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“Fat is Your Fault”: Gatekeepers to Health, Attributions of Responsibility and the Portrayal
of Gender in the Irish Media Representation of Obesity

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Abstract

We investigated the representation of obesity in the Irish media by conducting an inductive thematic analysis on newspaper articles ($n=346$) published in 2005, 2007 and 2009 sampled from six major publications. The study analysed the media's construction of gender in discussions of obesity and associated attributions of blame. Three dominant themes are discussed: the caricatured portrayal of gender, women as caregivers for others, and emotive parent-blaming for childhood obesity. Men were portrayed as a homogenous group; unaware and unconcerned about weight and health issues. Dieting and engaging in preventative health behaviours were portrayed as activities exclusively within the female domain and women were depicted as responsible for encouraging men to be healthy. Parents, specifically mothers, attracted much blame for childhood obesity and media messages aimed to shame and disgrace parents of obese children through use of emotive and evocative language. This portrayal was broadly consistent across media types and served to reinforce traditional gender roles by positioning women as primarily responsible for health. This analysis offers the first qualitative investigation into the Irish media discourse on obesity and indicates a rather traditional take on gender roles in diet and nutrition.

Keywords: Gender; attitudes to food and diet; qualitative analysis; media studies; obesity; Ireland.

Introduction

Obesity is a complex condition with a variety of contributory factors including environmental, sociocultural, and behavioural influences (Butland et al., 2007). Based on trends in several populations, it is evident that the average body mass for adults and children has increased in recent decades (Flegal, Graubard, Williamson, & Gail, 2009; Lissau, 2004). Ireland is among the countries with the highest prevalence of overweight and obesity in Europe, with the most recent study indicating that approximately 24% of the Irish adult population is obese and 37% is overweight (Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance, 2011). The considerable sociocultural change experienced in Ireland as a result of exceptional economic growth and prosperity between 1994 and 2006 can provide some explanation for the emergence of this trend. During this period, Ireland shifted from being characterised by traditional and rural living to a modern, urban society (Collins & Joyce, 2007). Inevitably, modernisation and associated change had consequences in many aspects of daily life. The country experienced higher standards of living, increased participation of women in the workforce and higher levels of disposable income (Collins & Joyce, 2008). Aligned with this, increased commuting times and reduced time for household chores were experienced. McCarthy and Collins (2008) noted that as a result, for many households, the adage “money rich and time poor” applied. These new lifestyles had related impacts on food choices and physical activities. In particular, increased demand for energy dense convenient foods (due to the emergence of time famines) and reduced physical activity were observed (McCarthy & Collins, 2008).

As the upward trends in weight became evident, the Irish National Task Force on Obesity was established with the goal of halting and reversing the rise in the prevalence of obesity. The Task Force made a number of recommendations regarding the food,

environmental, government and social sectors (National Task Force on Obesity, 2005). The Task Force reported that the behaviours congruent to healthy weight maintenance include having a balanced diet and engaging in regular physical activity. Previous research has indicated that the recommendations made by the Task Force may have influenced trends in Irish media reporting on obesity (De Brún, McKenzie, McCarthy, & McGloin, 2011).

Gender is one factor that has received considerable attention in health research. In most countries in the world women now have a longer life expectancy than men (WHO, 2011b). Ireland also displays this trend, as life expectancy for Irish men is 76.8 years compared to 81.6 years for women, almost a five year difference (CSO, 2009). Furthermore, men's all-cause early mortality¹ rate is higher than women's (CSO, 2008). The WHO contends that 'gender' accounts for the socially constructed roles a certain culture or society deems appropriate for men and women, as distinct from 'sex' differences, which refer to the biological and physiological characteristics of men and women (WHO, 2011a). It is believed that gender differences may contribute to the disparity observed between men and women in overweight and obesity as statistics illustrate that in Ireland, men are more likely than women to be overweight (men 44%, women 31%) and obese (men 26%, women 21%) (Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance, 2011).

The mass media play a considerable role in our everyday lives and it is acknowledged that the media represent one of the key influences on people's knowledge and behaviours (Entman, 2004; Wise & Brewer, 2010). Media portrayals can be a powerful influence in defining and reinforcing understandings of many social issues including obesity. Such media representations shape and are shaped by social representations and this influence can extend beyond the lay public to include professional audiences (Lyons, 2000). It is arguable that the

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¹ All-cause mortality refers to the annual number of deaths in a group per the population in that group.

dominant model of how the media affect the public has been one of a top-down influence, whereby the news media are said to contribute to the shaping of an individual's view. According to agenda setting theory, the coverage the media give an issue influences how important the public deem that issue to be (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Furthermore, how an issue is presented or framed in media reports is said to affect an individual's understanding of the issues. For instance, Iyengar (1991) suggests that the news media in particular may function to shape perceptions of who is responsible for a specific issue. Iyengar's work has demonstrated that individuals' beliefs regarding the causes of a problem can influence their attributions of responsibility for the problem accordingly. A recent study by Major (2009) demonstrated this effect using obesity messages. Major found significant effects of framing styles on participants' attributions of responsibility for obesity to either behavioural or societal factors. Thus, the media can be influential regarding health matters such as obesity and therefore offers a valuable site in which to examine the discussion surrounding gender and responsibility.

The social construction of gender is a useful theory in understanding the evolution of gender norms, or how we 'do gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987). The theory considers gender to be an active process, constantly created and recreated through human interaction (Lorber, 1994). Saltonstall (1993) describes engagement in health behaviours as a social act which in itself can represent an expression of gender. Previous research on gender and health has examined how social and cultural norms may operate on individuals to conform to a dominant gender role or stereotype. For instance, the concept of 'hegemonic masculinities' has been explored (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinities may be described as socially patterned constructions of masculinity that are dominant at one time in a particular cultural context and that relate to power and authority

between men and women. One dominant construction of masculinity in the Western world is that men are risk takers, invulnerable and uninterested in health issues. Courtenay (2000) examined constructions of masculinity in the US and found that subscription to the hegemonic masculinity can result in men avoiding healthy behaviours. Recent evidence suggests that this construction may be particularly adverse among men with strong beliefs about masculinity and among older men of a higher socioeconomic status (Springer & Mouzon, 2011). Furthermore, an examination of how apparently healthy men in the UK construct masculinity, researchers found that they too avoided thinking about and discussing health issues and similarly considered a concern for health to be within the feminine domain (Sloan, Gough, & Conner, 2010).

A growing body of evidence strongly suggests that gendered weight discourses exist throughout the media. Gough's (2006) investigation of the media's representation of gender in health discourses found that the British media presented men as in denial and infantile in their refusal to seek medical attention. Furthermore, Inthorn and Boyce (2010) analysed UK television programmes dedicated to obesity and found that body fat and weight issues were associated with femininity. Significantly, when male obesity was discussed, they documented that derogatory terms directed at men related fat to femininity. Hence, they concluded that culturally established gender concepts reinforce the shaming of obese individuals.

Considerable social and economic change in Ireland in the past two decades has resulted in significant shifts in the typical social roles of women. Similar societal change regarding women's choice and possible range of social roles has been documented in other Western nations and consequently, Gillespie (2000) posits that a wider range of discourse have emerged regarding femininity. For instance, representations of what constitutes a 'good' and 'bad' mother have been examined. As outlined by Hadfield et al. (2007), the denigration

of teenage mothers is especially evident in tabloid newspapers. Recently, Shaw and Giles (2009) found that there was a robust negative depiction of older mothers in the British media. Thus, it seems that a ‘good’ or fit mother is one is selfless, fertile, of middle class or higher and in her mid-20s to mid-30s (Gillespie, 2000; Hadfield et al., 2007). Harris and Clayton (2002) assert there has been a general underrepresentation of women in the media. However, when women are represented, it tends to occur in stereotypical terms, reinforcing traditional societal norms of the female role (Davis, 1990). A dominant social construction exists regarding women’s health in the media in that women are depicted as caregivers for others. For instance, it has been found that men’s health issues are discussed in women’s magazines (Elliott, 1994) and health advice for men is aimed at women (Lyons & Willott, 1999), strongly indicating that women are viewed as gatekeepers, with a significant influence on men’s health. Maher et al. (2010) found that the representation of childhood obesity in the media implicated women as responsible due to their alleged failure to honour their maternal caregiving responsibilities. Previously, Murphy (2003) asserted that mothers are assigned the moral and everyday responsibility for making good and healthy choices.

This study was conducted within a media discourse of obesity characterised by pervasive individual blame (De Brún, McCarthy, McKenzie, & McGloin, 2012; Kim & Willis, 2007) and in a Western society typified by the deeply and widely held perception that individual willingness to act means that anyone may achieve the ‘ideal’ body type. Thus, overweight and obese individuals are viewed as failing to act and as bring physical disease, psychological illness, and social disapproval on themselves (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). Within this broader context, the current study examines how the Irish media has represented gender roles around diet and weight and associated attributions of responsibility for obesity. Of particular interest is any difference in reporting by various news outlets as Gough (2006) has

recommended that this be a consideration of future research. For instance, previous studies have outlined the significant differences in the portrayal of obesity between publications types (Hilbert & Ried, 2009; Sandberg, 2007), thus, we expected clear differences in the portrayal of the issue between tabloids and broadsheets.

Bobo and Licari (1989) previously examined the concept of cognitive sophistication, typified by the ability to comprehend conceptual complexity, which they asserted was influenced by education. Regular readers of broadsheet publications in Ireland tend to be of a higher socioeconomic status and of a higher educational level (JNRS, 2010). Therefore, we contend that the content of broadsheet papers will be characterised by a higher level of cognitive sophistication compared to tabloid publications. Specifically, we expect the two publication types to differ with regard to the obesity messages conveyed, the valence and nuance of messaging and in the tone of the reporting. Furthermore, we are also interested in examining whether there has been any modernisation in the media discussion of men and women's relationships with diet and weight. Inglehart and Baker (2000) described modernisation theory as the powerful economic and political forces that drive cultural change. The theory posits that economic development is associated with predictable changes in social and cultural life and is characterised by increasing education levels and changing gender roles. By use of the term modernisation, we mean to examine whether the media are recognising the increasingly domestic role of Irish men in dual-earner households (McGinnity & Russell, 2008). Public Health must be aware of how the media depict and refract these gender roles and norms around diet and weight in order to effectively target positive behaviour change and thus, we present a fine-grained case study analysis of this using the Irish print media.

Method

Sample

A sample of 346 print news articles was drawn from six major publications in the Republic of Ireland, including three broadsheets (*Irish Times (IT)*, *Irish Independent (II)*, *The Sunday Independent (SI)*) and three tabloids (*The Sunday World (SW)*, *The Star (TS)* and *Evening Herald(EH)*)². The articles were collated via the *LexisNexis* and the *safefood*³ news archives, using the search terms ‘obese’, ‘obesity’ and ‘overweight’ for three selected years of interest: 2005, 2007 and 2009. News articles, opinion pieces and editorials were all included in the analysis and only letters to the editor were excluded. Systematic sampling was employed and every second article was included in the analysis. The selected years were chosen for analysis as the inclusion of three time points facilitated an examination of trends in reporting over time as well as offering some breadth to the analysis. We acknowledge that this is a relatively short time period, but data for most of the media outlets in the sample were not available in a searchable archive before 2005 and therefore, the sample was restricted by what was available. Also, 2005 tied-in with the publication of the standout Irish public health document for Ireland – the report of the National Task Force on Obesity. Finally, Ireland experienced significant economic, social and employment changes during this period as a result of the global recession. We speculate that this may have resulted in shift in attention regarding gender roles and norms in food provision and caregiving. Each article was imported into QSR International’s NVivo9 for coding and analysis.

Analytic Process

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² Readership of print publications includes ABC and BCDE marketing groups. In total, the daily publications have a combined readership of 42.6% of the adult population and the two Sunday publications have a readership of 51.9% (JNRS, 2010) in the Republic of Ireland. The publication codes in the brackets will be cited in the analysis.

³ *safefood* are the body responsible for the promotion of food safety in Ireland.

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted, using guidelines from Braun and Clarke (2006) and Miles and Huberman (1994). Thematic analysis is a methodology employed in order to identify, analyse, and report patterns within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is suitable for large data sets and is an accessible and theoretically flexible approach. An inductive thematic analysis is a data-driven method which requires codes to be developed based on the reading of the raw data itself and thus, codes and themes are strongly linked to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial codes were generated using words used in the source text where possible to ensure the codes accurately represented the data. The next phase involved searching for themes and broader patterns among codes. Themes were then reviewed and refined and data extracts were organised to represent each theme. All articles were coded and analysis was conducted by the first author. The coding and final themes were checked by the second and third authors. Examples of the coding at various stages of the analysis are found in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Results

The analysis discusses three main sub-themes under the broad theme of gender roles and responsibility for obesity: emotive parent-blaming, the caricatured portrayal gendered relationships with food and diet, and women as caregivers for men's and children's health.

Emotive parent-blaming

A persistent thread of emotive language was evident in the blaming of parents for their children's obesity. The reporting of parents' "*unconditional responsibility*" (EH₁, tabloid, 2005) for childhood nutrition laid the foundation for this discourse, which was

evident in 29% of articles ($n=100$). Parents were encouraged to act as guardians of the diets and activities of children to ensure children's weight remained at a suitable level.

Future food choices and eating habits are laid down in childhood and carried through to adulthood so it's extremely important that good eating patterns are set down early on (SI₃, broadsheet, 2007)

An emotive stance was widely adopted in the depiction of the duties and role of parents. Vivid and critical language was employed in the condemnation of parents for the part they were perceived in playing in the escalating childhood obesity 'epidemic'. There was a preoccupation with shaming parents and eliciting emotional responses in readers via a blunt attribution of blame on those parents who were said to be failing in their caregiving role.

If your kids look fat, then they are overweight; as a parent, that's your fault... Fat is your fault (EH₁, tabloid, 2005).

'Fat' is considered an emotionally-loaded term compared to the clinical terms of 'overweight' or 'excess weight' (Gray et al., 2011; Wadden & Didie, 2003) and thus employing the term fat conveys the negative associations and social disapproval of fatness. 'Fat' was often used as a derogatory term for excess weight which could pertain to either overweight and obesity. However, it seems that differences were drawn between terms; 'overweight' was used as the medical term whereas 'fat' seemed to refer to the child's appearance and to the social construction of excess weight. Therefore, implicit such communications is the necessity of parents to address the medical and the socially-constructed definitions of the issue so children can avoid the physical as well as the social repercussions associated with excess weight.

Crude and hostile assertions implied that excess weight in children is obvious and easy to address, insinuating parents were failing in their role at a basic level. Furthermore, the

risk of children dying before their parents was a topic which attracted widespread attention and the emotive language used to frame the issue supported a sensational stance, highlighting the media's tendency toward research that lends itself to sensationalism and dramatization (Nelkin, 1995). Sensationalism may be defined as a feature of news reporting that provokes emotional responses in media audiences (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001). The prospect of children becoming more vulnerable to traditionally 'adult' obesity-related diseases and dying before their parents was portrayed in dramatic terms, as against the natural order, and was said to represent parents' greatest fear and shame.

Obese children, who will make this the first generation of children to start dying before their parents do... Growing numbers of our children will not outlive us, killed instead by an obesity epidemic that is fast approaching a reversal of generations of improved life expectancy (IT₃, broadsheet, 2005)

Most ghoulish of all, they will be buried by the parents who outlive them. (II₃, broadsheet, 2005)

Evocative language was employed by broadsheets and tabloids alike, speaking to a dominant manifestation of parent-blaming across the news media, communicating messages that appeal to the emotions of readers via this affect-laden narrative style. Implicating parents in causing their children's disease and distress aims to induce guilt and to disgrace parents, presumably in an effort to compel them into action. Parents were also condemned for the psychological problems that children may suffer as a result of the stigma of excess weight and for allegedly bringing hardship on their own children as a result of their feeding practices, depicted as "*killing their children with kindness*" (EH₂, tabloid, 2007). However, implicit in such portrayals was a need for further intervention to protect children against inadequate parenting where it was suggested that these parents were guilty of negligence and child abuse. Such

message framing may also have implications for public acceptance of the prospect of legal action against parents of obese children.

On your child's behalf, you are welcoming with open arms the chance of heart disease, and, later on, you will not be thanked for your negligence. (EH₁, tabloid, 2005)

Punish the parents of obese kids... A group of doctors are calling for obesity in under-12s to be designated an act of neglect and for action against those parents (EH₂, tabloid, 2007)

The news media appear to be setting out social rules and norms for good parenting and the quality of parenting may be assessed solely by looking at the child. It seems these judgements are made without conscious reflection and illustrates the powerful social structures guiding our judgements of parents as unfit. Such discourses situate poor feeding practices as within the lowest social sphere and the parents of obese children as criminal negligent and thus, such assessments may impact on the social position of individuals as their social and cultural capital may be threatened by their perceived parenting failure (Bourdieu, 1984).

When childhood obesity is discussed in news stories through narratives that elicit disgust and shame, this may intensify the individual-blaming focus of the media discourse on obesity and may operate as a barrier to addressing wider environmental influences on obesity (Atanasova, Koteyko, & Gunter, 2012). Typically television news has been considered as more emotion-laden compared to print media, as print news is characterised by a more deliberative and less spontaneous type of communication (Cho et al., 2003). However, strong threads of emotion-laden language were evident in the current study conveying disgust and

bestowing moral judgements on the parents of obese children, signifying the depth of feeling the issue evokes and the intertwined nature of weight and morality.

I feel sorriest for children who are given access to all kinds of obesogenic foods as a sign of parental care and love. Other kids taunt their resulting obesity and they may avoid sporting activities that aggravates their weight. (IT₄, broadsheet, 2005)

Caricatured portrayal of gender

The positioning of males and females on the issue of weight and diet was in keeping with the traditional dominant social construction around gender (Davis, 1990; Gough, 2006, 2007), where women were portrayed as fixated with weight and dieting and men represented as unconcerned with issues of diet and health. This chasm between typical male and female approaches to diet and weight was acknowledged in approximately 15% of articles ($n=52$). Firstly, differences were observed in the nature of typical male and female diets, as well as their likelihood to adopt a healthy diet. Men's diets were portrayed as low in fruit and vegetables and high in fat and meat content. This conforms to traditional stereotypical expectations of men eating meat, greasy foods and drinking beer; consumption patterns which are considered indicative of masculinity and of a disinterest in a healthy diet (Stibbe, 2004). Dieting was depicted as to be a female issue and dieting and talking about weight issues was just 'something that women do', characterised by women spending "*hours reading magazines in the hope of finding a new miracle diet*" (II₁, broadsheet, 2009). Weight consciousness and dieting were considered women's issues; women were described as having a greater self-awareness of weight and more of an awareness of weight issues generally. Resonant with previous research (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Gough, 2006, 2007) articles discussed male perceptions of masculinity and how the so-called 'macho' image is considered the cultural norm.

Men deal with food completely differently than women and their attitudes to it are tied up in macho ideas of risk taking and what it is to be a man (SI₁, broadsheet, 2005)

We [men] just don't think about our bodies in the same way women think about theirs. If a woman detects a milligram of extra fat, she runs to the gym. (IT₁, broadsheet, 2009)

Notably, the tendency was to propagate caricatures of the stereotypical relationships men and women have with weight and diet. Extreme depictions of both men's and women's relationship to diet were frequent in media messages and these caricatures served to illustrate the extent of the perceived differences in weight-related behaviors between genders. Recent research suggests that there are more overweight and obese men than overweight and obese women in Ireland (Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance, 2011) so arguably this depiction may represent an over-exaggeration of an underlying truth. An *Irish Times* article outlined what may be considered a stereotypical conversation that could occur between two women regarding weight. However, in the article, the journalist subverts this norm and imagines this conversation occurring between two Irish men. The use of satire in this extract effectively illustrates the divergent approaches of men and women to the self-monitoring of weight and diet.

Two lads are sitting in a bar, having a pint and a chat. "Look at you!" exclaims the first bloke. "You're so skinny - I hate you. You're like, what, a size zero?" The other bloke replies, "Oh, get away. I'm like an elephant. I've been going mad on the Guinness. I need to go to the gym big-time." "No, no, you look like you've been running marathons." "Oh, no, I've completely let myself go. I can hardly fit into these jeans." This conversation couldn't, of course, have happened between two typical Irishmen. We just don't talk to each other like that. (IT₁, broadsheet, 2009)

This fictional exchange between two men was described by the journalist as absurd, to the point of being comical, as it is perceived to entirely contradict typical Irish male behaviour. Although this interaction was described as occurring between two men, through this extract one can examine how the media construct and perpetuate traditional masculine and feminine roles regarding diet and weight. Femininity is regulated and separated from the hegemonic masculinity, which is demarcated by a distance between the 'feminine' activities of self-monitoring and the discussion of weight and importantly, unhappiness with weight. This indicates an expectation of women to constantly strive towards the societal ideal, in this case identified as being a 'size zero'. Conversely, men are not subject to the same pressure and the idea that this pressure to attain a body size ideal would exist for Irish men is deemed ridiculous.

The contextualisation of weight concerns as a women's issue was bolstered by evidence that weight interventions were situated as being primarily of concern to women, with several articles emphasising the benefits of various weight loss interventions to a woman's body shape. For example, one tabloid article discussed the promise of a new weight-loss drug and immediately positions the discussion as being of female concern by establishing the effect the drug can have on a woman's waistline, thus implying that the drug is solely for women's use.

The drug can help a woman drop a dress size in four months... For a 12-stone woman this would mean shedding more than seven pounds (TS₁, tabloid, 2007)

Not only were weight and diet issues considered a female concern, there was also evidence of the pressure exerted on females to achieve to a certain body size ideal (Bordo, 2003). These pressures on women were acknowledged and were described as stemming from the media as well as celebrity culture, where an unrealistic 'size zero' ideal is

promoted. In accordance with typical Western depictions (e.g., Gracia-Arnaiz, 2010), the Irish media portrayed thinness as ideal, relating being slim to success and femininity, whereas excess weight was considered undesirable. Media reports strongly suggested that women's weight is closely linked to their emotional well-being. Arguably, the pressure exerted on females to conform to an 'ideal' weight has led to unhappiness with weight, as women of all ages find it difficult to meet this contemporary, unrealistic standard of thinness.

Women of reproductive age are bombarded with messages about diet, and body image," they said. "There is growing concern on the one hand about an epidemic of obesity, and on the other about a culture that promotes 'size zero' as desirable, irrespective of a woman's natural build." (II₂, broadsheet, 2007)

The news comes as a shocking survey released last week shows how the majority of Irish women are becoming unhappy with their body image from as young as 13. (SI₂, broadsheet, 2007)

Compared to men, it was said that "*even overweight women worry much more about their diet*" (SI₁, broadsheet, 2005). Implicit in this message is that overweight women are perceived as not caring about their diet. However, compared to men, "*even*" overweight women worry more about their diet, suggesting that overweight women are being separated from normal weight women and that different assumptions are made about women based on their weight. Furthermore, the use of the word 'even' suggests that it may be surprising to some that overweight women are worried about their diet. This representation of overweight is consistent with the typical stigma encountered in Western cultures, where overweight and obese people are considered lazy, unmotivated and uninterested in healthy living (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). Yet, even women who do not appear concerned about their diet do worry about

their diet compared to men, who were rendered as detached from the feminine world of weight consciousness.

Although health and dietary concerns are predominantly considered to be within the female domain, men's weight status is portrayed as a critical issue, with serious consequences for health. There was recognition of the need to target males specifically and to target them in a different way to which women are targeted in health campaigns. It was implied that men need special attention to alert them to immediate benefits as women are more able to see the long-term benefits of a healthy diet. Media reports also discussed health campaigns aimed at men, highlighting that such campaigns have focused on encouraging men to be independently health-conscious in both their diet and lifestyle choices and not to rely on women to look out for their health. Previously, campaigns have endeavoured to break down men's 'barriers' using humour and adopting the format of a car manual to compile a guide to weight issues (Men's Health Forum, 2005). It was said this will appeal more to men and it attempts to de-feminise weight concerns by adopting a car manual style, which is perceived as a typically male domain. This is also indicative of a conception of body-as-machine thinking, an attitude toward diet and the body which Gough (2006) found to be characteristic of males.

The book will be the definitive guide to men and weight/obesity - not only will the content be comprehensive but it will follow the format of a car manual. The guide will also be entirely focused on men and problems specific to them. The reasoning behind this is that many men are accustomed to using information presented in this way. A 'body as machine' metaphor resonates with the way men tend to think about health issues. The concept also aims to introduce an element of humour - which helps to break down men's 'internal barriers' to accessing health information and advice (TS₂, tabloid, 2005).

It is revealing that only once was a brief mention of an element of ‘new’ masculinity recorded, where reputedly as a consequence of media exposure, some young Irish men are more concerned with their appearance. It was said that there are “*fewer beer bellies among the younger generation. They’re seeing young people on X Factor and want to look like that*” (IT₁, broadsheet, 2009). However, in the same article, this ‘new’ masculinity is described as a mind-set more common to California and to Mediterranean regions, areas renowned for their beaches and sunshine, and thus is portrayed as very much removed from the Irish way of life. Thus, while this mention may be evidence of a media slow to recognise newer alternative conceptions of masculinity, it speaks to the one-dimensionality of the construction of men’s relationship with food and weight in the media.

Women as caregivers

The recurring notion promulgated was that when men partner with women, women take on the role as gatekeepers to their male partner’s diet and health. It was suggested that men who live with women tend to have healthier diets, as it was often stated that women do the cooking, shopping and food planning, that is, they are the caregivers of the household. Moreover, health advice “*is aimed at women, especially when it is provided via the media or commercial organisations*” (TS₂, tabloid, 2005). It was suggested that men often rely on women for a healthy diet and women must ‘badger’ men into seeking medical attention. Although men’s behaviour is described as ‘silly’ and as a ‘little boy’s’ attitude, it emphasises the degree to which health and particularly diet and weight management are considered outside the realm of typical male behaviour. This pervasive portrayal serves to augment and normalise stereotypical gender roles rather than putting the onus on men to look after their own health. This task instead falls to women, as this caregiver role is perceived to be incompatible with dominant traditional ‘macho’ conceptions of masculinity.

Healthier diets, specifically fruit and vegetable consumption are observed more commonly among persons who are married or living with someone, especially so for males. (SI₁, broadsheet, 2005)

Women were also burdened with the principal responsibility for children's health, as the maternal role in childhood obesity was specifically emphasised in approximately 10% of articles. It was implied that it is women who are the primary caregivers and decision-makers regarding food and the influence of the mother was said to be "*more significant*" than that of the father (SW₁, tabloid, 2005). Indeed, the only instance of a discussion of a paternal-specific input to children's food intake observed in the sample was a discussion of how fathers use snack foods to pacify and indulge children. This underlines the prevailing notion of women as gatekeepers to diet and health and resonates with Murphy's (2003) finding that it is typically mothers who are considered morally obligated for making responsible food choice. Furthermore, reports emphasising that the majority of food consumed by children is prepared in the home served to underline the importance of home cooked meals and the failure of parents, specifically mothers, in providing children with high-quality, nutritious food. Women were represented as responsible for providing healthy choices, and this provision of healthy food is portrayed as a battle of wills, with mothers having to 'act' to provide healthy choices and fathers must stop providing unhealthy snacks to children. Yet if the mother "gives in" she will be perceived as failing in her caregiving obligation to provide healthy food to her children (Murphy, 2003).

Yes, kids can get fat while watching telly - but only if Mammy gives in to their bleating about how they don't want salmon with steamed broccoli, but a 12-inch Hawaiian Classic from Four-Star Pizza. Timed to arrive in time for Zoey 101. Yes, kids can get fat watching telly - but only if daddy repeatedly opens up the family pack

of Hunky Dory's and plants his little darlings, with a bowl of M&Ms on the side, in front of Nickelodeon. (EH₄, tabloid, 2005)

Maternal nutrition quality in pregnancy and the influence of mothers' consumption patterns and weight status were other concerns which directed blame for obesity towards women. Similar to Maher et al. (2010), there were clear indications that women in full-time employment were held accountable for childhood obesity. As a result of a rise in the number of women in employment and the number of dual-earner households in Ireland, women were also blamed for the time pressures that result in a reliance on convenient and easy to prepare rather than healthy home-cooked meals. Thus, it is mothers (and not fathers) who were portrayed as failing in their responsibilities towards their children due to the implied selfishness of not maintaining a healthy diet during pregnancy and working full-time outside the home. This depiction is consistent with the predominant representation of women in the media as operating to reinforce traditional societal roles for women (Davis, 1990). As noted by Maher et al. (2010), this portrayal serves to individualise mother and child relationships and ignores the broader social influences on diet and food choice, thus implicating mothers in the negative health outcomes of their children.

Kids whose mums work full-time when they are aged five to seven are more likely to be overweight later in life, reveals a new study... A rapid rise in childhood obesity rates in recent years has coincided with soaring numbers of working women (TS₄, tabloid, 2007)

Tabloid versus broadsheet accounts

We expected disparities in the portrayal of the issue between broadsheet and tabloid publications yet it was surprising to find broadly similar accounts, with relatively few

differences observed between publication types. However, we did observe an imbalance in coverage of gender roles around diet between publication types. Specifically, tabloids were more likely to report on female weight and diet issues; of the articles on gender differences, 71% were female-focused versus 29% male-focused. Broadsheet coverage however was equally balanced (52% focussed on female weight/diet issues, 48% on male). Yet, the publication types were equally likely to emphasise maternal blame for childhood obesity. As previously mentioned, there was only one instance in the sample of a paternal input into diet, however, there were ten tabloid articles targeting mothers for blame and eleven broadsheet articles implicating mothers, representing one-fifth of all the articles discussing parental blame for childhood obesity (21 out of 100). Generally, tabloids were also more likely to ascribe parental blame for childhood obesity and this attribution was habitually couched in blunt and hostile language, often directly addressing parents. In contrast, broadsheets tended to be more nuanced and circumspect in their approach to apportioning blame, often recognising external factors which inhibited parents from making healthy choices.

However, broadsheet articles that considered the stigma of obesity and the early mortality risk associated with childhood obesity tended to employ more evocative and emotive language in blaming parents and as such, the deviation observed in this subset was more comparable to language used in tabloid messages. It should also be noted that within broadsheet publications, typically opinion and editorial pieces were more likely to directly assign blame and responsibility and discuss this issue at length. Despite these variances, a broadly similar representation of the variance in gender norms and caregiving roles around diet and obesity was present between publication types and we suggest this speaks to a dominant construction of the issue in the media. As such, the disparity in cognitive

sophistication typically evident between tabloid and broadsheet publications was not as strongly manifest as expected in the current analysis.

Discussion

The current study examined the Irish media discussion on obesity for the treatment of gender roles and norms around weight and diet. Three themes emerged from the analysis: emotive parent-blaming for childhood obesity, the caricatured portrayal of gender, and women as gatekeepers for men's and children's diet. Also interrogated were differences between tabloid and broadsheet accounts of these issues.

Corresponding to previous studies conducted on health discourses (Courtenay, 2000; Gough, 2006, 2007), there was a dominant portrayal of the traditional construction of masculinity evident, which is characterised by a 'macho' approach to living, a disinterest in health issues and a reliance on women for healthy dietary practices. One striking feature of the current analysis was the extent to which this construction was evident. Previous research suggests that other constructions of masculinity are also present in news reporting (e.g., Coyle & Morgan-Sykes, 1998), however the current study found only one brief mention of an alternative and this conception was strongly associated with other countries and cultures. Thus, Irish men were principally portrayed as a homogenous group, with consistent apathetic attitudes to diet and weight management.

Although Ireland has witnessed considerable sociocultural change in recent decades, clearly traditional views on gender roles remain prevalent and are widely expounded, both explicitly and implicitly, by the media. On the surface level, this leads us to suggest that traditional gender roles and the discussion around gender norms are highly resistant to change. However, qualitative work conducted by Monaghan (2008) has examined men's

views and experiences of being 'big' and provides insight into the varieties and richness of perspectives among Irish men's relationship with diet and weight. For instance, men reported varied experiences of weight-consciousness and dieting, while some rejected the need for weight control, there was evidence that for other men, dieting enabled them to reclaim their masculinity. The nuances and variance observed by Monaghan challenge the stereotypical, caricature-driven representation of men found in the current analysis. Similarly, Holt and Thompson's discussion of 'man-of-action' constructions of masculinity describes richer conceptions of masculinity (Holt & Thompson, 2004). They outline how men synthesised aspects of traditional and breadwinner type roles with more feminised and rebellious aspects of consumption in idiosyncratic constructions of masculinity. This suggests that the media may be failing to recognise and represent men's evolving relationship with diet and weight and instead disseminate narrowly-defined and traditional gender roles.

Yet, the disparity in weight trends between the genders must be considered. Current statistics indicate that more Irish men than women are overweight and obese and therefore men are more at risk of illnesses associated with excess weight, including diabetes, cancer and heart disease (Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance, 2011). If the portrayal of men's attitudes to health in the media is an accurate reflection of reality, then men's denial and reticence in addressing weight status may stem from the conception of health and diet as female issues. Thus, engaging in health behaviours may be construed by men as a threat to their masculinity. Health campaigns targeting men must be aware of the effect of such gender norms on health and seek to address the problems associated with such an attitude to weight management. However, recent research suggests that this 'macho' masculinity may also impart some positive health behaviours (Levant, Wimer, & Williams, 2011). In particular, self-reliance has been associated with a higher likelihood of motivation to engage in positive

health behaviours (Wade, 2009). Therefore, a more nuanced understanding of the constructions of masculinity between and among various cultural contexts may be required in order to effectively encourage men to partake in health behaviours in a manner consistent with both culturally-dominant and personally-relevant constructions of masculinity.

The current study underlines the degree to which discussions of diet and weight management have a gender 'logic', in that diet and weight surveillance are habitually portrayed as female issues. According to Offer (1998), women are considered to have more to gain from self-monitoring of diet and of body weight, for instance, in terms of the marriage market. Thus, it is not surprising that women are more health-oriented and body-conscious. Women's psychological well-being was consistently associated with weight and thinness was linked to femininity and success, whereas overweight and obesity were described as undesirable and associated with unhappiness. This construction is typical among Western cultures, where thin bodies are idealised and being overweight is associated with sloth and gluttony (Gard & Wright, 2005; Gracia-Arnaiz, 2010). Although the media acknowledged the pressures on women to conform to a certain 'ideal' standard, the pressure on women to look after the health of others was not addressed. Instead, this appears to be a taken for granted role. Previous research has demonstrated that media exposure to such depictions of thinness is related to body image concern for women (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008) and this can result in internalisations of such depictions, leading to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994). Thus, it is reasonable to assert that women are also affected by the expectations associated with being considered responsible for the health of others (Oakley, 1994).

Similar to previous findings (e.g., Seale, 2002), in the current study overweight and obese children were portrayed as victims of poor parenting. A striking number of media

messages explicitly blamed parents for the high levels of childhood obesity in Ireland, whereby parents are either described as ignorant and uncaring or as too selfish and busy with their own lives. The tone of many of these articles was unsympathetic, even hostile, and reports were often condescending, implying that the solution to childhood obesity was simple but parents were too ignorant or uncaring to take action. By explicitly blaming parents for children's diseases and psychological problems related to excess weight, media messages aimed to induce guilt and to encourage parents to address the problem. However, the media did not take account of the potential consequences of this and the repercussions this type of framing can have implications for the public perception of childhood obesity as tantamount to child abuse as well as the acceptability of legal interventions in such instances. The degree to which emotion-laden this was evident serves to underline the highly moralised and sensationalised nature of the issue of childhood obesity. Nabi (2003) contends that the use of emotive language in message framing can result in the information becoming more accessible for subsequent judgement by virtue of making both topic-relevant and emotion-relevant details more accessible. Emotional responses can constitute a heuristic guide to judgement of social issues and therefore understanding how emotion is used to frame the issues of childhood obesity is an important consideration for health communicators.

A common thread in the analysis was the blame directed at women, both as the partners of men and as the mothers of children. Women were positioned as the primary caregivers, tasked with the responsibility for the nutrition and health of themselves and others. This is consistent with previous research on the representation of childhood obesity (Bastian, 2011) and the framing of mothers within the obesity discourse (Maher et al., 2010) but extends these investigations by finding evidence for the gendered burden of responsibility beyond childhood obesity alone. Parallels observed between these analyses may be indicative

of similarities in the apportioning of blame between Western nations, perhaps representing unease with modernisation and women's changing roles in society (Bordo, 2003). Irish research has revealed that although women do more unpaid work in the home than men, compared to men in households where they are the sole 'breadwinner', men in dual-earner households engage in more domestic work (McGinnity & Russell, 2008). Yet, this increasing domestic role of men is not acknowledged in media reports and instead, over time, the media remains focused on the role of women and mothers in healthy food provision.

The public health academy may well expect too much from the reporting of public health issues by the mass media. By their very nature, the mass media are intended to appeal to the literate population and not necessarily to the informed population in as much as the depiction of men and how they interact with their diet is painted in the broadest of brush strokes, the same could surely be said for almost all domains. For example, this discourse of gender and obesity may be indicative of comparatively unchanging gender role depictions across numerous domains, including politics (Norris, 1997), crime, employment and sport (Poindexter, Meraz, & Weiss, 2008). Furthermore, it could be argued that the function of the mass media is not to lead public opinion but to reflect it. Newspapers such as the UK's *The Guardian* or other media channels that are looked on as leaders of public opinion are rare; and across developed nation-states, their circulation is always a fraction of the entire newspaper market (Kelly, Mazzoleni & McQuail, 2004). The Irish media perpetuated traditional gender stereotypes and gender roles and largely ignore alternative male and female attitudes to diet and obesity. This is likely driven by mass media norms of generalisation and simplification. Implicit in this portrayal of the issue is that the traditional 'macho' approach to health is the culturally-dominant notion and expectation. Furthermore, it illustrates the effect of sociocultural influences on diet and on shaping gender roles and behavioural norms.

Although significant differences in the portrayal of the issue between broadsheet and tabloid publications were expected, it was surprising to find broadly similar accounts of the issues, with relatively few differences observed between tabloid and broadsheet discussions. Yet it is notable that tabloids were more likely to focus on weight and obesity news in terms of it being relevant as a ‘female’ issue, whereas broadsheets offered a more balanced discussion of gender and obesity. The focus on maternal blame for childhood obesity was apparent across publication types and the dominance of this construction of femininity serves to maintain the social norms of female responsibility for food provision and consequently, for childhood obesity. The relatively short sampling frame may account for the failure to detect any trends in reporting over time.

In sum, it is clear from the sample analysed that traditional notions of gender roles were dominant in media reports in Ireland and served to reproduce meaning, specifying and explaining expectations of health behaviours between genders. This construction of gender is embedded in an obesity discourse that is characterised by the persistent apportionment of personal blame for obesity (e.g., De Brún, et al., 2012; Kim & Willis, 2007). Thus, while the influence of environmental and socioeconomic factors continue to be minimised in media reports, we speculate that such gendered representations of responsibility will persist within this discourse individual responsibility. This study builds on previous work examining culturally-dominant conceptions of gender roles in health and illness and adds to the growing body of work examining media representations of health issues. However, the current research was not designed to evaluate factors related to how well the media portrayal reflects Irish people’s beliefs about gender roles and norms regarding health behaviours. Future research should investigate whether these themes are evident in lay interactions on the issue

as this could provide insight into how audiences are reacting to, reproducing and challenging popular discourses on weight.

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Publication	Article Code	Date	Headline
The Irish Times	IT ₁	21/11/2009	Overweight? Mise ⁴ ?
	IT ₂	08/06/2009	Our health and our diet
	IT ₃	19/03/2005	Super-size nation
	IT ₄	20/12/2005	Sin or disease debate
The Irish Independent	II ₁	18/08/2009	Most men too fat thanks to slim chance of exercise
	II ₂	27/07/2007	Yo-yo weight loss puts babies at risk
	II ₃	16/06/2005	Obesity: Don't swallow everything you're told...)
	II ₄	21/06/2007	We are a nation in denial over our food vices
The Sunday Independent	SI ₁	29/05/2005	Love means a better diet for men but girls need cash
	SI ₂	01/07/2007	Gastric-band surgery is the latest step for girls who long to be thinner
	SI ₃	25/02/2007	Saints and scholars now more gluttons and fatties
The Star	TS ₁	03/04/2007	Fats the way to watch the pounds fade away
	TS ₂	05/06/2005	Health file
	TS ₃	29/08/2007	Kid's Uniforms Getting Bigger
	TS ₄	22/11/2007	Latchkey kids are at higher risk of obesity
Evening Herald	EH ₁	05/11/2005	Chew on this, all parents
	EH ₂	14/06/2007	Punish the parents of obese kids
	EH ₃	09/07/2007	Meet the smart cycle
	EH ₄	16/09/2005	Windscreen bellies are not the fault of the box
	EH ₅	12/05/2007	Mammy's not always to blame
The Sunday World	SW ₁	28/08/2005	Kids have a fat chance

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⁴ 'Mise' is an Irish word meaning 'me'.

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Table 1. Samples of coding and coding process

Article Extract	Initial Codes	Code/Theme Refinement	Final Theme
“We just don’t think about our bodies in the same way women think about theirs. If a woman detects a milligram of extra fat, she runs to the gym”	-High female body consciousness -Men think about their bodies differently to women -Women and diet-obsession	Gender differences in body awareness Dieting & weight-management female concerns	Caricatured portrayal of gender
“How outrageous! We men would never be so silly as to need women to tell us when to do the things that are good for us. Would we, lads?”	-Humour used in discussion of men’s health behaviours -Men’s reliance on women in health matters	Male reliance to female guidance in health matters	
“Punish the parents of obese kids... A group of doctors are calling for obesity in under-12s to be designated an act of neglect and for action against those parents”	-Call to punish parents of obese children -Childhood obesity due to parental neglect -Pity for obese children, victims of poor parenting	Parental blame for obesity Failure of parents to fulfil role aligned with criminality Emotive language	Emotive parental-blame for childhood obesity
“I feel sorriest for children who are given access to all kinds of obesogenic foods as a sign of parental care and love.”	-Parents show love through food -Emotive language	Parents overfeeding as sign of love	