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REPRESENTATIONS OF OVERWEIGHT

A discourse analytical study of overweight in online
magazine articles

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TIIVISTELMÄ

Riikka Varis: REPRESENTATIONS OF OVERWEIGHT: A discourse analytical study of overweight in online magazine articles

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Ylipaino on nykymaailmassa sekä hyvin yleistä että näkyvillä olevaa. Tämä monitahoinen asia vaikuttaa yksilön ja yhteisön fyysiseen, psyykkiseen ja sosiaaliseen hyvinvointiin monin tavoin, ja tässä prosessissa on merkittävällä tavalla mukana kieli, jolla luodaan merkityksiä. Tämä tutkielma tarkastelee, miten ylipainoa kuvataan mediassa, tarkemmin sanottuna 2020-luvun verkkoartikkeleissa, ja pyrkii lisäksi ymmärtämään näitä kuvauksia niiden kulttuurisessa yhteydessä.

Kuvauksia ylipainosta tutkittiin analysoimalla pientä korpusaineistoa, joka koostui yhteensä kuudestatoista verkkoartikkelista. Nämä artikkelit oli alun perin julkaistu neljässä suosituksessa amerikkalaisessa aikakauslehdessä, jotka ovat saatavilla internetissä. Tutkielmassa käytettiin kahta avainsanaa ('overweight' ja 'fat'), joiden avulla kerättiin artikkeleita ylipainosta vuosilta 2020–2023. Tutkielman menetelmänä toimi laadullinen diskurssianalyysi, jolla artikkeleista etsittiin diskursseja. Valitulla menetelmällä tutkitaan kieltä käytössä ja se on luonteeltaan sekä kuvaileva että kriittinen.

Analyysin tuloksena tutkielmassa löytyi kolme päädiskurssia: *ylipaino on riski, on ok olla ylipainoinen* ja *ylipaino on yhteiskunnallinen kysymys*. Nämä erilaiset mutta toisiinsa liittyvät diskurssit kuvaavat ylipainoa terveyden, normaaliuuden ja yleisten asenteiden ja niiden haitallisten seurausten näkökulmista. Tulosten perusteella todetaan, että nämä diskurssit toistavat, muuttavat ja arvostelevat ylipainoon liittyviä oletuksia. Tulokset ovat pääosin yhteneväisiä aiempien tutkimusten tulosten kanssa ja niiden voidaan katsoa heijastavan modernin läntisen yhteiskunnan monimutkaista todellisuutta. Nämä diskurssit ovat tiiviisti yhteydessä niiden sosiaaliseen ja kulttuuriseen kontekstiin, joten lisätutkimusta tarvitaan, jotta saataisiin monipuolisempi näkemys median tavoista käsitellä ylipainoa.

Avainsanat: ylipaino, diskurssianalyysi, digitaalinen media, representaatio

Tämän julkaisun alkuperäisyys on tarkastettu Turnitin OriginalityCheck -ohjelmalla.

ABSTRACT

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In today's world overweight is both very prevalent and visible. It is a complex issue that affects the wellbeing of individuals and society in multiple ways, physically, mentally and socially, and language plays a crucial role in this process by producing meanings. This thesis examines media representations of overweight in magazine articles published online in the 2020s and tries to understand these representations in their cultural context.

The representations of overweight were studied by analyzing a small corpus of sixteen online magazine articles that were published in four popular American magazines. Two keywords, 'overweight' and 'fat', were used to collect articles about overweight between 2020-2023. A qualitative discourse analysis, which studies language in use and is both descriptive and critical, was used to identify discourses in the articles.

Three main discourses were found: *overweight is a risk*, *being overweight is okay*, and *overweight is a social issue*. These different but connected discourses describe overweight from the perspectives of health, normality and common attitudes and their harmful consequences. It is concluded that these discourses repeat, change and criticize assumptions about the world when it comes to overweight. The results are broadly consistent with previous research and can be seen as reflecting the complex reality of a modern western society. Since these discourses are tightly connected to their social and cultural context, more research is needed to get a broader view on overweight discourse in the media.

Keywords: overweight, discourse analysis, digital media, representation

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Nowadays a large proportion of the world's population is overweight. This has led to concerns about the public's health and future. Being overweight is readily associated with physical health, but that is essentially only one side of a complex issue. The fat acceptance movement, which has been in operation more or less since the 1960s, has advocated for the rights of fat people and aimed at reshaping the discourse around fat (note here that *fat* in this context is not a negative term; it has been adopted by the movement).

Overweight is not a novel theme in research: there have been many studies about overweight in the media. However, it could be argued that overweight is more visible than ever. Not only has the prevalence of overweight in the world increased, but due to the rapid advances in technology information is now much more accessible to people on a global scale. Smartphones have become common household items. 85% of Americans owned a smartphone in 2021, which is remarkably more than the 35% in 2011 (Pew Research Center, 2021a). Smartphones enable people to have non-stop access to local and global events alike and trends to spread quickly. Moreover, with the rise of the smartphone different kinds of apps became popular. 255 billion mobile apps were downloaded worldwide in 2022 (Statista, 2023). Social media is hugely popular: 72% of U.S. adults were users of some type of social media in 2021 (Pew Research Center, 2021b). There are different applications (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) to choose from. Social media might make weight more visible, in pictures and online discussions. Through social media everyone can potentially show their body, and there are, for example, many celebrities that address body positivity and weight-related issues (Wurzburger, 2021). Weight is also discussed from perspectives such as fat shaming and diet culture.

Bearing in mind that there are a lot of factors operating at the same time, you would assume this to affect the discourses of overweight as well. There is potential for rich discussions. With language we produce meanings; discourses shape our understanding of the world. By examining language use we can thus discover something about that world. Media can be perceived as especially influential in their language use, for they have the capability to reach a wide audience. This study seeks to better understand current media

representations of overweight. How weight is discussed is important, because it is in various ways connected to the wellbeing of individuals and society.

Though *overweight* can be defined using BMI, it is also used in a more general sense of *fat* (Cambridge, n.d.). The writer of this thesis is fully aware of negative connotations that the words related to weight may have as well as the complexities surrounding weight in general. The purpose of this thesis is not to determine the “right” way of talking about overweight per se, but to add to the research on overweight discourse, which is simultaneously affected by various trends and is still relevant in today’s world. The research questions are:

1. How is overweight represented in online magazine articles in the 2020s?
2. How can these representations be understood in relation to their cultural context?

These questions will be discussed in the following sections. Section 2 presents the foundation for this study, i.e. the theory background. The methods and materials are introduced in section 3, which is followed by analysis and discussion of the results in section 4. Section 5 summarizes the main points and findings of the study and suggests directions for future research in this area. In addition, the limitations of the study, including with the method of discourse analysis, will be discussed there. The amount of data in this study does not allow for exhaustive answers but contributes to previous research by considering current trends in overweight discourse and by hopefully inspiring further research in the field.

The good research practices provided by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2023) were followed in this project.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I will discuss the theoretical background of this study. Several general aspects of society were considered important for the purpose of this thesis (subsection 2.1). In addition, I will focus on previous research on overweight in the media (subsection 2.2). Theory of discourse analysis, which works as the methodological foundation for the analysis in section 4, is not included in this section but will be covered in section 3.

2.1 Overweight in society

In the following subsections, I will discuss the prevalence of overweight in the world and the United States, weight stigma and its effects, and the fat acceptance movement with its present forms.

2.1.1 Prevalence

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) defines overweight and obesity as “abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that may impair health”, which is measured by the body mass index (BMI): for adults overweight is 25 or more and obesity 30 or more. Nonetheless, BMI is a rough estimate and not a direct measure of body fat (Hales et al., 2020; WHO, 2021). This means that BMI should not be taken as a definitive measure of health for all individuals. Thus, the relationship between weight and health is quite complex.

Overweight has become a globally prevalent issue. There were more than 1.9 billion overweight adults in 2016, which is noteworthy, since raised BMI has been linked to multiple noncommunicable diseases as a risk factor: cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, musculoskeletal disorders and some cancers (WHO, 2021). Preventing overweight or obesity is not just the individual’s responsibility; the role of society in creating supportive environments and communities that facilitate healthier options (making choices in terms of food and exercise accessible, available and affordable) is crucial (WHO, 2021). In other words, efforts should be put into making a healthier lifestyle also the easiest one. In the US the prevalence of obesity in 2017-2018 was 42.4% among adults, and for the group of non-Hispanic black adults it was the highest (Hales et al., 2020). The data for this thesis comes from online magazines in the US.

2.1.2 Fat shame

Weight is clearly a topical issue and thus needs to be addressed. The question remains *how*. According to overweight people themselves, in addition to e.g. bullying and belittling by others, overweight people might also experience self-hate, shame and desperation due to the atmosphere that the culture has created around fat (Hobbes, 2018). The media have a great responsibility for their representation of the world since media language can normalize certain ideas or ignore others. However, with language it is not always straightforward to say what is right and what is wrong, which is why it is important to negotiate and openly discuss complex themes in society.

Research does not support shaming. On the contrary, studies have shown that fat-shaming has the opposite effect, it is more harmful than helpful (Gunnars, 2022). For example, weight stigma is associated with stress, psychological disorders, unhealthy eating and lower physical activity, and apparently promotes weight gain (Hunger et al., 2015; Puhl, 2010). Therefore, not only is the stress caused by fat-shaming a psychological burden, but it is also an ineffective way to manage the “obesity crisis”. It seems that WHO’s plea for supportive environments and communities should be applied to culture as well.

2.1.3 Fat acceptance

Body positivity has its roots in the fat acceptance movement. The first documented fat activist moment comes from the 1960s (Cooper, 2016). The movement has its own lively history; it has certainly changed since the 60s, but it has not died out. According to Cooper (2016), fat activism is a complex and multifaceted social movement which is often wrongly reduced to certain assumptions that are taken to represent the whole movement. Fat activism is not only about body positivity, NAAFA (the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance), eating disorders, body image or health. Fat activism wants to change the way fat is perceived and discussed. Based on her research, Cooper (2016) suggests five categories to describe doing fat activism: political process activism, activist communities, fat activism as cultural work, micro fat activism and ambiguous activism (p. 53). Thus, fat activism operates on multiple different levels, from the individual to society.

In recent years, body positivity has become more popular through social media platforms like Instagram (Markula, 2022). Although originating in the context of the fat acceptance movement, the goal of today's body positivity is more extensive. Body positivity attacks the conventional, narrow beauty standards and celebrates different bodies regardless of shape or size (Markula, 2022). In short, it ideally embraces diversity in society when it comes to bodies. However, it seems that with popularity and more commercial interests the focus of the movement has shifted from the acceptance of all different bodies and the margins to a more traditional ideal of curvy, white women, and new ideas have started to gain interest, e.g. "body neutrality" which encourages to find peace with your body (Kessel, 2018). You do not need to love your body, which can be very difficult, in order to accept it.

2.2 Overweight in media

Overweight has been approached from various angles in terms of both the content and methods. What follows next are some previous studies on the representation of overweight in the media.

2.2.1 Recurring themes

Kyrölä (2021) discusses overweight in the media from the perspective of fat studies, and states that media representations "participate in producing understandings of what counts as 'normal' or fat overall, how we are expected to feel about such definitions, and how other categories of difference, such as gender and race, intersect with fat" (p. 106). She also points out that fatness is often presented as a health problem by the media; in this approach personal experience is not taken into consideration.

Carbone-Moane and Guise (2021) analyzed UK online newspaper articles about obesity in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 using thematic analysis and found three prevalent themes: lifestyle recommendations ('expert' advise on health), individual responsibility (to tackle obesity) and actors of change (celebrities and politicians as role models). In addition to familiar themes, the pandemic also triggered new forms of obesity discourse, which also have meaning for public health (Carbone-Moane & Guise, 2021).

Brookes and Baker (2022) employed corpus linguistics and qualitative discourse analysis to examine risk in relation to obesity in British newspapers in 2008-2017. They analyzed both the differences between the chosen newspapers and change over time. They found that in the British press obesity was understood both as a risk factor itself and as the result of other risk factors. There were differences in the reporting which were related to the format and political affiliation of the newspaper. For example, the left-leaning broadsheets were more likely to focus on the socio-political risk factors of obesity, whereas the right-leaning broadsheets focused on individual responsibility.

2.2.2 Weight stigma

Heuer et al. (2011) used content analysis to analyze images in online news stories about obesity between 2002-2009. They found that of those images that depicted overweight or obese people, over 70 percent were negative or stigmatizing, for example by portraying their subjects without heads or focusing on their lower bodies, and there was a significant difference between the portrayals of overweight or obese people and non-overweight individuals.

Cook and Wilson's study (2019) examined food and weight discourses in a North American parenting magazine published in 2016-2017 by employing critical discourse analysis. They found that food messaging is characterized by moralization and control, mothers are strongly encouraged to control their weight and that fatness in kids is unhealthy and there is a risk of them becoming fat adults. For them these discourses "represent broader social and cultural expectations related to fatness and foodways that reinforce the mother-blame discourse" (pp. 329-330).

Cain et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative thematic analysis on American and Australian online news articles and their comments about obesity published in 2013-2015, with a special focus on critical perspectives. They found three themes to describe the obesity discourse, concerns, blame and advise, which were all connected to each other and had their own subthemes and conflicting perspectives. They conclude: "Overall our findings show that attempts to disrupt the dominant anti-'obesity' rhetoric are indeed making their way into the public discourse, albeit primarily through the more informal channels afforded by comments sections of digital media" (p. 184).

3 METHODS AND MATERIALS

In this section, I will present the method of this study, discourse analysis, and outline the process of data collection.

3.1 Discourse analysis

There are various approaches to discourse analysis, as evident in *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (Gee & Handford, 2012). In addition, *discourse* has many definitions, in different fields and by different researchers. In this study I will be using the approach that Gee (2010) outlines in his introductory work, an approach that is both descriptive and critical. Discourse analysts study language-in-use (Gee, 2010). Studying language-in-use is important, since through language use we “make the world meaningful in certain ways and not in others” and “we shape, produce and reproduce the world through language in use. In turn the world we shape and help to create works in certain ways to shape us as humans” (Gee & Handford, 2012, p. 5). Thus, in discourse analysis we are not interested in just language but what is done with it and how.

According to Gee (2010) we use language to “construct or build seven things or seven areas of ‘reality’” (p.17), which he calls building tasks. The seven building tasks are: significance, practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems and knowledge. Gee (2010) presents tools or thinking devices that can be used to analyze the building tasks; these “tools of inquiry” are: situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, Discourses, and Conversations. In discourse analysis these tools are used to ask questions about the building tasks of language (Gee, 2010, p. 121). This would in an ideal situation mean asking 42 (that comes from the seven building tasks and the six tools of inquiry) questions about our data. However, as Gee (2010) points out:

For the most part, any real discourse analysis deals only with some of the questions. Nonetheless, analysts should be aware that the remaining questions still serve as an unfinished background to the analysis and it is fair game for any critic to raise one or more of them in questioning the validity of our analyses, which may mean we have to do more work. (p. 122)

It is good to be aware of such limitations as they also apply to the present study.

I have not yet defined the different building tasks and tools of inquiry listed above. In the scope of this study it would not be reasonable to give detailed explanations of them all, and some of the meanings can be inferred from the name alone. Nonetheless, I will elaborate on a few of the tools of inquiry that were found to be especially relevant in the analysis. All these definitions originate from Gee (2010). Situated meanings refer to “[t]he specific meanings words and phrases take on in actual context of use”, and social languages are varieties of language that are associated with social identities, which in turn may be linked to different social groups, roles, practices etc. (Gee, 2010, pp. 211-212). Figured worlds are simplified stories or images that describe what is typical or normal in relation to things, people, activities or interactions, e.g. a typical marriage or student, and this is strongly affected by people and context. With Conversations Gee (2010) means “debates in society or within specific social groups... that large numbers of people recognize, both in terms of what ‘sides’ there are to take in such debates and what sorts of people tend to be on each side” (p. 201).

I will now briefly describe the process of dealing with the data in this study. I started by skimming through the magazine articles to be examined for the study when I was collecting them. The first official step in the analysis was to read through all of the articles to get a general sense of their contents. Then, I marked words and phrases that signaled overweight, such as ‘overweight’, ‘fat’, ‘plus-size’, and ‘excess weight’. I examined these parts of the articles more closely and tried to find recurring themes and linguistic patterns. At this point I also employed the discourse analysis questions (the building tasks and tools of inquiry) in Gee’s approach (2010), took notes and thought about answers to these questions. Some questions were more relevant than others, which is normal. Based on these answers I considered what kinds of things in the articles were the most important and made initial categories for different discourses. Lastly, I identified main discourses, and I have picked several examples to illustrate them. In the analysis I was constantly switching between theory and data to assure that the main discourses would represent the data as a whole. The results are presented in section 4.

3.2 Data

The data for this study is a small corpus of online magazine articles. These articles were published in magazines that had a high circulation in the U.S. last year, i.e. popular American magazines (MagazineLine, 2023). The data was collected on July 6th, 2023. Four magazines in the top 10 list by circulation were selected that fit the criteria. That is, the magazines had to be accessible online, have a search engine and articles found easily by either of the keywords between 2020-2023. Two keywords, ‘overweight’ and ‘fat’, were used in the search so that the keyword alone would not affect the results. Four articles from each magazine were selected for the analysis, two of them found by the keyword ‘overweight’ and two by ‘fat’. Some magazines had more articles available on these topics than others, which was also affected by the keyword, and *Cosmopolitan* had only one result for ‘overweight’. Ultimately, the first articles in which weight was a significant topic and which were published in 2020-2023 were selected. Table 1 below shows how the articles spread throughout the time period. We can see that overweight is a recurring topic in American magazine articles. Sixteen articles in total were included in the corpus. The corpus consists only of text (excluding external social media content such as tweets and Instagram posts).

Magazine	Month/Year			
AARP	6/2020	2/2023	5/2023	6/2023
People	1/2020	9/2020	3/2021	11/2022
Good Housekeeping	3/2021	2/2022	2/2022	10/2022
Cosmopolitan	10/2020	2/2022	5/2022	1/2023

Table 1 Magazine articles and their time of publication

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As the result of the analysis three main discourses were found in the magazine articles: *overweight is a risk*, *being overweight is okay*, and *overweight is a social issue*. It should be noted that any article could include multiple discourses, but this is not specified here. The discourses are presented and discussed below.

4.1 Overweight is a risk

This discourse characterizes overweight as a potential health risk. Here are some examples of it:

Try to lose unhealthy weight before it has had time to wreak havoc on your brain, experts say. Weight loss doesn't need to be dramatic to have a big impact [AARP]

That said, having a higher weight for your frame can make your heart have to work harder, putting stress on your arteries and joints [Cosmopolitan]

All those extra pounds are the main reason that, despite enormous leaps forward in medications and procedures, heart disease remains the number one killer of both men and women in their 50s [AARP]

In this rather traditional approach overweight is presented as something that might cause various health problems or even death. The writers are informing the audience on the risks of being overweight and usually giving them advice on how to lead a “healthier” lifestyle. Lifestyle recommendations have been found in online media before, e.g. by Carbone-Moane and Guise (2021). The health risks are presented as more extreme when overweight comes in the form of belly fat:

That's far more dangerous than other types of body fat. More visceral fat means more than just a wider waistline; it means a higher risk for heart disease, diabetes and stroke [AARP]

Where you carry your weight may matter, too, says Dr. Mysore — some studies show that carrying much of your fat around your middle may be more dangerous than when it's situated in your hips, butt or legs because it wraps around important internal organs, which can do damage and trigger the development of chronic diseases over time [Good Housekeeping]

“But more than that, our waistline is our lifeline, particularly as we get older. You can have hip fat, butt fat and arm fat, and still be relatively healthy. But if you have belly fat, it will crush your health.” [AARP]

Even those without obesity can be at increased risk from visceral fat [AARP]

A ‘normal’ BMI does not preclude you from being metabolically “obese” with risk factors like high cholesterol and elevated blood sugar [Good Housekeeping]

The word choices are quite intense, perhaps even alarming: “dangerous”, “do damage”, “crush”. The harmfulness of belly fat is strongly emphasized and becomes especially clear in the last two examples above: belly fat can affect anyone, including those who are not overweight. When overweight is presented as a risk, it is understood as a substance or statistics, which is measured by BMI and the amount of body fat, and the writers favor certain ways of knowing. They refer to research and experts of many kinds, and the information is conveyed through popularized language, i.e. language that is easier for the audience to understand and fits the context of a magazine article. The health risks of overweight in this discourse are almost entirely physical. When mental health is a topic, it is about body dissatisfaction due to being overweight:

If at midlife you’re unhappy with a body that’s suddenly heavier, wider and softer, you aren’t alone [AARP]

“Belly fat robs us of confidence at any age,” says Cruise, who is 52, with a very flat belly [AARP]

In these examples, body dissatisfaction is a shared problem, something that is common in society. Overweight as a health risk is not a novel theme in media representations but has been noted before, for example by Brookes and Baker (2022) and Kyrölä (2021). If something is a risk, it naturally calls for prevention. Presenting overweight as a health risk implies that it is not a state but something to lose or to control. Many articles offer advice on how to lose weight or fat, and the advice focuses on individual responsibility in this project. All in all, the *overweight is a risk* discourse often seems to draw on a widely shared figured world of a typical overweight person that says being overweight is, generally speaking, unhealthy. At the same time it brings to mind larger debates in society about the relationship of weight and health, which will be discussed further in relation to the following discourses.

4.2 Being overweight is okay

This discourse describes the complex relationship between health and overweight as well as living life normally as an overweight person. It rejects the idea that being overweight is automatically something negative. The following examples illustrate this point in relation to health:

How many pounds you weigh isn't everything; there are plenty of people above the usual weight targets who are fully healthy [AARP]

Yes, excess weight is associated with many health conditions, but being overweight isn't a solid measure of health [Cosmopolitan]

More people, proud of their thick thighs, big booties and "fluffy" abs are unrolling their yoga mats, swinging their kettlebells and joining the cultural conversation about body ideals and feeling healthy [Good Housekeeping]

So what's the deal? Can you actually be healthy at a higher weight? Can you be fat *and* fit? The short answer is yes! [Good Housekeeping]

Lizzo is proud of her body the way it is, and wants her fellow "fat girls who eat healthy" to feel the same [People]

The discourse brings attention to the idea that weight does not define your health. It partly reflects the inaccuracy of BMI which is recognized by health authorities (e.g. WHO, 2021). Instead, lifestyle (e.g. being active and eating healthy) and how you feel seem to be more important factors. Overweight people are even described as being proud of their bodies, which ties to the message of body positivity. The focus of this discourse is mostly on people (as opposed to substance), and the writers refer to both experts and their own observations (seeing "more people" do certain things and a celebrity talk to her followers on social media). Of course, you can discuss overweight from this perspective with less focus on health. A couple articles report on what two overweight celebrities have posted on social media. From their point of view, being overweight is understood as a characteristic:

"For many fat people, myself included, there has been a long journey of acceptance in using the word 'fat' as a descriptor like any other — short, brunette, and white are also adjectives I use to describe me and none are good or bad, they just are," she said. "Let fat people call themselves fat and recognize it isn't a put-down." [People]

"What really bothers me are the fake doctors in the comments saying, 'Oh, you have this,' or 'You might have this condition.' No. What if I'm just fat? What if this is just my body?" she said. "Bodies are not all designed to be slim with a six-pack. You know what I mean?" [People]

"I detoxed my body and I'm still fat. I love my body and I'm still fat. I'm beautiful and I'm still fat. These things are not mutually exclusive," she said in a second post [People]

Here being overweight is not something negative, it describes people existing as overweight individuals. Both of these celebrities are actively opposing the use of the word "fat" as something that cannot include positive associations, which becomes clear both from the content of the statements and from the fact that they use "fat" as an adjective to describe themselves. With their rhetoric they are participating in fat activism (see Cooper, 2016). The writers of the articles have decided to report on social media posts; thus they give value to personal experiences of being overweight. Overall, by using this discourse the writers are informing the audience but at the same time they are acknowledging and (more or less) molding the figured worlds that equal being overweight with negative assumptions. This activates debates about things such as weight and health, the fat acceptance movement and beauty standards.

At this point it is crucial to notice that the discourses presented in this study are by no means unrelated to each other, but this distinction is rather made for the sake of clarity. You cannot support, discuss or question ideas about overweight if you do not know what kinds of beliefs it calls forth or what is taken to be "typical" or "normal". For example, expressing that you want to use the word "fat" in a neutral way presupposes that there exist negative connotations for it. The discourses here are intertwined through shared stories about the world (and people, actions etc.) and relevant discussions in society. These are not universal but shaped by different social and cultural contexts. These points are important to keep in mind with all of the discourses. Nonetheless, the final discourse *overweight is a social issue* overtly brings overweight into the realm of societal expectations.

4.3 Overweight is a social issue

This discourse describes how overweight is connected to society at large and how this in turn can affect the lives of overweight people. Weight stigma was a prevalent theme in the data, and it was mentioned in some form in most of the articles. Overweight people are described as facing struggles in their personal lives due to attitudes to and assumptions about being overweight.

I am treated better when I'm thinner, but I live more authentically when I'm fat. It's exhausting. I still crave that approval from society, but ... [Good Housekeeping]

"It's a vicious cycle," Safer says. "You might think weight stigma makes you thinner, but over time people make worse choices." [AARP]

Whereas society standards also insist that plus-size bodies are unacceptable and inappropriate because they deviate from bigoted Western beliefs of what women's bodies are supposed to look like—I call bullshit [Cosmopolitan]

"It was my closest friends that were the ones that bullied me the most and made fun of me for being overweight and all these kind of things." [People]

I know this is a shockingly stark example of dating while fat, but I think it's rare to find a fat woman who hasn't had an experience that is similarly horrific [Good Housekeeping]

Weight stigma is recognized as influencing many different areas of life, e.g. social relationships, feeling beautiful in a bigger body, and general wellbeing. The experiences call for expressive language: *exhausting*, *bullshit*, *horrific*. These examples show various sides to weight stigma; body positivity can be difficult if society does not accept your body, stigma is not helpful, stigma is contextualized (Western beauty standards). The last two examples present weight stigma as deeply personal: your closest friends can be the bullies and your dates may treat you badly. The highly personal dating story actually points out that the writer's experience is not an exception; she hints that "fat women" as a group know what she is talking about.

In a few articles the writers discuss the representation of overweight people by the entertainment industry. There is an overt wish for more versatile depictions of overweight, the lack of which is seen to be affected by weight stigma:

Corden said it's a problem that stems from how society treats overweight people. "If someone came from another planet and put on the television, you would think that people who are big or overweight don't have sex," he said. "They don't fall in love. They're friends of people who fall in love. They're probably not that bright, but they're a good time, and they're not as valuable as people who are really good-looking." [People]

With a few rare exceptions, the most visible depictions of fat bodies on television and film position them as slovenly, incompetent, or objects of mockery and pity. Often, those depictions don't even include actual fat people. Instead, they use thinner actors in fat suits to perform roles that further the idea that fat bodies are to be ridiculed [Cosmopolitan]

The scene, which amplified the pressures society puts on people to be thin, quickly became a conversation starter for fans online as they participated in the discourse surrounding fatphobia and eating disorders [Good Housekeeping]

In the past five years, a small yet steady swell of dynamic fat, queer, middle-aged women and our stories have seized the limelight for what feels like the first time in television history—and I couldn't be more thrilled [Cosmopolitan]

Both the actors and consumers are voicing their opinions on how overweight people should be represented, which means that for many this issue is deeply personal. They are advocating for roles that do not reduce overweight people to stereotypes. In the second example this call for authentic roles is also physically present since the writer criticizes fat suits and not including "actual fat people". Being overweight is understood as an experience that cannot be imitated by putting on a suit. The last example refers to "our stories" and with it supports the idea that representation matters. Thus the versatile depictions include not only authentic stories and bodies but also other parts of identity with which overweight is intertwined, such as sexual orientation and age.

So, the latest example above illustrates another point, namely how weight is connected to other parts of social existence. Age, gender, race and socioeconomic status in relation to overweight are present in the data, as the following examples show:

It shook me because it felt like a new brand of rejection: Even men who *don't* think fat women are gross won't date me? [Good Housekeeping]

For years, Black creators, fat creators, and fat Black creators have been speaking out about the actual racism and fatphobia constantly displayed on social media apps [Cosmopolitan]

There are several reasons your weight may be snowballing in your 50s, and it's (mostly) not the fault of bad habits [AARP]

Corden wanted to emphasize that weight is not always a choice [People]

We also know that nutrition can play a role in body weight, but many people who are interested in eating in ways that dietitians suggest could lead to a lower weight cannot afford to, or may not have the time ability to prepare or buy fresh, healthy meals all the time, Savage points out [Good Housekeeping]

Being overweight is presented as another obstacle in life. In addition to, for example, misogyny in the dating scene and racism online on social media, being overweight makes the situation worse. The last three examples show how being overweight is “not always a choice” that depends on the individual but is itself affected by factors such as age and socioeconomic status.

In the *overweight is a social issue* discourse the writers refer to multiple ways of knowing: experts, personal or heard experiences, comments from celebrities, experience as audience. Individual experience is centered, though. This does not mean that it is less valuable knowledge. When it comes to weight stigma, the line between expert and personal knowledge might be fuzzy, since for overweight people weight stigma is part of their lived realities (which can be vastly different from each other). In this discourse, the underlining story seems to be, whether it is accepted or resisted, that society thinks negatively of overweight people and that it is normal or common to encounter weight stigma if you are overweight. Several social discussions are referred to, e.g. bullying, beauty standards and media representation.

Weight stigma has been found in previous studies, e.g. in relation to mothers (Cook & Wilson, 2019) and in online news images (Heuer et al., 2011) and articles and comments (Cain et al., 2017). Critical perspectives were also found by Cain et al. (2017): “Overall our findings show that attempts to disrupt the dominant anti-‘obesity’ rhetoric are indeed making their way into the public discourse, albeit primarily through the more informal channels afforded by comments sections of digital media” (p. 184). In the present study weight stigma was a recurring theme which was openly addressed and criticized in the articles themselves.

4.4 Discourses of overweight

As already mentioned, the three discourses of overweight (*overweight is a risk, being overweight is okay, overweight is a social issue*) are connected to each other. They intersect and partly also contradict and support each other, and through them certain assumptions about the world are repeated, changed and criticized. These discourses can be understood in their context of American (or western) online magazine articles of the 2020s. Although studies may differ (for example in article type or methodology), it was noted that similar themes have been found in previous research on media representation of overweight. The results of the analysis are also explained by modern realities and discussions which have to do with the western context to which the United States belongs. This includes the prevalence and visibility of overweight, perceptions of health, existing weight stigma and movements like body positivity and body neutrality. In the form of the three discourses, which make up the results of this study, we have detected different tendencies that reflect quite a lot of this complexity that is found in society.

5 CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the representations of overweight in recent online articles published in popular American magazines. The role of language in producing meanings and the influence of language use by media was recognized from the beginning, and so was the potential for nuanced discussions around overweight. The purpose was not to impose rules for language use but to contribute to the ongoing research of overweight discourse in media. By applying discourse analysis three main discourses were found in the articles. These are *overweight is a risk*, *being overweight is okay*, and *overweight is a social issue*. These discourses reflect quite a lot of the complexity that is associated with being overweight in a modern society.

Nonetheless, there were limitations to this study. First, the small size of the corpus (obtained by using two search words) does not allow for generalizations. Although different discourses were found, the magazines were not compared in this respect. This means that there were most likely differences in the representation of overweight that could be explained by differences in the target audience (e.g. young or old) and purpose (e.g. lifestyle, celebrities) of the magazines. These differences between magazines were not taken into consideration, but examples from each magazine were purposefully included in the analysis. Such comparisons would not be reasonable with a small dataset.

Second, the analysis method chosen, a qualitative discourse analysis, had its advantages and disadvantages. On one hand the method was slow and time-consuming, even with the small dataset. Additionally, for the scope of this study not all questions could be answered in a detailed way. On the other hand this qualitative approach made it possible to look closely at the data, which also gives more validity for the interpretation of the researcher. This is important because the qualitative analysis relied on it.

This study is, of course, restricted to a specific time and place. Regardless of the limitations, it offers a snapshot of the representations of overweight in American online magazines and shows possible trends that could be further explored in future research. For example, research could be conducted on a larger corpus, preferably with more articles from a wider selection of magazines, and quantitative methods could be used to support

qualitative discourse analysis to render this endeavor more manageable and generally applicable. It would be reasonable to consider including images in the analysis as well. Only text was analyzed in this study. It was a deliberate choice to focus on written language, but since images are a natural part of articles and can explain or even add to their written content, this would be an interesting addition to the analysis. Lastly, the focus here was on media language in a specific western country. The representation of overweight should be explored in different areas to get a broader view on the issue.

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