


Fatphobia: a gender issue? Analysis of the news coverage in elpais.com and lavanguardia.com

La gordofobia, ¿una cuestión de género? Análisis de la cobertura de elpais.com y lavanguardia.com



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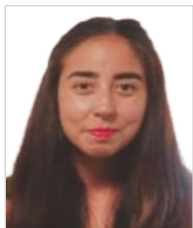
How to cite this article:

Marauri-Castillo, I.; Rodríguez-González, M. M. and Vargas-Veleta, Y. (2026). Fatphobia: a gender issue? Analysis of the news coverage in elpais.com and lavanguardia.com. *Doxa Comunicación*, 42, pp. 207-231.


<https://doi.org/10.31921/doxacom.n42a2670>



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ORCID: 0009-0009-6143-0841

Received: 14/05/2024 - Accepted: 09/09/2024 - Early access: 07/10/2024 - Published: 01/01/2026

Recibido: 14/05/2024 - Aceptado: 09/09/2024 - En edición: 07/10/2024 - Publicado: 01/01/2026

Abstract:

Fatphobia is seen as a stigma to which fat people are subjected, and the term has gained prominence in the media in recent years. In this article, we have analysed content published on the subject in 2022 in two of the main Spanish digital newspapers, elpais.com and lavanguardia.com, using a multidisciplinary methodology that includes content analysis and framing theory, while bearing in mind the gender perspective. The authorship of the content, the sections where they are placed, the images, the protagonists, the type of framing employed, and the use of language are the main aspects addressed. The study suggests that the news coverage of fatphobia is dominated by episodic framing without depth or context, which is written, focused on, starring, and portraying mainly women. Among the most relevant conclusions is the need to address this problem through thematic analysis using expert sources and more contextualisation, while keeping in mind that we are faced with a gender discourse in which women are both the object of victimisation and the only vindicating voices.

Keywords:

Fatphobia; framing; information; gender perspective; the press; stigmatisation.

Resumen:

La gordofobia, entendida como la estigmatización a la que están sometidas las personas gordas, es un concepto que ha ganado presencia en los medios de comunicación. En este texto se analizan los contenidos publicados al respecto en 2022 en dos de los principales diarios digitales españoles, elpais.com y lavanguardia.com, desde una metodología multidisciplinar que incluye el análisis de contenido y la teoría del framing, y teniendo presente la perspectiva de género. La autoría de los contenidos, las secciones que ocupan, las imágenes, los sujetos protagonistas, el tipo de encuadre utilizado, así como el uso del lenguaje son los principales aspectos investigados. El análisis sugiere que la cobertura informativa de la gordofobia está dominada por un encuadre episódico, sin profundización ni contexto, redactado, enfocado, protagonizado e ilustrado mayoritariamente con perfiles femeninos. Entre las conclusiones más destacadas está la necesidad de abordar este problema desde un enfoque temático, recurriendo a más fuentes expertas y una mayor contextualización, así como la evidencia de estar ante un discurso de género donde las mujeres son a la vez el objeto de victimización y las únicas voces reivindicativas.

Palabras clave:

Gordofobia; encuadre; información; perspectiva de género; prensa; estigmatización.

1. Introduction

Obesity is a concept that refers to the excessive accumulation of fat that leads to a wide range of health problems. The standard for identifying excessive weight is the Body Mass Index (BMI), created by Belgian scientist Adolphe Quetelet in the 19th century for insurance actuaries. The index is obtained by dividing a person's weight by the square of their height. This reference, which is considered a medical parameter, disregards genetic, cultural and even geographical aspects, and instead measures diverse

individuals by the same criteria, ignoring the fact that socio-economic level, gender, age, and ethnic origin are explanatory variables, not only because the opportunities for eating and managing health are very different according to these variables, but also because eating practices depend on numerous micro and macro structural factors (García Arnaiz, 2011: 25).

Research on the news coverage of obesity has addressed different aspects such as placing blame, or the most common frames and themes when facing this problem (Marín-Murillo, Marauri-Castillo and Rodríguez-González, 2024; Martín Vicario, Bustos Díaz and Nicolas-Sans, 2024; Argiñano and Gurrutxaga, 2024; Armentia, and Marín, 2020; Baker, et.al., 2020; Van Hooft, et. al., 2017). Childhood obesity has also been the subject of study in recent years (Miralles, Chilet-Rosell and Hernández-Águado, 2021), in view of its prevalence among children. Currently, diverse studies are being carried out (Mathieu Bolh, 2021; Shekar and Popking, 2020; García Arnaiz, 2011), which highlighted the importance of economic and social factors, both in addressing the causes of obesity and its consequences.

Regardless of the causes and where to place the blame, obesity is acknowledged by national and international institutions as a growing trend that requires immediate action (WHO, 2024). As such, the media emphasise the health consequences of being overweight, such as cardiovascular problems, hepatitis, certain cancers, musculoskeletal disorders, and even premature death. Psychosocial approaches to the issue have also acknowledged the multiple factors involved, including environmental, cultural and, above all, economic determinants, which are being addressed in order to understand how social and economic inequalities have an impact on higher rates of obesity in both high-income and developing countries (Argiñano and Gurrutxaga-Rekondo, 2023). In spite of this, a significant percentage of news coverage continues to link the responsibility for obesity, as well as solutions to solving the problem, to personal choices and attitudes toward nutrition, habits, and lifestyle, as if all of these factors were the result of freely-made decisions (Camacho, Goikoetxea and Marauri, 2023).

In this paper, the authors do not want to focus on these aspects, which have been extensively addressed already, but rather to focus on the way language is used and the individuals who adopt such language in order to reveal the main source of stigmatisation, fatphobia, and the reactions it provokes.

Although the Spanish neologism *gordofobia* is not officially recognised by the Royal Spanish Academy [RAE], it has become popular both in common speech and in the media. It is a translation of the English term “fatphobia”, which was first used in 1984 by Robinson, Bacon and O’Reilly (Allende and Allende, 2020; Álvarez, 2015: 37), a term that now has synonyms such as *fat shaming* and *fat shame*.

Historical analysis shows that women have suffered patriarchal oppression through the control of their bodies (Halse, CH., 2009; Bordo, S., 2003). They have been subjected to all kinds of disciplinary actions and treated as objects that can always be improved. The tyranny and violence exercised over women’s bodies makes fatphobia a variant of this domination. As Guerrero Salazar points out, a high percentage of fat discrimination found on social sites is suffered by the female gender, which has led feminist platforms to spread the neologism *fatphobia*, through which they denounce the fact that a rejection of fat people mainly affects women (2020: 96).

In our society, obesity is portrayed as a body stigma, which is impossible to hide in social situations, yet ironically it is almost completely hidden in media portrayals. The stigma of fat people includes stereotyping that depicts them as lazy, lacking self-control, and weak. To counteract such negativity, audio-visual fiction has added kindness, affability, and even a sense of

humour to the characters of fat people. Goffman goes even further and asserts that stigma theory operates as an ideology to explain the inferiority of stigmatised individuals (Goffman, 2006:15).

Specifically, fatphobia can be expressed through different behaviours, such as segregation in the workplace and education, in addition to health care discrimination, a decline in interpersonal relationships, and stigmatisation in the media, with the resulting denial of basic rights to those affected (Morán and Terrasa, 2022: 1). According to Piñeyro (2016), all these problems can be seen in the areas of social, institutional, and cultural discrimination.

In reaction to this stigma, fat activism emerged in the United States in the 1960s and later spread to Latin America, with a strong presence in Chile, Mexico and Argentina. Fat activism and different scientific approaches have cast doubt on the linear relationship between body weight, diet, physical exercise, and health, claiming that this concept is inconsistent, while at the same time refuting BMI (body mass index) as a universal anthropometric measure (Kohan, 2020: 402).

While the term obese, for both men and women, refers to converting what is considered being *fat* into a pathology, the word *fat* has been transformed into a derogatory adjective. Despite this situation, or perhaps because of it, the term is now in the process of an attempted vindication: Identifying oneself as fat, as certain feminist viewpoints proclaim, “is a political necessity today” (Masson: 227). In fact, on Spanish-speaking websites dedicated to feminist activism, there is an awareness that language intervention is a social construction of the signs of identity, which is why terms such as *fatphobia* (aimed at either men or women), and specifically use of *fat woman*, are becoming vindicated by being stripped of negative connotations (Guerrero, 2020: 106). According to Baker, “The only negative connotation of this word is what has been built around it... We don’t need to stop using the word *fat*; we need to stop the hatred that our world connects to the word *fat*” (2015: 3). Anti-fatphobia activism has been fuelled from the beginning by the feminist movement, and in Spain one of the first platforms was *Stop Gordofobia* [stop fatphobia] (2011), founded by Carlos Savoie and Magdalena Piñeyro, the latter of whom is the author of *Stop Gordofobia* and *Las panzas subversas* [subversive pot bellies] (Piñeyro, 2016). From there, different initiatives such as *Cuerpos Empoderados* [empowered bodies] (2014), and the *Ramonak* (2016) continued to emerge.

From a feminist point of view, fatphobia is presented as a new language of classism and racism (Tovar, 2018), which demands a response that must occasionally go beyond the discourse of pride and acceptance in order to challenge the culture of diets, physical exercise, and surgery – in short, to avoid pathologising fatness and the feelings of guilt that result from it.

In the field of science, voices have also been raised along the same lines. In 2020, in the journal *Nature Medicine*, one hundred representatives from renowned scientific organisations that specialise in obesity published a declaration known as the Joint International Consensus Statement for Ending the Stigma of Obesity. In the statement, they describe and condemn different attitudes and beliefs that contribute to the discrimination and stigmatisation of obese people by debunking certain myths about this group with scientific evidence. They claim that the media have fomented stereotypes of fat people as lazy and gluttonous, lacking in willpower and self-discipline, and these scholars have denounced the media’s role when spreading messages, one of which is that diet and physical exercise are the only adequate therapies to combat obesity, which they say lacks scientific evidence (Rubino et al., 2020: 489).

From the academic world, the so-called *Fat Studies* appeared in the 1950s in the United States, which focused attention on the body, contemplating the ideals of beauty, medicalising nutrition, and standardizing the healthy body in biomedical and

moral terms (Barrientos and Silva, 2020: 153). As these academics consider that fatness is becoming a science, language once again takes on a key role: “With language, they are trying to vindicate fatness as another possible body shape that should not be pointed to as pathological, undesirable, and unhealthy’ (Energici and Acosta, 2020:10).

Recent studies on the stigma of fat bodies in the media, whether in the digital sphere (Camacho, Goikoetxea and Marauri, 2023; Cooper, 2021; Blanes, 2017; Fernández-Ramírez and Baleriola, 2012), or in audio-visual fiction (Kyrölä, 2021, 2016; De Sousa and Mikos, 2020; Donovan, 2019), highlight the long road ahead for “the deconstruction of these narrative and imaginary patterns, in a process of recovery, reassignment, and offering new meaning to a specific body type and its role in communication” (De Sousa and Mikos, 2020: 124).

2. Objectives and hypothesis

Based on the assumptions above and a deliberate selection of the units of analysis, the main objective is to reveal how fatphobia is covered in the digital press in Spain.

The specific objectives are as follows:

- O1. Discover the extent of fatphobia in cyber newspapers.
- O2. Describe the sections where this type of content most often appears.
- O3. Reveal the type of framing, either thematic or episodic, used for the texts.
- O4. Make a sum of the number and gender of the authors.
- O5. Identify the protagonists of the information and, as a result, those who wear the label of either *fat man* or *fat woman*.
- O6. Quantify and categorise the images published.
- O7. Analyse the use of language and assess its connotations.
- O8. Determine whether the media address fatphobia as another form of discrimination against women.

With the above objectives in mind, the hypotheses to be tested are the following:

- H1. Fatphobia is a problem that receives significant coverage by the press, especially in the sections focused on Health.
- H2. There is a balance between thematic and episodic coverage.
- H3. The authorship of the texts is equally divided between men and women.
- H4. The terms used prioritise their most negative connotation without distinction of gender.
- H5. Women are more frequently the protagonists of the information and images than men, since both social and self-imposed control over their bodies affects them, especially in the case of women. Consequently, fatphobia can be seen as another type of gender violence.

3. Methodology

The digital media examined were *lavanguardia.com* and *elpais.com*, both of which are benchmark dailies at the national level in Spain. In selecting these two newspapers, we considered the place of publication (Madrid in the case of *elpais.com*, and Barcelona in the case of *lavanguardia.com*), their editorial line (centre-left for *elpais.com* and centre-right for *lavanguardia.com*), as well as the readership of each. In December 2022, *elpais.com* had 17.3 million unique users, and *lavanguardia.com* had 12.5 million, according to data from GfK Dam¹, the official agency for audience metrics in Spain. This makes *elpais.com* the most widely read newspaper, with *lavanguardia.com* being the daily with the largest readership outside the national capital.

To select the units of analysis, the search engines of the newspapers themselves were used by employing keywords such as “fat man”, “fat woman”, and “fatphobia”. The search covered the entire year of 2022. By using these terms as references in the search, the aim was to focus the sample on content that specifically addressed the issue.

Next, we carried out a content analysis (Krippendorff, 1990), both quantitative and qualitative, for which a file was prepared with both descriptive and analytical items. This analysis included the date of publication, specific medium, author, the most relevant sources, and whether or not the concept of “fatphobia” was present in both the headlines and the text. This could be either an explicit presence of the term *fatphobia*, such as attitudes directly related to the word, or an implicit presence, such as attitudes that fit with the term but are not directly linked to it, regardless of whether the word is specifically used.

In approaching this research, the authors have also considered the gender perspective, which is seen as an expansive theory that encompasses categories, hypotheses, interpretations, and knowledge related to the wide array of historical phenomena constructed around gender (Lagarde, 1996: 23). Thus, we have detailed not only the gender of those who authored the information, but also the gender and social role of both the male and female protagonists of the content, as well as the images used to portray them. The texts have also been analysed according to this criterion in order to highlight whether they include a gender perspective when dealing with the issue.

It was also of interest to reveal whether the content used a news frame that was episodic or thematic. Based on framing theory, and specifically on the contributions of authors such as Iyengar (1991), and De Vreese and Semetko (2001), the first differentiation was established between *issue-specific* news frames and *generic* news frames. The former address very specifically and in detail the typical aspects of events or topics, while the latter refer to a summary of various topics that can occur in different cultural contexts over time. Among the latter, there are two categories: episodic and thematic (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). As defined by Sádaba (2008: 107), episodic framing is linked to a specific event regarding a certain person, yet without a political and social context. On the other hand, as thematic framing places more emphasis on context, the sources are more specialised and can address both causes and consequences.

In addition, the corpus analysed has been extended to look at the media’s use of the terms “fat man” and “fat woman”. Following on from studies by Fernández-Ramírez and Bareliora (2012), and Guerrero (2020), yet restricting the analysis to these two

¹ Information gathered in <https://dircomfidencial.com/medios/el-pais-cierra-el-ano-como-lider-en-audiencia-de-la-prensa-digital-20230117-0403/> Information gathered in.

terms, the aim was to discover the following: Who are the subjects of this qualifier: men, women, or both? What is the approach used: positive, negative, or neutral? What are the metaphors, euphemisms, or associations surrounding these terms?

The aim was to show how language can either stigmatise or, conversely, become an instrument of empowerment, yet bearing in mind that social portrayals are also shaped through communication and language, which is a construct that can lead to the creation of categories that culminate in stereotyping certain groups (Moscovici, 1998; Guareschi and Jovchelovitch, 1995).

4. Results

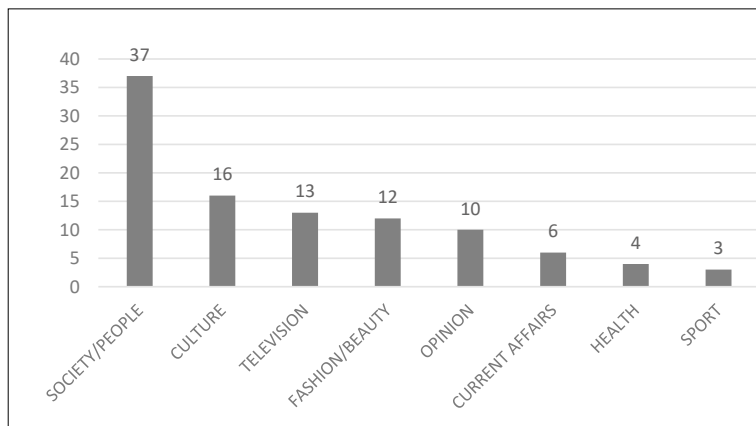
4.1. *Fatphobia by section*

The corpus of this study was limited to 142 texts, 56 from *elpais.com* and 86 from *lavanguardia.com*, which include the terms *fat man*, *fat woman*, and *fatphobia*. It should be noted that the number of texts would have increased considerably if the concepts *obese man/woman* and *obesity* had been added, as evidenced by the fact that in the same period, a search in *lavanguardia.com* involving these terms yielded 346 pieces of content. These data confirm the intuitive belief that although they are not mutually exclusive, on rare occasions terms such as *fat man*, *fat woman*, and *obesity* can be found together in the same content. Yet the fact is, in the sample selected, this happened only in 10 texts.

Of the 142 texts extracted, the number of content items that refer to *fatphobia*, either explicitly or implicitly, reached a total of 101. The term *fatphobia* is addressed explicitly in 63 content pieces (31 in *elpais.com* and 32 in *lavanguardia.com*) and implicitly in the remaining 38 (11 in *elpais.com* and 27 in *lavanguardia.com*). Fatphobia is an issue that is mainly addressed in thematic headings such as Society and People, which covers various sections in both media, such as S, Fashion, Celebrities, People, Life Style, Society, and *Magazine Luchadoras*, which focus on reporting about the lives of people who are famous or popular. In this category, there were 37 pieces of content, there are many testimonies of singers, actresses, models, and influencers who have suffered rejection, criticism, or exclusion for having non-standard bodies: “Fame, excess weight, and mistreatment: The intolerable recollections of Gabourey Sidibe, the unforgettable star of *Precious* (*elpais.com*, 13/04/2022); or “Alicia Silverstone, who gets so fed up with those who call her fat that she makes a crude gesture’ (*lavanguardia.com*, 10/01/2022).

In the Culture section, 16 texts related to history, literature, theatre and the cinema were collected. The considerable number of texts in this field is due to its coinciding with the premiere of the film *Cerdita*, directed by Carlota Pereda and starring Laura Galán. The film is a thriller set in summertime in a village in La Mancha, Spain, where the main character, who is clearly overweight, is bullied by other young girls in the village. Interviews with the lead actress, director, and casting director highlight the prevalence of fatphobia in society. The feature film was defined in *elpais.com* as “a cocktail of horror, bullying, social reflection, fatphobia testimony, and a portrait of Spain” (*elpais.com*, 25/01/2022). Other content items highlight the nearly total lack of visibility to which fat people are subjected due to the dearth of body diversity in audio-visual portrayals, as well as the scant number of role models in this field. Thus, *lavanguardia.com* (27/02/022) reports on the demands made by actresses such as Kate Winslet and Emma Thompson to appear on screen as they really are.

Graph 1. Fatphobia by section



Source: compiled by the authors

In the Television section, there are 13 items that refer to fatphobia. In most cases, the information refers to comments made on social sites or on the sets of certain programmes that focus on the excess weight of different public figures: “Carmen Lomana causes unease in *Secret Story* with her fatphobic comments” (*lavanguardia.com*, 25/02/2022).

In sections associated with Fashion and Beauty, 12 texts related to fatphobia were published. Some of the topics covered include the rejection of fat bodies, professional obstacles in the field of fashion, the difficulty in finding sizes that fit different types of bodies, and especially eating disorders associated with social and personal judgements about one’s own body.

In the Opinion section, we found three letters to the editor and seven other articles. Most of the latter seven items were written by women in which, from different perspectives, they address the social and personal judgements that women are subjected to in their daily lives for not fulfilling standard body aesthetics. One example is the controversy over an advertising campaign by a well-known sports brand that presented women with a wide range of body types. The advert unleashed a firestorm on social networks with accusations of fatphobia and the defence of fatness, which was echoed in a column by Noelia Ramírez in *elpais.com* (28/04/2022).

Two opinion columns written by men focus on school bullying, yet they only indirectly hinted that the insults associated with an adolescent’s body were part of the bullying reported.

With six news items, the sections linked to Current Affairs such as International, Local, and Political information, deal more superficially with fatphobia. However, in 2022 the bullying suffered by a child at school went viral through the images that the child’s brother uploaded to social sites showing the taunts he was subjected to by classmates on his birthday. Although the term *fatphobia* does not appear in any part of this item, the version of the happy birthday that the other children sang to the little boy at his party literally said, “as fat and happy as a walrus”. In a significant percentage of the news items analysed, fatphobia

can therefore be interpreted as another type of bullying, which emphasises the victim's physical appearance, especially when the victim is a minor.

In the Sport section, there are only three texts that address fatphobia. The demands of sport practice often lead to abuse that is verbalised through insults, an example of which is the Italian rhythmic gymnastics team, which was denounced for abusive practices in which some of the girls were mocked for their weight (*elpais.com*, 04/11/2022). In other cases, the sportswomen themselves perceive their own obesity, such as cyclist Omer Shapira (*elpais.com*, 13/10/2022), or cricket player Sahne Warne, who were insulted for gaining weight and were periodically forced to follow strict diets (*lavanguardia.com*, 09/03/2022). In all three examples, both male and female athletes were affected physically and psychologically.

There are three items related to Health, which include the sub-headings Health & Well-being, Science and Matter, and Screening. Although the texts approach obesity from a multi-factor perspective, they allude to fatphobia directly or indirectly. In *elpais.com*, the health problems of an anonymous woman undergoing a comprehensive treatment was also reported. This text gives a voice to health professionals and nutritionists (*elpais.com*, 18/09/2022), without leaving aside the added suffering caused by social criticism in the form of insults about their fatness. Another text addresses the prevalence of childhood obesity in Spain, which ranks third among European countries, according to a study carried out by the Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (COSI), the results of which were shared by the European Regional World Health Organisation (WHO). Both the health and physical problems reflected in these data do not hide the underlying psychological repercussions that result from hatred directed at fat bodies. Published in *lavanguardia.com* (10/11/2022), the article mentioned above is one of the most comprehensive in the sample. It includes a video by a well-known influencer, Andrea Compton, who reviews the stereotype of fat women in audio-visual fiction and denounces their lack of presence.

In the pages related to Health and Well-being in *elpais.com*, the features of what is known as 'aesthetic violence' are described, which is social pressure linked to the aesthetic criteria of slimness, youth, and beauty. As this type of aggression is perpetrated mainly against women, it has a clear sexist undertone that leads to eating disorders and psychological distress: "Aesthetic violence: the price of being beautiful" (*elpais.com*, 16/07/2022). Also in this section, columnist Juanjo Villalba (*elpais.com*, 04/09/2022) warns of the presence of micro-fatphobias. According to Ferrán Giménez, lecturer at the *Universitat Oberta de Catalunya*, "despite not being a physical manifestation of violence, micro-phobias have a tremendous capacity to create stress, anguish, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness in the people who are targeted".

4.2. Episodic and thematic framing

Only 28 of the 101 texts have a thematic frame. In the Opinion section, all the texts are of this type, yet in the Sport and Television sections, the proportion is completely reversed.

Table 1. Proportion of thematic and episodic frames by section

Section	Framing			
	Thematic		Episodic	
	%	No.	%	No.
Society & People	16%	6	84%	31
Culture	12%	2	88%	14
Television	0%	0	100%	13
Fashion & Beauty	55%	6	45%	5
Opinion	100%	10	0%	0
Current Affairs	14%	1	86%	6
Health	75%	3	25%	1
Sport	0%	0	100%	3

Source: compiled by the authors

Health is the section with the third highest percentage of content published with a thematic focus, 75% (3), preceded by Fashion and Beauty at 55% (6), and Society/People (also with 6), which in this case represents 16%. In Culture and Current Affairs we found two texts and one text, respectively.

These data reflect the extent to which fatphobia, in 72% of the cases analysed is subject to specific events that explicitly or implicitly suggest discriminatory or humiliating treatment towards a specific person, generally a celebrity, because they are fat.

There are several cases of this type of treatment, including the following: The airline that refused to provide a seat to a plus-size model (*lavanguardia.com* 24/12/2022); the singer who was reproached for being fat (*elpais.com*, 30/08/2022); the fatphobic comments of a television presenter (*lavanguardia.com*, 20/04/2022); the recollections of an actress (*elpais.com*, 13/04/2022); and an arguably controversial fatphobic message in a video clip by singer Taylor Swift (*lavanguardia.com*, 30/10/2022). In none of these cases were the cited sources experts on the issue, beyond the words of the protagonists of the news item, and the information was rarely placed in context.

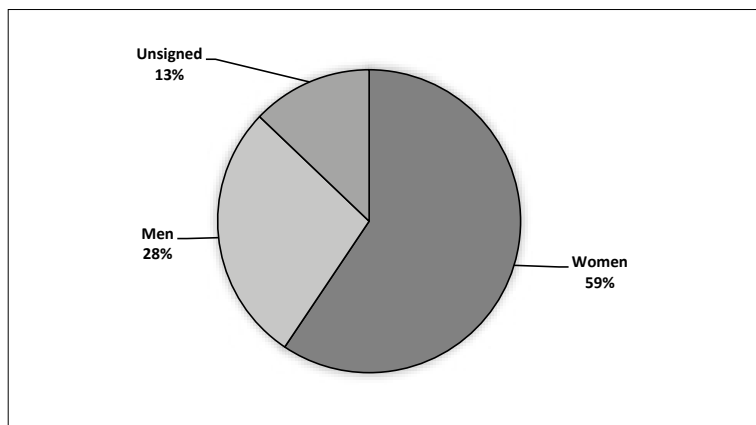
In 28% of the content with a thematic focus, the situation is not very different. Despite placing more attention on the context, as well as the causes and consequences of the events reported, few of the texts include the opinions of experts in their reflections. In fact, reports issued by the WHO regarding obesity are cited only twice, and scientific and health sources, although more numerous, are concentrated in three articles. The same is true of sources that specifically analyse the portrayal and impact of fatphobia in social and psychological research, as well as those who speak out from the viewpoint of anti-fatphobia activism, philosophy, literature, and journalism, or in their capacity as influencers.

This scarcity of specialised sources means that very few of the items analysed, including those that fall within the thematic category, address the causes, consequences and solutions arising from discrimination against fat bodies with sufficient depth and diversity of perspectives.

4.3. *Fatphobia is a women's issue*

Of the 101 pieces analysed, 28% were written by men, 59% by women, and 13% were unsigned. These data do not vary substantially in percentage terms if we look only at the texts (63) in which fatphobia is dealt with more explicitly. Thus, 60% (38) are by women authors, 26% (16) are by men, and 14% (9) are unsigned.

Graph 2. Authorship



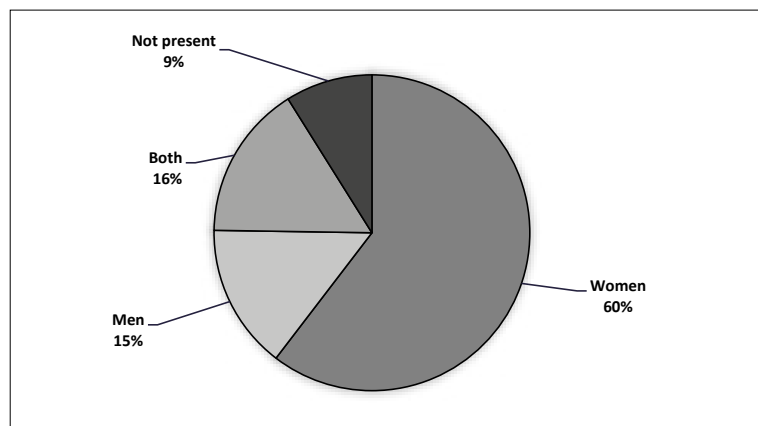
Source: compiled by the authors

We cannot ignore the fact that the greater presence of female bylines in the sections traditionally known as *soft news* is widely documented in various studies (North, 2016; Bezunartea et al. 2014; García Gordillo, 2010). In the case at hand, these are also the sections where most of the content on fatphobia is located. Although slight changes have been observed in the profession, women are generally assigned topic areas linked to consumption, well-being, lifestyle, beauty, education, and the arts, as pointed out by North (2016).

In 48 of these texts, a gender perspective is present, yet not in the remaining 52%. The criterion for this distinction has to do with explicit or implicit references to women as the most common victims of weight discrimination. In fact, authors such as sociologist Esther Pineda do not hesitate to include fatphobia as merely one additional manifestation of the aesthetic violence perpetrated against women. In the words of Pineda, this violence is “the collection of narratives, portrayals, and practices that exert pressure and different types of discrimination against women in order to force them to comply with the prevailing standards of beauty. This social pressure has physical and psychological consequences on women and is based on four premises: sexism, gerontophobia, racism, and fatphobia” (*lavanguardia.com*, 16/07/2022).

This kind of pressure against large bodies is mainly suffered by women, as expressed in the content in which they are the central figure (Graph 3).

Graph 3. The protagonists



Source: compiled by the authors

Women are the protagonists of the information in 60% (61) of the cases. Of these, 32% (19) are anonymous women, and the remaining 68% (42) can be classified as “celebrities”. In this regard, the most common professions are from the world of fashion, show business, and communication, such as actresses, singers, influencers, and communication professionals. Some of the names are very well known. On the international scene, these include Taylor Swift, Lizzo, Britney Spears, and Ireland’s Nicola Coughlan, star of the series *The Bridgertons* and *The Derry Girls*, among others. Those in Spain include model Helena Barquilla, actress and communicator María Jiménez, lead actress Laura Galán of the film *Cerdita*, as well as several anti-fatphobia activists such as Magdalena Piñeyro and influencer/actress Teresa López. In her study on the coverage of eating disorders in the daily press, Mónica Jiménez warned not only of the placement of this content on the Society pages, but also of the overexposure of famous women and its implications: “The fact that celebrities suffer from eating disorders, far from humanising them, it gives them an aura of exclusivity, of a clear differentiation from the rest of the mortals” (Jiménez, 2008: 781).

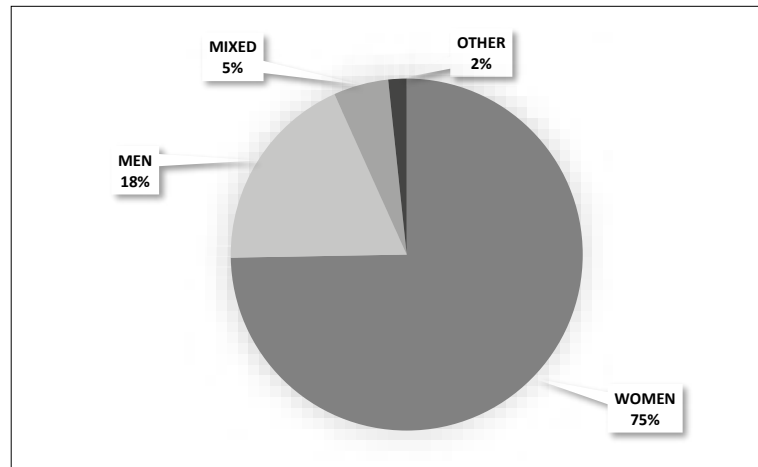
The remaining 19 women are anonymous individuals, sometimes television contestants, women who have undergone surgery to reduce their weight, or simply a generic reference to all the women who suffer this kind of mistreatment.

Men are less present in this type of content, as only 15% are the protagonists of the information. Of these, 27% (4) are well-known personalities, including a TV presenter, a singer, a cricket player, and a fictional character. When a clear gender bias is not present (16% of the texts refer to fat people, men or women, indistinctly), people are referred to by their first names, or the terms female and male are used interchangeably to designate them. In these cases, celebrities do not appear, and the protagonists are simply anonymous people. In 20% of these items, the protagonists are underage young people of both genders who suffer bullying at school, which includes fatphobia. In the remaining 9% of the texts analysed, there is no explicit reference to the people who suffer this stigma.

Another aspect to be considered is whose bodies are displayed visually in these items, and what they look like. This aspect is relevant, since media images can show bodies that we would never see in our daily lives, and they can exclude bodies that are present in our daily lives. In both cases, this inclusion or exclusion influences the way we assess what kind of bodies are sufficiently important, valued, or undervalued in order to be reflected in images (Kyröla, 2016).

In 89% of the items there are accompanying photographs, and only in the remaining 11% is there no image at all. In total, 178 photographs were edited and distributed among 90 texts.

Graph 4. Content of the photographs

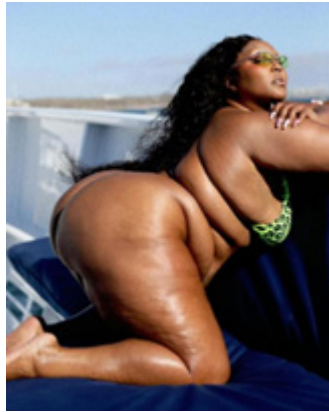


Source: compiled by the authors

A total of 75% of these photographs are depictions of women (Figure 4), who appear in 133 images. Men are only portrayed in 18% of the content, or 33 photographs. Mixed content with men and women sharing space accounts for 5% (only 9 photos), and the remaining 2% consists of 3 images; one of a patrol car, another of an empty classroom, and the third of a set of scales surrounded by a one-metre ruler.

Although there are more photos of fat women than fat men (62 and 14, respectively), the fact is, despite addressing fatphobia, standard body types are in the majority among both genders. A total of 53% are images of thin women, and 59% of slender men. The fat bodies belong to public figures, models, actors, actresses, singers, influencers, communication professionals, etc. There are only eight photos of anonymous men, eight in the case of women, and only three in which a mixed group is shown. The fat women mostly appear posing in a photo call, in the middle of the street, in an airport, in a fashion show, or on a TV set. There is also a photo from a campaign by the Ministry of Equality that is not without controversy, which is repeated several times and shows a group of women with different bodies on the beach. This particular photo is one of 15 in which women are depicted in skimpy clothing, swimming costumes, bikinis, or see-through garments. The singer Lizzo is the only fat woman who poses completely naked (Image 1) in order to strengthen her message of empowerment and pride in her own body (*lavanguardia.com*, 03/03/2022). She is also the only fat woman to pose for a photograph preparing to eat something as “inadvisable” as a hot dog. Another image is that of a fat man (Image 2). He is naked from the waist up, with his face not even in the frame, holding a plate of pasta with tomato sauce on his lap, and holding his mobile phone in the other hand. As part of an advertising campaign for the prevention of childhood obesity, this photograph was controversial, because some people saw it as a stereotypical and prejudiced depiction of overweight people (*lavanguardia.com*, 28/08/2022). They argued that the association between fatness and the excessive consumption of unhealthy foods would reinforce the stereotype of overweight people as lacking willpower and, consequently, solely responsible for their condition.

**Image 1. Instagram/@lizzobeeating.
Lizzo, lavanguardia.com, 03/03/2022**



Source: *lavanguardia.com*

**Image 2. Twitter/@elpodcastgordo.
lavanguardia.com. 28/03/20**



Source: *lavanguardia.com*

In the same article, a young, overweight man who was naked from the waist up was also shown with his face hidden and with a tape measure around his waist. Another photo of a fat child sitting in a doctor's office with his face hidden exemplifies the fact that Spain is third in the rankings of countries with the most overweight children (*lavanguardia.com*, 10/11/2022). This series of photos of fat people without faces is nearly a genre in itself, referred to as the 'headless fat people' by Charlotte Cooper (2007), which describes this phenomenon of not showing the heads of fat, anonymous people who usually accompany reports on the overweight epidemic.

Image 3. Photos published by a passenger. *lavanguardia.com* 10/11/2022



Source: *lavanguardia.com*

This same objectification can be seen in the close-up shots taken by a passenger to support her complaint to an airline company, because she had to travel with two overweight people. The photo (Image 3) shows parts of the bodies of these people extending beyond the limits of their seats (*lavanguardia.com*, 10/11/2022).

4.4. How to refer to overweight people

Although the initial search yielded 142 texts, if we exclude the 9 texts in which the term *fat man* or *fat woman* is not used, there would be a total of 133 contents in which the adjectives *fat man/woman* are used on at least one occasion.

Although the terms *obese man*, *obese woman*, and *obesity* are not mutually exclusive, they were not part of the search criteria, and the truth is that only 8% of these contents appear together with the popular adjectives *fat man* and *fat woman*. In fact, this occurs in the articles that address obesity, and even fatphobia, from a health perspective.

The adjective *fat* refers to women in 59% (70) of the texts, and to men in 34% (46). Its use for both men and women can be found in the remaining 13% (17).

Although there is only one meaning for this word, which has a clearly degrading connotation and equates the adjective to “clumsy, foolish, and unwise” (a meaning which the Royal Spanish Academy considers to be in disuse), the fact is that the insulting use of this term is the most widespread and common in the corpus analysed (Table 2). It should also be kept in mind that the stigma attached to a certain group produces responses that are not only physical, but verbal as well, in the form of insults and mockery.

Table 2. Proportion of positive, negative, hybrid, and neutral approaches to the terms *fat man* and *fat woman*

Term	Positive		Negative		Hybrid		Neutral		TOTAL	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
FAT WOMAN	17%	12	79%	55	4%	3	0	0	53%	70
FAT MAN	9%	4	59%	27	2%	1	30%	14	34%	46
MIXED	0	0	100%	17	0		0		13%	17
TOTAL	12%	16	74%	99	3%	4	11%	14	100%	133

Source: compiled by the authors

In 74% (99) of the texts, an overweight man or woman is described as fat, and this term is displayed as a judgement or criticism of their physical appearance, which sometimes takes the form of an insult. While 59% (27) of the men are subjected to this description, this is the case with 79% (55) of the women. The social pressure directed at the female body makes fatness a

condition to be avoided, hidden, or rejected. However, on more occasions 17% (12), women are actually the ones who see the term *fat* as something positive:

“For me, it was very hard to use the word *fat*. But I grew up like that. It’s part of my personality. It has made me who I am. So it’s necessary for me to reclaim the term in order to be happy, because otherwise it’s like being stabbed with a dagger every time you hear the word out there” (María Jiménez, *elpais.com*, 17/05/2022).

The content items that give a voice to anti-fatphobia activists are among those that have an influence on reclaiming the term *fat*, although the testimonies of famous women also reinforce the use of this adjective.

Only in 9% (4) of the texts do men assimilate the term *fat* as something positive. This is the case with war correspondent and journalist S.J. Liebling, who describes himself as ‘happily fat’ (*lavanguardia.com*, 02/03/2022). Other examples include the association made by the mother of columnist Carlos Zánón between virility and fatness, which offers a positive image of a fat Elvis (*lavanguardia.com*, 03/08/2022), or the disappointment of a contestant on the TV dating programme *First Dates*, when she realises that her companion is not fat (*lavanguardia.com*, 18/11/2022).

While the neutral use of this word is non-existent among females, or when it refers to both genders, it is used in a neutral sense in 30% (14) of the content referring to men. This is because the word *fat* is sometimes used as a nickname for a public or historical figure, such as Louis XVI, and it is used without any special connotation in the article. Moreover, some fairly well-known individuals, such as film director Álex de la Iglesia, use it to describe themselves, neither with a desire to vindicate their bodies nor in a derogatory sense: ‘I’m the fat guy who makes films: it’s the mask I use when I go out into the street’ (Álex de la Iglesia, *elpais.com*, 09/09/2022).

Hybrid approaches, or in other words, those that refer to the positive and negative aspects of being fat, are more difficult to find. In the case of men, there is only one text that meets these criteria, and in the case of women, there are only three. The latter tend to be reports on fashion and aesthetics that promote body diversity, yet without neglecting the health problems associated with being overweight.

It is enlightening to see the association of terms shown in the texts, as well as synonyms and euphemisms, and the use of adverbs that hyperbolise or ridicule body appearance, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Association of terms regarding the expressions *fat man* and *fat woman*, both in a positive and negative sense, and the use of synonyms and euphemisms

Positive terms for fat women	Positive terms for fat men
Fat and fabulous	Fat and rich
Fat and funny	Fat and virile
Beautiful and healthy	Fat for life
Gorgeous, strong	Happily fat
Fat and sexy	Fat and confident

Negative terms for fat women	Negative terms for fat men
Fat scum	Fucking Elephant
Class whale	Fat and vulgar
Fat, disgusting, cellulite freak	Greedy fat man
Hideously fat woman with elephant legs	Fat, ugly, and bald
Little pig	Fat and sickly
Fat bitch	Fat fucking moors
Lard ass	Fat ass
Wide body 747	Four-eyed fat ass
Fat and decrepit	Fat and decrepit
Old fat midget	Hippo
Slum whale	Fat walrus
Fat, ugly, four-eyed geek	Little fat hog
Fat cow	Fat, tyrannical, power monger
Super fat	
Fat women / Fat men	
Lazy people	
Euphemisms/Synonyms	
Large women	
Women of different sizes / Non-standard bodies	
Large sizes	
Obese	
Overweight / Extra pounds	
Round figure, curvy body	

Source: compiled by the authors

Although in both genders there are adjectives that convey a positive perception of fatness, the truth is that women use language as an instrument of change to define themselves, as pointed out by Guerrero Salazar: “It’s a matter of articulating a discourse of resistance to sexism, which at the same time shapes their group identity with regard to social and cultural change” (Guerrero, 2020: 106).

On the other hand, overweight men are generally portrayed by others who are not directly involved, and their “positive” image drifts toward a stereotype rooted in popular culture, that of a rich, virile, and self-confident man, who just happens to be fat, as if his body were merely another extension of his opulence.

Although women are the main focus of fatphobia, when it comes to intensifying the pejorative use of the word ‘fat’, the level of creativity is equal. Racist prejudice appears in both genders, such as referring to “wretched Moors”, as well as metaphorical images resorting to the association with all kinds of animals, such as “cow”, “whale”, “elephant”, “walrus”, and “little pig”. Some of these terms also appear in a study that has analysed the animalisation of women as a form of misogyny (Lacalle et al., 2024).

If we add the lack of willpower and laziness that supposedly describes fat people, along with their insatiable appetite, the stereotype is complete. This jaded view makes them solely responsible for their physical condition, which is considered not only unattractive, but unhealthy as well.

Other terms such as obese, large sizes, overweight, and non-standard bodies are intended to avoid negative connotations, but they are also subject to criticism, as pointed out by Baltasar Fernández and Balteriola (2012: 31): “By using euphemisms such as obesity or obese people, to what extent is the aim of these terms to use politically correct language, or are they just a way of including and justifying the treatment of fatness within the medical field of disease”?

Likewise, for some anti-fatphobia activists, appealing to *curvy* models or talking about non-standard bodies is nothing more than softening the language, which trivialises and hides the real scope of the problem. “I don’t like it when people talk about non-standard bodies. Are they saying I’m not normal?” (Navas, *lavanguardia.com*, 19/06/2022).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The presence of fatphobia in *elpais.com* and *lavanguardia.com*, two of Spain’s leading digital newspapers, is an established fact. It is also a true that their approach is superficial and is mainly associated with sections that have traditionally been considered *soft news*. This finding concurs with the conclusions of Jiménez (2008), with regard to the coverage of eating disorders by the Spanish press. Ironically, despite the connection between fatness and public health, in which a pivotal consequence is the social stigma and psychological repercussions suffered by people with these characteristics (Camacho, Goikoetxea and Marauri, 2023; Rubino et al., 2020), fatphobia is hardly mentioned in the Health section, yet it appears in other parts of the newspapers linked to the entertainment industry. Therefore, the first hypothesis is partially confirmed. Related to this situation, the predominance of the episodic approach in content that addresses fatphobia stands out (72% of the texts analysed), which refutes the second hypothesis. Although fatphobia is on the agenda of the newspapers analysed, as these articles offer neither context nor in-depth analysis, it can be concluded that these items are more like a succession of unconnected anecdotes than reporting on a social problem, which coincides with other analyses of news coverage aimed at highly sensitive issues such as gender violence (Gutiérrez, Notario and Martínez, 2009).

Only 28% of the texts analysed offer thematic framing, which provides a broader context in which the consequences of stigmatisation are expanded by introducing occupational and emotional discrimination, and even bias in education that results from being perceived or self-perceived as a fat person. This imbalance is confirmed by the notable absence of expert sources, even in texts with a thematic framework.

From a gender perspective, hypotheses three, four, and five of this study have been confirmed. The image conveyed by the content analysed is that fatphobia is a problem that mainly affects women. The gender factor is clear, not only as a result of the much higher percentage of female authors (60% women compared to 15% men), which is common in the sections where they appear, but most of all due to the fact that the focus of the information is also clearly female, as attested by the aforementioned 60% female and 15% male.

Women are the ones who suffer the stigmatisation of their bodies first hand, and this is by far the most obvious symptom of control over women's bodies, which are subject to a standard of beauty that caters to the male gaze as inscribed in a patriarchal and androcentric society (Halse, CH., 2009; Bordo, S., 2003). In some of the content analysed, this bodily judgement is even self-inflicted, as attested by Berger, who states that "women see themselves in the way that others look at them. This determines not only most relationships between men and women, but even women's relationship to themselves. The supervisory voice within women is masculine: those who are supervised are feminine" (2005: 55).

A total of 60% of these women are celebrities, women linked to the world of show business. Thus, celebrities have become the benchmark of a problem that affects society as a whole, for which they act as a loudspeaker, sometimes through victimisation, and to a lesser extent through empowerment. The latter is manifested through language, and these women are the ones who most often (17%) use the term *fat* in order to vindicate the word.

Although it is still in the minority, the content that addresses this issue from the point of view of anti-fatphobia activism also has a place, and this is where we find the most positive approaches. If we construct reality through language, it is obvious that fatness is a women's issue, as they are the group most often described as overweight in 70% of the content. However, this should not hinder either gender from fighting against the most degrading associations in shaping stereotypes of fat people, which are mostly negative.

In the photographs that accompany these texts, the female image is also dominant, and depictions of fat women are much more common than those of fat men. However, in line with the findings of previous articles (Camacho, Goikoetxea and Marauri, 2023), degrading photographs and the objectification/depersonalisation of fat people through images are clearly in the minority.

In conclusion, fatphobia is an issue that is mainly addressed in the Society section of newspapers, where these articles have a lack of depth and diversity of opinion. The protagonists of these stories are generally famous or popular people, and although they might become benchmarks for stating their demands, they polarise their criticism in the world of aesthetics and fashion, thereby losing sight of the multiple consequences that this stigma entails. Women are portrayed as victims of this discrimination throughout their lives compared to men who, despite being more vulnerable in adolescence, are less likely to be subject to bodily prejudice in adulthood.

In light of the foregoing, there is a need for more content with a thematic approach, where expert sources are given a voice and the situations are contextualized, thereby allowing the problem to be addressed in all its complexity (Camacho, 2023; Rodríguez,

2024). These recommendations concur with others, which have been established to combat devastating social problems such as gender violence (Sánchez-Ramos, Zurbano-Berenguer and Edo-Ibáñez, 2024). In fact, some authors include fatphobia as another manifestation of gender-based violence.

The scarcity of similar research, together with the social relevance of fatphobia, invite further exploration. Digital native media, social sites, and audio-visual products, both fiction and non-fiction, are potential fields of analysis that we hope to address in future studies.

6. Acknowledgements

This article has been translated into English by Charles E. Arthur, to whom we are grateful for his diligent work.

This study is part of two projects: The first is *Tratamiento Mediático y Prevención de la Obesidad: Cibermedios, Redes Sociales y Comunicación Institucional* [media coverage and the prevention of obesity: cybermedia, social networks, and institutional communication], funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation in the 2020 call (PID2020-118090RB-I00); The second project is *El papel de los medios de comunicación en el desarrollo de la gordofobia y la obesofobia en Bizkaia* [the media's role in the development of fatphobia and obesophobia in Bizkaia] (US23/08). The authors of this research are part of the *Mediaiker* group, acknowledged in the 2021 call for applications to receive grants, in order to support the activities of research groups in the Basque university system (IT1686-22).

The authors would like to give special thanks to Flora Marín Murillo, who is a retired *UPV/EHU* lecturer and researcher, for her invaluable help.

7. Specific contributions of each author

	Names and surname
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Data collection and analysis	Iñigo Marauri-Castillo, María del Mar Rodríguez-González and Yazmina Vargas-Veleda
Discussion and conclusions	Iñigo Marauri-Castillo
Drafting, formatting, version review and approval	Iñigo Marauri-Castillo, María del Mar Rodríguez-González and Yazmina Vargas-Veleda

8. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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