Carly to integrate this somewhere?

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57e9ebb16a4963ef7adfafdb/t/5fcdbe2c662d5e24e0c1e5a6/1607319086673/OC+Focus+group+research+Final_.pdf>

**Corpus linguistics and media guidelines – An international case study on obesity in the news**

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Content warning: This article includes examples of dispreferred language practices in relation to people with obesity.

1. **Introduction**

‘Whenever a newspaper carried a headline about the “obesity crisis” and how much it costs the NHS, I would think “not only am I fat and ugly, like everyone says, I am also a burden to the state”. On the news there were pictures of people like me wandering past the camera, which zoomed in on rubbing thighs and muffin tops. Meanwhile a thin, perfectly coiffed newsreader would describe how obesity meant an increased risk of cancer, lower fertility, heightened risk of diabetes. Every time I saw one of these reports, I felt my heart puncture. Try harder, they seemed to say to me – and if you fail, you fail society not just yourself. There was no recognition that the images and the tone of the debate itself were hurtful – and setting me, and others like me, back.’

(Moran 2019)

It is widely recognised that weight stigma in news media is a problem, as also illustrated in the above statement from a person with lived experience. The selection of images, language, and news frames has been shown to contribute to negative and stereotypical representations of people with obesity, both in Australia (e.g. Bonfiglioli et al. 2007, Bonfiglioli 2020, Cain et al. 2017, Islam and Fitzgerald 2016) and in the UK (e.g. Atanasova and Koteyko 2017, Brookes & Baker 2021, Coltman-Patel 2020, add ref?). The Australian Health Promotion Charity *Weight Issues Network* (WIN) – a network of people affected by obesity or overweight – argues that for weight stigma to stop, ‘[p]ortrayal of people with obesity in the media to be respectful. Framing and images with stereotypes perpetuate and reinforce stigma.’ (Weight Issues Network 2020: 6). Weight stigma, in turn, is clearly harmful: Potential effects of weight stigma on individual wellbeing range from increased likelihood of anxiety, depression, substance abuse and suicidal thoughts and behaviours, to reduced motivation to engage in weight-related health behaviours (see Bellew et al 2020, Weight Issues Network 2020).

As a response, several Australian and international organisations, which are active in improving perceptions and treatment of people with obesity, have published reporting or media guidelines. Similar guidelines have been developed to address coverage of other important social issues (for example, reporting on mental health, suicide, violence against women, etc). Media guidelines or style guides now also exist for reporting on marginalised groups, for instance on trans people and issues (e.g. Trans Journalist Association n.d.) or on intersex people and issues (e.g. Intersex Human Rights Australia 2009/2021).

In general, such media guidelines are created or published by organisations who recognise the importance of language use in the media and beyond – for example, in 2011 Diabetes Australia published ‘a world first position statement calling for “a new language for diabetes”’ (Diabetes Australia 2021: 1), which was followed by similar statements from international diabetes organisations and a #LanguageMatters movement (Diabetes Australia 2021: 1). Similarly, the Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) states that ‘one of the most prevalent areas that the OAC is now tackling to eradicate weight bias and stigma is language’ (Obesity Action Coalition n.d.). Importantly, some media guidelines are developed drawing on linguistic expertise (e.g. for diabetes, see Charles Perkins Centre 2019) and thus represent clear attempts at societal impact, i.e. changes in journalism practices, with presumed flow-on effects on policy-making, public perception, discourse, etc.

It is often the case that multiple guidelines exist – for instance in relation to reporting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and issues in Australia (see e.g. Media Diversity Australia 2018, Public Health Association Australia 2017, Roberts et al 2021) or in relation to media portrayals of violence against women (Sutherland et al 2017: 22). This is also the case with the topic that we study in this chapter, namely obesity, where at least six guidelines exist for English-language media coverage alone (Australian, UK, US, and global context). In this chapter, we focus on these guidelines, by first summarising the experience of two of the authors who were involved in the drafting of two of these guidelines. Following this, we review the recommendations that the six obesity media guidelines make, with a specific focus on language use, drawing out similarities and differences. Taking a corpus linguistic approach, we then examine the extent to which selected recommendations on language choices from the guidelines has been adhered to in journalism in Australia, and whether any changes over time can be identified. This analysis is based on a subset of the Australian Obesity Corpus (Vanichkina & Bednarek 2022), introduced in section x. We then include a brief comparison with journalism from the UK, using Coltman-Patel’s (2020) Obesity in the British Press corpus. Finally, we discuss whether the guidelines have had any measurable impact on journalism and reflect on how this could be improved.

1. **Linguistics, journalism, and media guidelines: Personal experiences**

This project is part of an international research collaboration which involves an interdisciplinary team of linguists/journalism scholars from Australian and UK universities as well as the Australian Obesity Collective, ‘a platform for committed individuals and organisations from across the community to take on the obesity challenge together, with empathy and a whole of society perspective’ (Obesity Collective, n.d., a). They take an active approach to improving news media coverage on obesity. In addition to a very short (1-page) media guide (Obesity Collective, n.d., b), this consists of conversations with journalists via phone and/or email, mostly about their problematic use of language or images.

Two team members, Catriona Bonfiglioli (Australian journalism scholar and former professional journalist) and Tara Coltman-Patel (UK corpus linguist), have relevant experience in drafting obesity media guidelines. In addition, Bonfiglioli has widely published on obesity in Australian news (e.g. Bonfiglioli 2015, 2020), and Coltman-Patel wrote her PhD thesis on the linguistic representation of obesity in British newspapers (Coltman-Patel 2020). Both also have lived experience with obesity – ok to say and phrase like this? In this section, we briefly summarise their involvement in international media guidelines on obesity.

For Catriona Bonfiglioli, the creation of the relevant Australian media guidelines arose out of her role as a Research Coordinator at the NSW Centre for Overweight and Obesity (COO) from 2005-2008. Following her research on obesity and physical activity in Australian television news and current affairs (Bonfiglioli, King et al. 2007, Bonfiglioli, Smith et al. 2007, Bonfiglioli, Smith et al. 2011) and motivated by the desire to improve such coverage, a resource was created to encourage journalists to look at additional types of evidence, reflect on their patterns of coverage, and diversify their news sources (Bonfiglioli 2007). This was seen as necessary given that Australian news tended to highlight personal responsibility, neglect environmental drivers of weight gain and inactivity, convey stigmatising messages and rarely hold industry to account (Bonfiglioli, Smith et al. 2007). The resource was based on evidence about obesity and inactivity, previous studies of media, and their own research analysing TV news media coverage of overweight and obesity drawing on a dataset of TV news and current affairs generated by the Australian Health news Research Collaboration at the University of Sydney led by Professor Simon Chapman. The draft guidelines were revised after review by a panel of experts including a health journalist, a clinical obesity specialist, a health promotion professional, and a nutritionist.

Tara Coltman-Patel’s involvement started in June 2018 as an intern for World Obesity, followed by a 6-month role as a language and weight stigma consultant for a campaign centred around weight stigma. In this role, she wrote an advocacy guide, a media report highlighting the pervasive use of stigmatising imagery and language currently used in news reports, and the language guidelines, which were first written independently and then given to the rest of the team for input. In this case, the guidelines were a component of a larger campaign to raise awareness around stigmatising language and motivated by the desire to offer alternatives. It was important to the campaign to not just condemn media outlets for their shortcomings in their reporting of obesity, but also to provide them with a solution. The resource was based on Tara’s own PhD research as well as existing guidelines, with the aim to extend them.

For this chapter, we asked both authors to not only tell us about their experiences and motivations as summarised above, but to also reflect upon the impact of these guidelines. We will return to these reflections in section 5. First, we review what these two guidelines – as well as four other English-language guidelines – actually say about language use in relation to obesity news coverage. Note that we do not review guidelines for talking about weight outside news media contexts, such as guidelines for doctors and healthcare professionals (see e.g. Crotty 2021).

1. **Media guidelines on obesity**

For our review, we identified six English-language media guides for obesity news coverage, which were published by organisations in Australia, the UK and the US, which are working to reduce weight stigma in the media (see Table 1). In general, these guides aim to raise awareness of journalistic practices which perpetuate weight stigma and suggest alternatives, sometimes providing lists of practices to be avoided and adopted. Our review here focusses on practices most closely related to language use, i.e. lexis – for the full review, also including themes/frames and images, see Bray & Bednarek (2021).

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Organisation** | **Year** | **Country** | **Title** | **Link** |
| Obesity Australia | 2015 | Australia | Rethink obesity:  A media guide on how to report on obesity | [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57e9ebb16a4963ef7adfafdb/t/57ea17b0f7e0ab1a3449ef1b/1474959285344/A-media-guide-on-how-to-report-on-obesity.pdf](https://protect-au.mimecast.com/s/jv9sCQnMBZfkLZrVxUMtHUX?domain=static1.squarespace.com) |
| World Obesity Federation | 2018 | Global | Weight stigma in the media | <https://www.worldobesity.org/resources/resource-library/world-obesity-day-2018-media-report> |
| Western Australia  Department of Health | 2020 | Australia | Shift: A guide for media and communications professionals | <https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/~/media/Corp/Documents/Health-for/Health-Networks/Healthy-Weight-Action-Plan/Shift-A-guide-for-media-and-communications-professionals.pdf> |
| Rudd Centre, Obesity Society & Obesity Action Coalition | 2014 | USA | Guideline for media portrayals of individuals affected by obesity | <https://uconnruddcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2909/2020/07/MediaGuidelines_PortrayalObese.pdf> |
| NSW Centre for Overweight and Obesity | 2007 | Australia | Reporting obesity:  A resource for journalists | [https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/handle/2123/16807/2007\_reporting\_obesity.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://protect-au.mimecast.com/s/_oA_CROND2uvXZBYVtOMV-g?domain=ses.library.usyd.edu.au) |
| One Life Suffolk, Suffolk County Council & Leeds Beckett University | 2020 (?) | UK | Media guidelines: Avoiding weight stigma and discrimination | [http://obesitycanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/WOF\_Media\_guidelinesDev1-1.pdf](https://protect-au.mimecast.com/s/4rfOCOMKzVTpkQ4YGHEjyln?domain=obesitycanada.ca) |

Table 1 The surveyed guidelines

Copy-pasted from journal article – carly to rewrite the next section highlighted in yellow, include a ref to Table 2, also integrating the new explainer on people-first language.

At the level of lexis, support for people-first language such as *people with obesity* is universal. People-first language can be explained as follows:

“People-first language involves putting people first, rather than labelling them by their disease or disability, and it has become an established standard for respectfully addressing people with diseases or illnesses, including mental illness, diabetes, autism and other chronic diseases. It has been broadly accepted as an important aspect of efforts to reduce disease stigma, but it’s fairly recent to the obesity field […] What this would mean is instead of referring to someone as an “obese” person, we would talk about a person who “has obesity”, or a person “with obesity”, or a person “affected by obesity”. This is becoming an accepted standard by a number of health organisations, as well as research journals.”

(Rebecca Puhl, cited in World Obesity n.d.)

All guides problematise condition-first terms like *obese people* and some draw comparisons with equivalent references to other conditions—such as *cancerous people*, for example—which would be regarded as inappropriate (Obesity Australia, 2015; Rudd Centre for Food Policy and Obesity, n.d.).

The practice of using scientific descriptors such as BMI scores or obesity classes in place of pejorative adjectives such as *fat* and *obese* is also widely supported, though the limitations of the BMI metric have also been noted (Obesity Australia, 2015; Bonfiglioli, 2007). The negative adverbs *severely* and *morbidly* which denote outdated classification labels also receive criticism, as do pejorative nominal items like *fatty* and *chubster*. Negative references to obesity itself are similarly discouraged. These include such generally negative terms as *suffer*, *epidemic* or *strain*; combative metaphorical language including *war on obesity* or *fight obesity*; and prohibitive language regarding public health efforts such as *police*, *banning*, or *nanny state*.

In our corpus linguistic analyses, we largely focus on pejorative labels and condition-first language, which are widespread concerns within the media guidelines (see Table 2). It is important to note that the review only identified the consensus in published guidelines, as opposed to any consensus in people with lived experience of obesity. There is likely to be diversity of opinion, as ‘people have different preferences around terminology’ (Weight Issues Network (2020: p. 9). This may include diverse views regarding condition-first language or specific lexis. For example, Moran (2019) writes how *fat* is triggering for her, and that she prefers terms like *overweight* or *obese*, while others have reclaimed the word *fat* (ref), and many dislike the condition-first labelling of people as *obese*: ‘Labeling individuals as “obese” creates negative feelings toward individuals with obesity and perpetuates weight bias’ (Obesity Action Coalition 2021).

The study’s focus on pejorative labels and condition-first vs people-first language is also supported by the wide-spread adoption of the latter language practice by relevant stakeholders. According to World Obesity (n.d.), ‘people-first language has been widely adopted [in the English-speaking obesity research community] in recent years as a means of reducing the stigma around obesity’. A new campaign aimed at increasing the use of people-first language is currently in progress, and such language is already widely supported by multiple organisations (for a relevant list, see Obesity Action Coalition, n.d.). It is also supported by our research partner, the Obesity Collective, and included in their own short media guide (Obesity Collective, n.d., b). The argument for preferring such language is that condition-first language dehumanises individuals and labels an individual by their condition, perpetuating weight bias and stigma (Obesity Action Coalition, n.d.). Person-first language is also recommended by the Weight Issues Network (2020):

‘Please don’t […] [c]all us obese. People may prefer other terms like ‘larger bodies’ or ‘above a healthy weight’. If you are going to use the term obesity please use person first language ‘living with obesity’, not obese. Obesity is a health term that should not be a label.’ (p. 24)

A final reason for focussing on condition-first language and pejorative labels is feedback from people with lived experience from the Weight Issues Network regarding their interest in a range of different linguistic practices who nominated these as areas of interest (see Bednarek at al, under review).

In sum, our study analyses the use of pejorative labels (vs positive/euphemistic labels) and condition-first (vs person-first) language in Australian newspapers. It focusses on whether such language occurs and how frequent it is, also including a brief comparison with UK newspapers. In so doing, we can examine the extent to which the relevant language recommendations from media guidelines have been adhered to in journalism on obesity. The next section introduces the corpus and methods.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **ADOPT** |  |  |  | **AVOID** |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | People-first language | Scientific descriptors | Individuals’ preferred  descriptors | Accurate, specific  language | Pejorative  language | Negative adjectives and adverbs | Negative reference to obesity | Combative language | Prohibitive language | Excessive medical jargon |
| Obesity Australia | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |  | X | X |  |  |  |  |
| World Obesity Federation | ✓ | ✓ |  | ✓ | X | X | X |  |  | X |
| Western Australia Department of Health | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |  | X | X |  | X | X |  |
| Rudd Centre, Obesity Society & Obesity Action Coalition | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |  | X | X |  |  |  |  |
| One Life Suffolk, Suffolk County Council & Leeds Beckett University | ✓ | ✓ |  | ✓ | X |  |  | X |  |  |

Table 2 Language recommendations in the guidelines

1. **Corpus and methods**

The Australian corpus that we use for this study is a sub-set of the larger Australian Obesity Corpus, which includes newspaper articles with at least one mention of *obese* or *obesity* from twelve national Australian newspapers over a period of ten years (2008 to 2019). The corpus building process is described in detail in Vanichkina & Bednarek (2022). The sub-set that we are using in this chapter contains only those articles from the larger corpus that contain at least **three** instances of *obese* or *obesity*. This is similar to how the Obesity in the British Press (OiBP) corpus (Coltman-Patel 2020) was generated (see section x), and allows for more appropriate international comparison. Table 3 shows the newspapers included in the sub-set (with information about newspaper type and political orientation), along with the relevant number of articles and words. The corpus was accessed via CQPweb (Hardie 2012), and the number of words in Table 3 [Carly to add] corresponds to the token definition used by CQPweb.

Table 3. The sub-set corpus

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Publication** | **Constituent newspapers** | **Type** | **Orientation** | **Number of articles** | **Words** |
| The Advertiser (Adelaide) | The Advertiser  The Advertiser Online  Sunday Mail | Tabloid | Right-leaning |  |  |
| The Age (Melbourne) | The Age  The Age Online  The Sunday Age | Broadsheet | Left-leaning |  |  |
| The Australian (National) | The Australian | Broadsheet | Right-leaning |  |  |
| Canberra Times (Canberra) | Canberra Times  Canberra Times Online | Broadsheet | Left-leaning |  |  |
| Courier Mail (Brisbane) | Courier Mail  The Sunday Mail | Tabloid | Right-leaning |  |  |
| Brisbane Times (Brisbane) | Brisbane Times | Broadsheet | Left-leaning |  |  |
| Daily Telegraph (Sydney) | Daily Telegraph  Sunday Telegraph | Tabloid | Right-leaning |  |  |
| Herald-Sun (Melbourne) | Herald-Sun  Sunday Herald Sun | Tabloid | Right-leaning |  |  |
| Hobart Mercury (Hobart) | Hobart Mercury  The Sunday Tasmanian | Tabloid | Right-leaning |  |  |
| Northern Territory News (Darwin) | Northern Territory News  Sunday Territorian | Tabloid | Right-leaning |  |  |
| Sydney Morning Herald (Sydney) | Sydney Morning Herald  The Sun-Herald Online | Broadsheet | Left-leaning |  |  |
| The West Australian (Perth) | The West Australian  The Sunday Times | Tabloid | Right-leaning |  |  |

To compare people-first with condition-first language in this corpus, we used the CQPweb interface and a search syntax that was developed for a previous study (under review), which is included in the online appendix (OSF). Search syntax 1 (for condition-first language) retrieves instances of *obese* followed by a set of N alternative human nouns (e.g. *obese people*, *obese Australians*, *obese women*), while search syntax 2 (for people-first language) retrieves instances of N alternative human nouns followed by *with \* obesity* (e.g. *people with obesity*, *adolescents with severe obesity*). Note that search syntax 1 also retrieves cases where a particular word form might be used as adjective, such as *obese* ***Australian*** *adults*,but that such instances still represent condition-first language. Our analysis of analysis of people-first language differs from other corpus linguistic studies in that we search for a wide range of phrases rather than just *person/people with obesity* or *obese people* (e.g. Brookes/Baker: page ref).

In addition, we searched for instances of “{live} with \* obesity” (the brackets retrieve a lemma) and for the exact phrase “the obese”, manually excluding all irrelevant instances of the latter (e.g. *the obese category, the obese mice*) using the ‘Categorise’ function in CQPweb, which permits annotation of concordance lines. Check if Brookes/Baker also do this qualitative analysis or is their analysis just form-based? mention Other potential structures (see Obesity Action Coalition 2021) for people-first (e.g. *affected by obesity*) or condition-first language (e.g. predication – person reference + *BE obese*) were not included in this study.

To compare pejorative vs positive/euphemistic labels, we created a search syntax focussing on specific word forms identified in media guidelines and corpus linguistic research (Brookes & Baker 2021, ask Carly to add?):

Pejorative: *fatty*, *fatties*, *fatso*, *fatsos*, *fat*, *lardies*, *flab*, *bulk*, *blubber*, *blubbery*, *flobber*, *flubber*, *fleshy*, *meaty*, *lardy*, *flabby*, *podgy*, *dumpy*, *heavy*

Positive/euphemistic: *cuddly*, *curvy*, *roly-poly*, *big-boned*, *solid*, *full-figured*, *plus-sized*, *voluptuous*, *portly*, *tubby*, *chubby*, *chubster*, *chubsters*, *fluffy*, *chunky*

For each of the identified instances, we again used the ‘Categorise’ function in CQPweb for qualitative analysis in order to exclude all irrelevant instances (e.g. *fat* as noun or occurrences such as *heavy smoking, meaty bones, solid* *evidence*).

We used exact phrase and concordance searches rather than collocation analysis to minimise false positives. We first identified general results in the subset corpus, retrieved from the CQPweb analysis. Following this, we undertook statistical analyses and visualisation using …. The relevant re-usable notebook is available through the ARDC projects at LINK. Our approach to the international comparison of language use (Australia vs UK) is introduced in section x below, where we also briefly describe the British corpus that is used in this comparison.

**5. Language recommendations vs language use**

Integrate relevant refs from previous research on obesity news coverage in Australia here (see lit review journal article)

**5.1 Dispreferred language**

We start by discussing the results for dispreferred language: condition-first language and use of “the obese” to refer to people with obesity. The search syntax for condition-first language returned 3101 mentions across 1706 texts. Of the terms included in the syntax, the most frequently occurring noun is *people*, with *obese people* totalling 823 instances (26.52%). This exact term is identified as stigmatising in several media guidelines, making its frequency problematic. The second most frequent term, *obese children*, is close to half as frequent, with 447 instances (14.41%). Stigma in references to children is not specifically discussed in the guidelines; however one notes that children and adolescents are at particular risk of the negative psychological effects of experiencing stigma (Law and Pulker 2020, p. 12). The third most frequent result overall is *obese patients* (311 instances, 10.02%) suggesting discussions of comorbidities and perhaps a medicalised focus in general. The guidelines reviewed above are ambivalent on the benefits and drawbacks of discussing obesity in medical terms, although most agree that to focus on these aspects at the expense of others is stigmatising. As such, the prevalence of this term may be problematic.

The fourth most frequent term is *obese women* (Carly: add frequency and percentage), suggesting that gender is a common lens for discussing obesity. Compared to *obese women, obese men* ranks slightly lower, at 7th in the list (appendix), suggesting obesity among men is discussed less frequently. Notably, there are almost three times as many mentions of *obese women* (n=290) as *obese men* (n=105). A similar trend is observed when all overtly gendered nouns are aggregated into total mentions of male and female terms respectively,[[1]](#endnote-1) with more than twice as many mentions of female terms (n=419, across 238 texts) as male (n=199, across 126 texts). Female personal pronouns were found to be disproportionately frequent compared to male pronouns in personal narrative stories in coverage of obesity in the UK (Coltman-Patel 2020, pp. ?). also integrate chapter by Brookes/Baker that focusses on gender or article by Brookes (?) The above finding suggests that this focus on women and obesity may also be present in Australian journalism.

Together, the four most frequent nouns (*people*, *children*, *patients*, *women*) make up % [carly to add] of all instances. The remaining nouns and their frequencies are listed in Table x in the online appendix. Table x shows that the nouns can be classified into four broad semantic categories: Generic, age-based, national/regional identity, and functional.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Generic | | *people, person, individuals, individual, persons* |
| Age-based | | *children, women, adults, men, kids, child, adolescents, man, teenagers, woman, teens, girls, adult, boys, youngsters, girl, ladies, teenager, adolescent, boy, lady* |
| National/regional identity | | *Australians, Australian, residents, Victorians, Queenslanders, Canberrans, Tasmanians, Aussies, American, Victorian, Americans, Brits* |
| Functional | Family/kinship | *mothers, parents, mums, dads, fathers, mother, father, daughters, parent, son, sons, dad, mum* |
| Medical/research | *patients, patient, asthmatics, diabetics, smoker*  *subjects, participants, subject* |
| Employment | *workers, volunteers, employees, models, soldiers, boss, model, employee* |
| Travel | *passengers, passenger, travellers, traveller* |
| Other | *students, preschoolers, citizens, contestants, fans, friend, contestant, dieters, subject* |

Table x Semantic categories of nouns premodified by *obese*

Generic nouns are terms used to refer generically to individuals or groups of people*.* Age-based nounsgroup people demographically by age, and may additionally be gendered (e.g. *women*/*men*; *girls*/*boys*). Other nouns group people according to geographic location, either globally (eg. *Australians*; *American*), by state or territory (eg. *Victorians*), or, using *residents*, by city (such as *Wagga Wagga* (AG150510111) or *the City of Melbourne* (CM120906974)). Finally, functional nouns groups people according to a range of different societal functions: Familial functions/kinship roles such as *parents* and *son* are common (and also partially gendered), though, interestingly, all relate to the parent-child relationship rather than extended kinship roles. Terms in the medical/research category refer to people, for example, as *patients* or *diabetics*, again suggesting a recurrent medical framing, or as the subjects/topic of scientific research (*subjects, participants*).[[2]](#endnote-2) The category of Employment contains terms which both refer to people according to employment status (eg. *workers* and *volunteers*) and in terms of specific professions (eg. *soldiers* and *models*). The category of Travel suggests that excess weight is in some way relevant to being a *passenger* or *traveller*, most likely due to items about x [carly: check articles]. The nouns in the Other category relate to a range of societal functions with 1-2 nouns per function, including for example information about education (*students*, *preschoolers*), citizenship (*citizens*), and friendship (*friend*)*.* The noun *dieters* may indicate a behavioural frame that highlights personal responsibility (include ref to media guidelines). Together, the results show that dispreferred condition-first language is common in the corpus. They also demonstrate that using a specific search term such as *obese people* will not discover the full range of condition-first language in a corpus.

Moving on to the dispreferred structure *the obese*, this exact phrase occurs 296 times in 259 different texts. However, only 166 instances (across xxx texts) are relevant (56.1%), i.e. used to refer to people with obesity. Given the high proportion of irrelevant occurrences, it is clear that the use of this specific search term must be complemented with qualitative analysis to avoid including false positives. Critique Brookes/Baker if they do not do this? In general, it is clear that this dispreferred practice is much less frequent than the use of *obese* as a premodifier of human nouns.

**5.2 Preferred language**

As we have seen above, dispreferred condition-first language is highly frequent in the corpus; however, it remains unclear if it is more frequent than preferred person-first language. In fact, the search syntax for person-first language returned just 104 instances across 76 texts, making it much less frequent than condition-first language (3101 instances across 1706 texts). As such, person-first language accounts for just 3.35% of references to people with obesity captured with Syntax 1 and Syntax 2 combined. This is despite being strongly preferred according to the media guidelines and being widely adopted and promoted (see section x above). World Obesity (n.d.) is even currently undertaking a survey to ‘solicit feedback from our members and stakeholders on the suitability of people-first language to their respective languages (whether it is currently used, and the extent to which it is suitable for their languages if not).’

The word *people* is again the most frequent, accounting for approximately half of total mentions (49.04%). Likewise, *children* and *patients* again rank 2 and 3 in the list when sorted by frequency. These terms, along with the remainder of results (in appendix), each occur fewer than 10 times. Overall, instances of *people/person with obesity* account for % of all occurrences, indicating that a reliance on these phrases alone would … As can be seen in Table x, the terms can be classified into semantic categories which overlap with those seen above – generic, national/regional identity, age-based, functional (medical/research; employment). Notably, forms are markedly less gendered than those in Table x, with only one instance of *girl*. The lower number of categories and gendered terms could be a result of the lower overall frequencies of person-first language.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Generic | | *people, those, many, person* |
| National/regional identity | | *Australians* |
| Age-based | | *children, adolescents, adults, child, girl, teens* |
| Functional | Medical/research | *patients* |
| Employment | *volunteers* |

Table x

The phrase *{live} with \* obesity* which is not covered by search Syntax 2 and was captured separately is even more infrequent, with just 10 total occurrences. All instances take the gerund form *living with obesity*, and two instances include the problematic intensifying modifier *morbidly,* which… media guidelines. The instances primarily occur in broadsheet newspapers, with the exception of one instance in the *Herald Sun.* These results indicate that …

**5.3 Pejorative vs positive/euphemistic labels**

Our search syntax for pejorative labels retrieved 7,426 instances, with only three of the terms included in the syntax not occurring in the Australian corpus(*lardies, flubber*, *blobber*). Overwhelmingly, the results consist of mentions of *fat* (n=6,242), although qualitative analysis shows that this word appears to only be used as a pejorative label in fewer than 30% of occurrences (coded as ‘Yes’; see Table x). Four other terms (*fatty, bulk*, *meaty, lardy*) are also used in non-pejorative ways considerably more often than in pejorative ways. Because *fat* and *fatty* are highly frequent, the total proportion of all words in Table x coded as ‘Yes’ corresponds to only 30.9%, compared to the total proportion of words coded as ‘No’ (67.3%).[[3]](#endnote-3) Again, this indicates that a purely form-based analysis would be inappropriate. It is highly problematic, however, that pejorative labelling does persist in a third of occurrences. After all, such pejorative labels can have lasting psychological impact on people with lived experience:

‘long after people have stopped calling me fat, fatty, fatty-boom sticks, smelly Kelly with the big belly, the big girl, the big chick, the larger woman, those words, those labels, are still part of my fabric. They still impact how I think of myself. Of what I’m capable of.’ (Kelly, cited in Weight Issues Network 2020: 13)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Word form** | **Yes** | **No** | **Unclear** | **Total** |
| *fat* | 166 (26.6%) | 437 (70.0%) | 21 (3.4%) | 624\* |
| *fatty* | 20 (3.9%) | 492 (96.1%) |  | 512 |
| *fatties* | 65 (98.5%) | 1 (1.5%) |  | 66 |
| *fatso* | 11 (68.8%) | 5 (31.3%) |  | 16 |
| *fatsos* | 5 (100%) |  |  | 5 |
| *flab* | 78 (95.1%) |  | 4 (4.9%) | 82 |
| *bulk* | 19 (21.3%) | 70 (78.7%) |  | 89 |
| *blubber* | 9 (81.8%) | 2 (18.2%) |  | 11 |
| *fleshy* | 2 (100%) |  |  | 2 |
| *meaty* |  | 8 (100%) |  | 8 |
| *lardy* | 1 (33.3%) | 2 (66.7%) |  | 3 |
| *flabby* | 17 (85.0%) | 3 (15.0%) |  | 20 |
| *blubbery* | 5 (100%) |  |  | 5 |
| *podgy* | 5 (100%) |  |  | 5 |
| *dumpy* | 2 (100%) |  |  | 2 |
| *heavy* | 153 (43.0%) | 196 (55.1%) | 7 (2.0%) | 356 |
| **Total** | 558 (30.9%) | 1216 (67.3%) | 32 (1.8%) | 1806 |

\*10% sample of the total 6242 instances of *fat*

Interestingly, the five terms with higher non-pejorative use (*fat, fatty, bulk*, *meaty, lardy*) are words that tend to have more varied usage in general. For instance, *fat* and *fatty* are both nouns and adjectives. In the case of *fat*, the noun most often refers to the substance as found in food, which is not considered pejorative, while the adjectival usage often is. The reverse is true of *fatty*, for which the nominal use is pejorative, while the adjectival usage most often refers to *fatty acid*(*s*), *fatty foods*/*diets* and *fatty liver disease*.[[4]](#endnote-4) Similarly, *bulk* occurs in a range of non-pejorative nominal and verbal constructions including *the bulk of X*, *bulk bill*, *in bulk* and *bulk up*, which make up the majority of its occurrences. The term *meaty* was found to be used metaphorically (e.g. *meaty issue*), while a literal usage exclusively referred to non-human *meaty bones*. As such, no occurrences of *meaty* were pejorative labels for people with obesity. Discuss the 3 isntances of lardy.

Notably, a small number of mentions of *fat* and *fatty* serve to challenge traditional (stigmatising) understandings of obesity in some way. Usages like *fat studies* (to mean the cultural study of obesity and surrounding attitudes) and *fat pride*, for example, are considered reclaimed uses of *fat*. Phrases like *Puppy fat is normal* and *cruel nicknames such as fatty, tubby and porker* problematise the traditional norm of thinness and use of stigmatising language respectively. This is a promising finding and shows the capacity of journalism to cover stigmatising practices.

The remainder of terms are predominantly used in pejorative ways, with the exception of *heavy* which has a fairly similar proportion of pejorative and non-pejorative usages. *Fatties* and *flab* are the most numerous by a considerable margin (65 and 78 instances respectively) and are used in highly problematic constructions like *Some generous subsidies are being cooked up for Australia’s* ***fatties*** and *War on child* ***flab***. Relatively small numbers of uses are non-pejorative: one instance of *fatties* is reclaimed (a reference to the fat positive blog *Fierce Fatties*), all five instances of *fatso* refer to animals, *blubber* occasionally refers to the substance as found in food, and *flabby* is used metaphorically on three occasions to refer to intellectual or rhetorical inaccuracy in phrases like *The flabby old adage*, for example.

Moving on,our search syntax for positive/euphemistic labels retrieved only 359 results in 228 texts, with zero instances of two of the terms included in the syntax (*chubster*, *chubsters*). In contrast to the pejorative labels in Table x, a higher proportion of the words in Table x were coded as ‘Yes’ (62.4%) than ‘No’ (36.5%). This indicates that overall such words are more often used with reference to people with obesity than the words in Table x.

Table

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Word form** | **Yes** | **No** | **Unclear** | **Total** |
| *solid* | 4 (4.2%) | 91 (95.8%) |  | 95 |
| *chubby* | 76 (91.6%) | 5 (6.0%) | 2 (2.4%) | 83 |
| *Plus-sized* | 47 (88.7%) | 6 (11.3%) |  | 53 |
| *curvy* | 25 (83.3%) | 5 (16.7%) |  | 30 |
| *tubby* | 24 (82.8%) | 4 (13.8%) | 1 (3.4%) | 29 |
| *chunky* | 13 (72.2%) | 5 (27.8%) |  | 18 |
| *big-boned* | 13 (100%) |  |  | 13 |
| *fluffy* |  | 12 (100%) |  | 12 |
| *portly* | 10 (100%) |  |  | 10 |
| *roly-poly* | 5 (71.4%) | 1 (14.3%) | 1 (14.3%) | 7 |
| *cuddly* | 1 (33.3%) | 2 (66.7%) |  | 3 |
| *full-figured* | 3 (100%) |  |  | 3 |
| *voluptuous* | 3 (100%) |  |  | 3 |
| **Total** | 224 (62.4%) | 131 (36.5%) | 4 (1.1%) | 359 |

However, the extent to which this is true depends on the specific word. On the one hand, *big-boned*, *portly*, *full-figured* and *voluptuous* are always used in reference to people with obesity. The term *big-boned* is often used in the first person, though several of the 13 instances are duplicates (in different articles). The 4 overtly gendered referents of the term *portly* (n=10) are male. *Full-figured* and *voluptuous* occur only 3 times each in the corpus, with male/female referents?

On the other hand, *fluffy* is never used as a label for people with obesity, neither are most of the occurrences of *solid* and *cuddly*. This may be explained by the fact that the labelling usage of these terms is arguably a metaphorical extension of a more basic meaning. *Fluffy* refers primarily to dogs and a brand of asbestos. *Solid* refers to solid food in 37 instances; other common referents include (scientific) evidence and growth. Non-relevant instances of the infrequent *cuddly* refer to animals.

The remaining terms are used in reference to people most of the time. *Chubby* is the most frequent of the search terms with 76 relevant instances. Interestingly, more than half of these (n=42) reference children or childhood, as do 7 of 25 instances of *tubby*. By contrast, *plus-sized* (the second most frequent term) is predominantly used to refer to plus-sized models (29 of 47 instances). Instances of *curvy* (n=25) modify a range of human nouns. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when the gender of the referent is recoverable from the immediate co-text, the referent is always female. Referents of *chunky* are of varied (or unknown) age and are only occasionally gendered (*chunky baby boy*, *she is not even chunky*). The remainder of words has fewer than 10 instances. Taken together, the results do appear to confirm ? the gendered nature of obesity coverage found above.

In comparison, positive/euphemistic labelling is much rarer than pejorative labelling in the corpus. As evident from Table x, 224 instances were coded as ‘yes’. For Table x, we need to extrapolate from the sample analysis for *fat*, i.e. counting 1660 (rather than 166) instances, resulting in a total of 2052 likely instances of pejorative labelling. Even though the two searches do not include the same number of word forms (19 for pejorative, 15 for positive/euphemistic), the trend is very strong and likely not an artefact of the search syntax. It must be noted that positive/euphemistic labelling is not necessarily desirable, given that such language reinforces the taboo surrounding obesity and overweight. However, it is ultimately less overtly Othering than pejorative labelling.

**5.4 Distribution across newspapers and time**

Above, we reported our results in an aggregate way for the whole corpus. To identify trends across newspapers and over time, we …. To do so we excluded … We are also not reporting trends for the ten instances of *living with obesity*.

Change over time – vs publication of guidelines/data – ob col?

For the stats/visualisations – exclude those newspapers that are not consistently and completely included in corpus? Also for journal article and check for uk corpus?

Condition-first language

“the obese” [for discussion, see Carly’s phase 1 write-up based on all data and adjust)

Person-first language (including the ten instances of living with obesity?)

Pejorative vs positive/euphemistic labels

**5.5 Comparison with UK corpus**

As a final step in the analysis, we include a brief international comparison, focusing on people-first and condition-first language in Australian vs UK journalism. The British corpus used for this comparison is the Obesity in the British Press (OiBP) corpus (Coltman-Patel 2020), which includes newspaper articles with at least three mentions of *obese* or *obesity* from nine national British newspapers from 1 January 2006 to 31 December 2016. The corpus building process is explained in detail in Coltman-Patel (2020). Table x shows the newspapers included in the corpus (with information about type and orientation), along with the relevant number of articles and words (according to CQPweb).

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Publication | Constituent newspapers | Type | Orientation | Number of articles | Words |
| *The Daily Express* |  | Tabloid |  |  |  |
| *The Daily Mail* |  | Tabloid |  |  |  |
| *The Daily Star* |  | tabloid |  |  |  |
| *The Daily Telegraph* |  | Broadsheet |  |  |  |
| *The Guardian* |  | Broadsheet |  |  |  |
| *The Independent* |  | Broadsheet |  |  |  |
| *The Mirror* |  | Tabloid |  |  |  |
| *The Sun* |  | Tabloid |  |  |  |
| *The Times* |  | Broadsheet |  |  |  |

Table X The Obesity in the British Press (OiBP) corpus

For this international comparison, we could not apply the Australian-specific search syntax that we used above. Rather, to retrieve condition-first language, we searched for *obese* followed by ref UCREL semantic tag S2 (‘people’) and its subcategories, using the search syntax [word="obese"] [semtag="S2.\*"]. To retrieve person-first language, we searched for the semtag S2 and its subcategories followed by *with obesity*, using the search syntax [semtag="S2.\*"] [word="with"] [word="obesity"]. While these searches do not retrieve all relevant instances and semantic tagging is not 100% accurate, results will reveal key trends/tendencies across the two corpora. Also compare “the obese” (after qual analysis?)

Tara: to integrate relevant refs from previous research on obesity news coverage in Britain here (see lit review journal article) and comparison with Baker and Brookes (findings) on their own UK corpus.

Baker and Brookes do not analyse people-first language as they found little evidence of uptake of *person/people with obesity* in the UK press (n=71). Rather, they make a distinction between nominations in which a person’s weight is a modifier to their identity (eg. *obese person*, that is, where other characteristics are at least possible) and those in which weight constitutes a person’s identity (eg. *the obese*).

To analyse, they calculate the proportion of adjectival to nominal usages of *obese* (ie. *obese people* versus *the obese*; these exact terms only) for each newspaper to allow for cross-comparisons. They then do the same with *overweight people* and *the overweight*, finding in both cases that the nominal form (*the obese/overweight*) is used more frequently by broadsheets, suggesting it is an indicator of style. Analysis of changes in use of these terms over time is also limited. They calculate that the frequency of keywords (when comparing each year to the rest of the corpus) relating to the category of weight have increased across the period covered by the corpus. However, this category includes a number of other terms in addition to *obese*, and the authors do not distinguish between nominal and adjectival usages.

How the forms that are analysed were arrived at is not explicitly outlined but, in Chapters 2 and 3, *obese* was identified both as a shared keyword across the four sub-corpora (right-leaning tabloid, left-leaning tabloid, right-leaning broadsheet, left-leaning broadsheet) when each was compared to the written portion of the BNC, and as a keyword when certain sub-corpora (all of the tabloid-right, and the tabloid-left newspaper, *The Mirror*) were compared to the remainder of the corpus. It is possible the nominal/adjectival distinction became apparent during qualitative analysis in these sections.

**6. Closing reflection**

Check against above: In sum, our analyses indicates that condition-first language is prevalent and that person-first language is only rarely used. We also found that pejorative labelling does still occur and is much more frequent then positive/euphemistic labelling. In contrast, problematic nominal labelling using “the obese” appear to be rare in the Australian data. Overall, our research has found that the relevant recommendations from media guidelines are only rarely adhered. Change over time – publication of guidelines/data?

This is perhaps to be expected. A previous study of diabetes coverage in Australia found that …, while a study of (Carly) showed that … Sutherland et al (2017) argue that ‘evidence for the effectiveness of guidelines in changing journalistic practice is weak, particularly as an intervention in isolation’ (Sutherland et al 2017: 22). They note that guidelines can have limited reach and uptake if they are not actively disseminated and if there is no active engagement to accompany them (Sutherland et al 2017: 22). While we do not know the specifics of how all of the six guidelines were disseminated, we do have some insight into two of the guidelines:

For the NSW resource (Bongfiglioli 2007), the NSW Centre for Overweight and Obesity mailed copies to journalists across NSW and presentations were given at various relevant conferences such as the Australasian Medical Writers’ Association Annual Conference and to journalists at the BBC. AMWA members are dedicated to high quality health and medical journalism and most members are active medical writers. As Catriona reflects: ‘All evidence available suggests the resource was very well received. We received positive feedback from some journalists and public health experts. Some journalists, notably Paula Goodyer, appeared to be making good use of the resource. Being invited to speak at the AMWA conferences (once on obesity in the news and once on physical activity/inactivity in the news) provided notable evidence of impact and esteem. However, a clearer picture of the impact would have come from a structured evaluation, and the resource would have benefited from social media distribution and video presentation.’

The World Federation guidelines were a free resource on the campaign website, advertised via the campaign’s and The World Obesity Federation’s social media as well as in other media, e.g. via radio interviews and television interviews. The campaign itself reached over 10 million people, so appears successful. However, the media guidelines did not seem to have had much of an impact. As Tara reflects: ‘I think the reasons for this are probably multifaceted. Stigmatising headlines are often sensational and drive sales and clicks, journalists are under massive time pressures so may not have time to consult guidelines, and even if they do, language changes may also be made by editors. I also think weight stigma is so normalised and it technically isn’t against the law to stigmatise someone on the basis of their weight in the UK. Weight is not a protected characteristic under the Equality Act and current independent press guidelines make no mention of sensitive reporting around weight. Even with the rise of the body positivity movement, weight stigma is still socially acceptable. This particularly true of implicit stigmatisation which is what most of the language we advised against perpetuated. I also think we could have done more in terms of outreach to journalists, a workshop targeted towards them perhaps. Also, we maybe should have done YouTube videos and Instagram posts. Our social media was limited to Twitter. Our main focus was the content for the campaign and because of that, our social media outreach, and outreach to journalists suffered a little.’

In addition to limited outreach/engagement, another reason for the limited uptake of particular guidelines could be their length – for example, the NSW COO resource is 19-pages long. In their engagement with journalists through one-on-one conversations (Tiffany Petre, personal communication), the Obesity Collective identified the need for a shorter guide, given that journalists are stripped for time because of the deadline pressures on them. These conversations also suggested that journalists do not want to contribute to stigmatisation and may not in fact be aware that they are doing something problematic. At the same time, there is some pushback against certain suggestions, for example the use of condition-first language with *obese* may not be considered as problematic, while preferred phraseologies such as *people with obesity* are considered as ‘clunky’. Check with Tiffany and add other relevant insights?

In relation to reporting on violence against women and their children, Sutherland et al (2017) suggest that ‘media guidelines alone will not be sufficient to change reporting practices’ (p. 5) and that ‘approaches to engaging with media in primary prevention are more likely to be effective when they are evidence-informed, developed collaboratively and involve multi-faceted, integrated and appropriately resourced strategies’ (p. 4). Such strategies, they suggest should be based on comprehensive understandings of the complex and changing media landscape and should include (i) media training for university students, practicing journalists and community spokespeople, (ii) cross-sector collaboration and learning (including media professionals), (iii) industry guidance that considers the specifics of the professional journalism context (news agendas, needs, journalistic practices, etc), (iv) engagement with social media platforms, (v) recognising and rewarding quality reporting practices, (vi) continuing evaluation and monitoring and evidence-based research. It seems reasonable that these suggestions could also be effective in relation to news coverage of obesity. It is possible, for example, for social media activism to focus directly on language use – an example, is the popular #FixedIt campaign, which corrects newspaper headlines about violence against women (<https://twitter.com/JaneTribune>). A context-sensitive approach should also consider that what works for the ‘quality’ press (broadsheets) may not work for the ‘popular’ press (tabloids).

In addition to these suggestions, media guidelines should be short, use plain language, and be collaboratively created with relevant stakeholders. As Weight Issues Network 2020 recommends: ‘The lived experience voice and perspective to be included in the development of plans, strategies, design of treatment pathways, research, and debates on weight issues in a person-centered approach.’ Where multiple guidelines exist, it could also be potentially useful to create a unified guideline, which is sensitive to the language norms and journalistic practice in that country. Further, it could also be helpful to lobby for changes to style guides that are already used ‘in-house’. In any case, guidelines should be easily findable and widely accessible. To facilitate this, one could consider technological solutions such as the creation of a media platform that hosts all media guidelines in a given country, organised by topic/issue/group as a ‘one-stop shop’ solution for journalists. Technological solutions may also include the development of tools that alert journalist to problematic phrases (similar to a spell/grammar check) and suggest more suitable alternatives.

Given that nearly 70% of Australians have overweight or obesity (ref), it is important to continue analysis of stigmatising representations of obesity. As the Weight Issues Network emphasises: ‘obesity is not a choice, and the shame, bias and discrimination is helping no one but harming many of us’ (Weight Issues Network 2020: 5). In this respect, it is at least a hopeful sign that Australia’s National Obesity Strategy 2022–2032 recognises the need for using appropriate language and messages to avoid weight stigma, for example in relation to social marketing and health promotion messages (see Commonwealth of Australia 2022).

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1. Search syntax for this analysis:

   Female: obese (daughter|daughters|Frenchwomen|girl|girls|ladies|lady|mother|mothers|mum|mums|woman|women)

   Male: obese (boy|boys|dad|dads|father|fathers|Frenchman|Frenchmen|guy|guys|man|men|son|sons) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Concordance lines of *subjects* were checked to ensure this was the actual usage; *subject* was found not to be used this way and is therefore included under Other. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Usages that were coded as ‘unclear’ are rare (1.8%), occurring with only three search terms (*fat, flab, heavy*). Many of these intentionally utilise ambiguity for effect. This is particularly the case in headlines in which there is not sufficient context to establish whether a usage is pejorative or not. For example, *Fat or Fiction?* and *Getting heavy at the mines* do not make clear whether *fat* and *heavy* are labels being ascribed to people. Both are examples of word play, which Brookes and Baker note is a form of discursive humour that may be stigmatising (ref). Similarly, the term *flab jab* (accounting for all unclear instances of *flab* and relating to a treatment for obesity currently in development), cannot be strongly argued to directly label people or bodies. Moreover, all four instances occur in a single article. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Note that the latter uses can still be stigmatising through the personal responsibility and medicalising frames. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)