesity, it is clear that pro-obesity statements are often more persuasive and more acceptable than anti-obesity statements. Specifically, the statements of opinion expressed by the anti-obesity crowd often use the appearance of obese people's behavior as a 'spear' and a 'shield', and this physical attack on obese people is both a weapon they use to violate the rights of obese people and a way to protect them in the face of condemnation. The main argument for the stigmatization of the obese is already

unconvincing in an increasingly technological and cultural society, but what further reduces its acceptability is the aggressiveness and arrogance of its value judgements on the obese, which extend from the negation of their gender to the negation of their personal qualities as a whole, which is full of arrogance and prejudice. Such expressions of opinion are not only unconvincing, but also likely to provoke resentment from the majority of the audience. The pro-obesity rhetoric presented in the text is an expression of sympathy for the obese and supports the idea that they should have the same rights as healthy people. The pro-obesity advocates' use of human rights as their armor is more powerful than the people who oppose stigmatization, especially in a modern society where human rights are increasingly promoted, and their criticism of stigmatization is therefore justified. The stigma of obesity has been a long-standing issue and the government still has a long way to go to remove it and actually reduce the country's obese population. The media has an important role to play in this process, as its reporting on social issues or the construction of social phenomena can have a huge impact on the perceptions and behaviors of its audiences. The media needs to uphold its responsibility to explore what kind of reporting is necessary to promote social progress and to pursue social reality in an equal and tolerant manner.

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