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A Year of *El País* Headlines on Childhood Obesity (2013)

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Abstract

This research aims to examine the contents and discourse of Spanish newspaper reports about obesity, especially that involving children and adolescents. An initial corpus was compiled with 183 news items published by the largest circulating national daily *El País* between 01/01/2013 and 31/12/2013 and retrieved from the digital edition's online archives using the search expression *obesidad infantil*. After scrutinizing each for relevance, a 69-item sample was selected for quantitative and qualitative analysis. The results of this small corpus study illustrate the trends in coverage in the headlines and the issues associated with obesity over the year.

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1. Introduction

In recent years multidisciplinary researchers have examined how print media reports on overweight and obesity, being noteworthy the pioneering work in the USA by Lawrence (2004). In the European context, obesity studies have focused on newspaper contents and framing in Sweden (Sandberg, 2007), Germany (Hilbert and Ried, 2009) and Norway (Malterud and Ulriksen, 2010). In 2005 the *Informe Quiral* characterized obesity coverage as 'continuous' in the leading Spanish dailies, the authors concluding that "la preocupación por la obesidad en la prensa parece un reflejo lógico de un problema real, pues la prevalencia de esta patología está creciendo en los últimos años y puede llegar a constituir uno de los mayores problemas de salud pública de las próximas décadas" (*Quiral Salud*, 2005:3). Since then there has been a steady rise in overweight rates among youngsters, particularly in

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Spain (Sánchez-Cruz et al., 2013), and a growing concern for their future health, both physical and otherwise (Puhl and Heuer, 2009). Media coverage unquestionably influences public perception of health issues like obesity, as pointed out by the renowned Spanish expert in nutrition Félix Lobo: “[...] los medios de comunicación en la sociedad moderna son un canal fundamental para la obtención de información y el cambio de comportamientos por los ciudadanos” (2007:439). Therefore, the framing of obesity news by the national press is fundamental to shape public understanding of the disease, and by collaborating with health professionals, Spanish journalists can indeed contribute “[...] para frenar la tendencia alarmante de aumento del sobrepeso y la obesidad en nuestro país, estimulando las actuaciones preventivas, además de intensificar las terapéuticas” (*Quiral Salud*, 2005:7).

Small corpus studies, like those conducted by Díaz-Rojo (2009) and Westall (2011), have begun to shed light on the peculiarities of obesogenic discourse in Spanish newspapers, the former centering on rhetorical resources employed by columnists and the latter on recurring topics covered by the national press. To continue in this line of research and pave the way for more comprehensive evaluation of obesity reporting over time, this study presents the findings from a small corpus analysis of 69 *El País* newspaper articles about overweight and obesity, especially that related to children. In the following, I will describe the materials and method used to compile the corpus as well as the results obtained from the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the sample created with headlines from 2013.

2. Materials and method

The first step in this research was to create an initial corpus with news items addressing childhood obesity and published by the largest circulating national daily *El País* between 01/01/2013 and 31/12/2013. Using the search expression *obesidad infantil*, 183 items were returned from the digital edition’s online archives (<http://elpais.com/archivo/>; September 2014). After filtering through the returns for general relevance and eliminating those clearly not related to the topic at hand, some 80 articles were extracted in electronic format and registered in a working database with pertinent source/technical data (URL, date, section, author, images, captions, etc.).

In the second step, each article was subjected to further scrutiny to verify the presence of relevant key words and expressions within the discourse. A 69-item sample was then compiled with what were deemed to be the most relevant news pieces, that is, those containing either 1) the search term (*obesidad infantil*) or 2) the key words (*obesidad*, *obeso/a*, *sobrepeso*) in combination with references to children (e.g. *niño/a/os/as*, *adolescentes*, *bebés*, *chicas*, *jóvenes*, *menores*, etc.). Among the articles not included in the final sample was “Una compañía aérea cobra a cada pasajero según su peso” (10/04). Manual scrutiny revealed that even though the words *sobrepeso*, *obesidad* and *niños* were present, the overall focus was not on children or obesity as such, but rather on the airline’s charging of passengers based on weight (“[...]‘cobramos a nuestros pasajeros por lo que pesan’, como suplemento por sobrepeso,”), the discourse relating the initiative to “[...] aumentar la preocupación de la sociedad de Somoa sobre el sobrepeso en un de los países con mayor índice de obesidad del mundo” only with its impact on “las familias con niños”. Table 1 illustrates the monthly distribution of the 183 initial returns obtained from the *El País* archives and the 69 news items selected for this study.

Table 1. *El País* and childhood obesity news in 2013.

Month	Search items identified for 2013	Relevant items selected for analysis
January	17	6
February	11	3
March	20	7
April	20	10
May	18	5
June	16	4

July	12	5
August	5	1
September	19	8
October	23	10
November	13	4
December	9	6

The third step aimed to characterize the 69-item sample, which included various text types (reports, special features, news briefs, interviews, opinion pieces), these being distributed throughout the year, as seen in Table 1, and published in different sections of the daily, mainly in the society pages, but also in the economy, regional and international sections and in the cultural agenda. The months of April and October registered highest number of articles mentioning childhood obesity (10 each), while August was naturally the month with the fewest (only one). Authorship for the vast majority of the articles was attributed to individual reporters, although the news agency EFE was also credited in a small number of cases (7 articles). The 69-item sample contained some 59,551 words, and an average text length around 863 words; the longest article had 3,820 words (“2008-2013: Balance de daños”, 27/12), only 15 articles had more than 1,000 words; the shortest had fewer than 200 words, specifically, 181 in “Carta al director” (31/05) and 53 in “Agenda de Madrid” (05/07).

Finally, the qualitative content analysis of the 69 articles comprising the sample began with a closer examination of the ten *El País* headlines that featured the key word *obesidad*.

- Coca-Cola aborda por primera vez la obesidad en sus anuncios (15/01)
- El Gobierno aprueba la creación del Observatorio de la Obesidad (22/01)
- EEUU presiona a Mas contra la tasa antiobesidad a las bebidas azucaradas (05/03)
- Platos más pequeños para combatir la obesidad infantil en EEUU (08/04c)
- La lucha contra la obesidad encalla en el tratamiento psicológico (06/05)
- La obesidad ya es una enfermedad en Estados Unidos (19/06)
- La carrera americana de la obesidad no tiene ganadores (14/07)
- MÉXICO SALUD. El impuesto a refrescos para combatir obesidad y diabetes divide a México (20/10)
- EEUU SALUD. Michelle Obama ficha a personajes de Barrio Sésamo para combatir la obesidad (31/10a)
- A menor nivel educativo, más obesidad (13/12)

3. Results and discussion

Given the exploratory nature of this research, the qualitative content analysis centered, in line with the objectives for this study, on the headlines of *El País* reports related to childhood obesity in 2013. The language used in the headlines reflected not just the contents of news coverage but also the framing of this public health epidemic (e.g. Lawrence, 2004; Westall, 2011). The tendencies in coverage and framing were first evident in the ten headlines that featured *obesidad*. Three of these associated obesity with Coca-Cola (15/01), “bebidas azucaradas” (05/03) and “refrescos” (20/10), thus reflecting the nutritional focus of the discourse. Three others related news in Spain, mostly reports of scientific studies, i.e. the creation of an ‘Obesity Observatory’ (22/01) and research into obesity treatment (06/05) and obesity prevention (13/12). The final four headlines made reference to obesity prevention programs in the USA. Two of these focused on initiatives targeting children, by providing smaller portions of food in restaurants (08/04c) and by engaging Sesame Street characters in Michelle Obama’s ‘Let’s move’ campaign (31/10a); two others reported on research into obesity and its medical classification in the USA (19/06) and its widespread prevalence in the USA and Mexico (14/07).

Interestingly, these ten headlines are not only representative of the type of obesity news covered by *El País* in 2013, but they also reveal the predominant frames identified in the discourse. Most notable were the 29 items with mention of nutrition (*alimentación, dieta, hambre*, etc.), foods (*pan, hamburguesas, snack*, etc.), or drinks, like Coca-Cola, as noted above, or juice and milk, as in the headline: “McDonald’s promocionará el zumo y la leche en su menú infantil” (27/09). Obesity news coverage focusing mainly on Spain was clearly identified in eight headlines, thanks to the naming of social actors such as “el cocinero José Andrés” (24/01), the cardiologist “[Valentín] Fuster” (17/07) and “la infanta Elena” (02/10). Finally, the USA was present in 17 headlines, with names like “Matt Damon y Gus Van Sant” (08/02) or Chelsea Clinton (22/11) being mentioned in two, “Nueva York” (31/10b) and “Estados Unidos” (19/06) being specified in two others, and the Spanish abbreviation “EEUU” being used in five headlines, and in two cases the key word *obesos* is featured:

- Los Scouts de EEUU excluyen de su gincana anual a los obesos (16/07)
- Disminuye el número de obesos en EEUU, pero continúa la epidemia (18/10)

Also noteworthy are the seven headlines covering the Obamas and their efforts to prevent obesity, as observed in two of the articles published in April: “La Fiesta de Pascua de la Casa Blanca no sucumbe a los recortes” (01/04) and “Michelle y una veintena de niños plantan trigo y espinacas en la Casa Blanca” (04/04), although other details of the First family also made the headlines in Spain, for example: “Obama bromea con que dejó de fumar por miedo a su mujer” (24/09).

The headline analysis clearly revealed the tendency in *El País* to relate obesity with diet and nutrition, as noted in the five headlines in the sample that mention soft drinks. On the one hand were articles about Coca-Cola’s new global advertising campaign, as noted above. One particular headline referring to the case of Australia provided good evidence of impersonal present tense verbs, more complex grammatical structures and a combination of the brand name and the generic term: “Piden a Coca-Cola que retire campaña de bebidas azucaradas en Australia” (11/09). On the other hand were previously cited articles describing proposals to tax carbonated drinks in Mexico (20/10) and in Catalonia (05/03), where it was dubbed “la tasa antiobesidad”. One headline even suggested the generic “refresco” as a surprising substitute for bread in Mexico: “México: a falta de pan, refresco” (23/03).

Likewise, the headlines in the sample revealed the health risks associated with eating certain foods. This is seen in a second headline mentioning bread: “El amor por el pan pone en riesgo la salud de los latinoamericanos” (09/12). While there were two headlines citing bread as being responsible for poor health in Latin America, another alludes to meat as being the culprit; this was the case for the USA, dubbed here ‘the land of hamburgers’: “‘Lunes sin carne’ en el país de la hamburguesa” (09/04). By contrast, meat is portrayed in quite a different light in Spain, where Serrano ham is denoted as the ‘meat with glamour’ in the headline: “El ADN del sibarita y carne con ‘glamour’ (08/04).

Additionally, two other headlines with specific geographic indications draw attention to public health initiatives using metaphoric expressions of cooking (“receta”) and war (“batalla”):

- América Latina busca su propia receta para dar más salud a sus ciudadanos (07/10)
- México inicia su batalla oficial contra la cultura del sobrepeso (02/11)

The concept of a ‘recipe’ is also present in the headline, “Recetas de cuento” (01/04), but is used in a more figurative sense in one of the few headlines encouraging physical activity: “TIERRA. La mejor receta es un paseo por un parque natural” (30/12).

In contrast to the headlines mentioning foods that contribute to the epidemic, in this sample of obesity discourse, headlines were found to focus as well on hunger and its prevention, thanks to the soccer star Ronaldo, and its effect in school classrooms:

- CR7 lucha contra el hambre mientras sueña con el Balón de Oro (03/01)
- El hambre se cuela en el colegio (15/06)

Obesity was also related with poor nutrition and malnutrition, these being associated in turn with brain development in children and dietary deficiencies among Asians, respectively. In the headlines the reporters quote the words of an expert and significant statistics to engage the reader:

- “La mala nutrición afecta al desarrollo cerebral del niño” (18/04)
- El 60% de las personas con malnutrición se encuentra en la región de Asia (16/10b)

Moreover, the results of Spanish research into diet and nutrition were also considered newsworthy in 2013, the headlines associating reduced risks with vegetarian diets and creative snacks with healthy hearts:

- Un estudio asocia el vegetarianismo con un menor riesgo de muerte (05/06)
- Investigadores valencianos crean un snack cardiosaludable (23/09)

While most headlines followed a typical syntactical pattern (subject followed by present tense verb) (Hernando-Cuadrado, 2002), more provocative structures were found to report nutrition research like that conducted in the USA, the headline framing a contrast between cookies and cocaine with the rhetorical question: “¿Son las Oreo tan adictivas como la cocaína?” (16/10a). Similarly, another article reported on the Spanish researcher who designed an exercise-vending machine, the headline using infinitive verbs to contrast exercise and Bollycaos: “Pedalear para ganarse el Bollycao” (13/03). Surprisingly absent were headlines referring to exercise and physical activity; this the topic was addressed only six headlines and mostly with different focus, as seen in the the cases of “Yoga, ¿ejercicio o religion?” (30/05), “Sostenibilidad. Caminar al cole para recuperar la calle” (04/12), and the contrasting headlines of the two opinion pieces published in April:

- Insuficiente en Educación Física (07/04)
- Demasiado deporte virtual (08/04)

Finally, as noted earlier, there were numerous references to the Obamas and the White House in the *El País* news sample from 2013, as previously noted, and especially to Michelle Obama’s efforts to combat obesity in America, including the different initiatives to improve nutritional habits among American youngsters (e.g. “Los huertos comunitarios, en auge en EE.UU. de la mano de Michelle Obama”, 16/05). Curiously enough, in two headlines the focus was seen to shift away from the programs and highlight more directly the First Lady herself (e.g. “Michelle Obama baila sola”, 01/03b; “Michelle Obama lanza un disco de rap”, 13/08).

4. Conclusion

This on-going research aims to characterize discursive practices common in Spanish newspaper reporting of childhood obesity. To this end, a corpus of news articles from 2013 was compiled from online archives of one of the major national dailies, and a sample of 69-items was selected for a quantitative and qualitative analysis. The results of this small corpus study confirmed a continued presence of obesity-related news in *El País* during 2013, the number of articles being quite similar to those published in 2008 (Westall, 2011). Moreover, the headline analysis revealed the continued framing of obesity as the individual’s responsibility, especially in terms of nutrition and dietary choices. Of special interest is the attention drawn to the United States and the White House, particularly the endeavors of the Obamas to combat obesity in this country. Surprisingly few references were made to exercise and physical activity and most of the discourse was constructed around other frames (sustainability, natural parks, etc.). The analysis will pave the way for further study into the discourse patterns prevalent in newspaper reporting on childhood obesity as well as the frames used to present the causes, consequences and prevention of this twenty-first century epidemic.

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