

Sexualising weight loss in British tabloids: celebrities ‘flaunting’ their bodies during a pandemic.

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between weight loss, sex and beauty by analysing a corpus of 285 articles about celebrity weight loss published in the U.K. national press between 23 March 2020 and 06 July 2020. Taking a corpus assisted critical discourse analysis approach, we examine the use of the statistically salient lemma *flaunt**. 97% of the instances of *flaunt** in our corpus are attributed to female celebrities, and the respective protagonists are reported by the UK press to *flaunt* their bodies and their weight loss on their social media pages. By critically analysing the use of *flaunt**, we are able to demonstrate the manner in which celebrity social media posts are repackaged to sexualise female celebrities and to sexualise the process of weight loss in general. We argue that describing social media images shared by female celebrities as *flaunting* could at best, misrepresent their intentions, and at worst contribute towards the pervasive unsolicited sexualisation of women, and exacerbate adverse body image and mental health issues during an unprecedented period which in and of itself has exacerbated these issues.

Background

On 23 March 2020, almost two months after the first known cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in the UK, Prime Minister Boris Johnson issued a ‘stay at home’ order which legally came into force three days later on the 26th March 2020. The series of legally enforced measures that the UK government put into place to reduce the spread of the virus quickly became referred to collectively as ‘lockdown’. From 26th March, lockdown restrictions required everyone other than key workers to stay at home except for one session of outdoor exercise or one essential shopping trip per day. In England, over May and June, people who could not work from home were encouraged to return to their workplaces and schools and non-essential shops were re-opened. The 4th July 2020 represented by far the largest easing of restrictions since they were first imposed, including the re-opening of pubs, bars, cinemas, restaurants and hairdressers¹. Then, on 6th July 2020, the government changed the guidance for the 2.2 million people who are clinically extremely vulnerable who had been ‘shielding’, and who were now able to gather in groups of six outdoors and could form a ‘support bubble’ with another household.

Several local and national lockdowns followed this initial re-opening of the UK economy between July 2020 and February 2022, but these initial measures were the most restrictive and wide-ranging. Although lockdown was reported as being effective in stemming (or delaying) the spread of the virus in the early stages of the pandemic in the UK (Scott 2021), it is now well-established that it had significant impacts elsewhere, including worsened mental health and increases in depression, loss of concentration and sleep, reduced confidence and self-worth and increased COVID-related worry (Banks and Xu 2020; Evans et al. 2021). The effect of lockdown that we are most interested in this paper is the relationship between lockdown and (perceived) weight gain. Studies have found that lockdown affected a range of

¹ Although the easing of restrictions was based on government announcements, the devolved nations of the UK (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland) eased lockdown at different speeds.

weight-related lifestyle behaviours including an increase in 'binge-eating' (Robinson, Gillespe and Jones 2020), alcohol consumption (Jacob et al. 2021) and decreases in physical activity with increases in sedentary behaviours (Stockwell et al. 2021). It follows that COVID-19 and lockdown are associated with negative body image and body dissatisfaction in both men and women (Swarmi, Horne and Furnham 2021). Such 'fear of fat' is exacerbated by the early identification of obesity as a risk factor for severe COVID-19 and related complications (Kassir 2020), a relationship that was emphasised and amplified in the media, with fatalistic and stigmatising depictions of obesity commonplace (Brookes 2021). At the same time, lockdown saw celebrities take to social media to share their lockdown lives in such a way that brought into sharp focus the inequity in the isolation experiences between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' (Cummins 2020).

This paper focuses on the ways in which celebrities' weight loss was reported by the British national tabloid press during the first lockdown in the UK. Although not always the case, much of the reporting focused on posts made by women celebrities on social media. Therefore, after providing an overview of the established relationship between weight and beauty, we explore the role of the traditional media in objectifying the body and report the literature related to social media use, weight messages and their effects during the pandemic. Our corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis focuses on the ways in which the tabloid press repackaged and represented celebrities' weight loss, and considers the implications of these practices against the backdrop of a nation under lockdown facing unprecedented mental health issues related to weight and body image.

Weight, beauty and objectification

Within western societies, it has been long established that the more beautiful an individual is considered, the more positively they will be viewed by society (Dion, Berscheid and Walster 1972) and, in turn, in order for an individual (and particularly a woman) to be considered beautiful, they must be thin (Gill 2009: 95). Being thin comes with a variety of tangible social rewards; for example, it has been found that attractive individuals have advantages in social interactions, employment, marriage, and other life outcomes (Kwan and Trautner 2009; Mason 2012). In contrast, the fat body is culturally deemed unattractive and bad, and is frequently confronted with social stigma. Specifically, the fat body is seen as reflecting particular characteristics of individuals, such as laziness, a lack of motivation and poor self-control (Grol-Prokopczyk 2010), as well as being associated with perceptions of unintelligence, incompetence and romantic unsuitability (Puhl and Brownell 2001; Juvonen et al. 2017). These harmful misconceptions can have serious long-reaching and damaging effects, particularly for women. For example, conventionally 'unattractive' women, including those who are 'overweight', are less likely to be believed when reporting crimes such as sexual assault, and their deaths are seen as less tragic and less unfair than that of a conventionally attractive woman (Clarke and Stermac 2011; Zidenberg et al. 2021). Therefore, the attitudinal and experiential differences between thin bodies/individuals and fat bodies/individuals are stark.

The media plays a central role in fostering and perpetuating beauty standards associated with weight. Recent research shows that people with obesity are routinely dehumanised and vilified in the British press and are presented as irresponsible and morally deviant (Coltman-Patel 2020; Brookes and Baker 2021). Media portrayals of women in particular emphasise three broad and intersecting expectations of what women should be: domestic, sexually

attractive and available, and thin (Blaine and McElroy 2002: 352). Sexualised portrayals of women pervade the many different facets of media. Advertisements, for example, are a medium in which women are frequently and perhaps most obviously depicted as ‘sex objects’ (Coltrane and Adams 1997: 323). But objectification of women’s bodies is also found in news media, where women are commonly described in overtly sexualised ways such as *busty*, *pretty*, *sexy*, *alluring* (Caldas-Coulthard and Moon 2010: 116). Research indicates that frequent exposure to sexualised images of women which promote thin beauty ideals can negatively influence women’s self-esteem and body image (Lavine, Sweeny and Wagner 1999) and increase eating disorder symptomology, depression, guilt, shame, stress, anger, and body dissatisfaction (Fister and Smith 2004; Ghaznavi and Taylor 2015). Indeed, as women are socialised to internalise an observer’s perspective, women can come to view themselves as objects to be looked at – a phenomenon known as ‘self-objectification’ (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 180). It is beyond the remit of this paper to comprehensively account for the literature on the objectification and sexualisation of women in the mass media, but the intention here is to provide a context that shows the relationship between societal conceptions of beauty and weight, the role of the media in perpetuating this relationship and its effects. The picture is made somewhat more complex when the roles of celebrity, social media and the isolated, locked-down reader are introduced.

Celebrity, (social) media and the body

Sexualised and gendered aesthetic judgments in the media are common, particularly in relation to (famous) women in the public eye. This includes women from all walks of life, including scientists such as Dr Laura Grant, who was presented in the British media as ‘the femme fatale of physics’ and the ‘28-year-old beauty with a brain’ (Attenborough 2011: 665). Likewise, female politicians are routinely subject to media objectification and overtly sexualised in such a way that undermines their professional status and credibility. Theresa May, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, was defined by her ‘kitten heels’ and an evening in which she reshuffled her cabinet was conceptualised as the ‘night of the long stilettos’ (Baxter 2018: 77). Fellow British Politician Edwina Currie has been described as a ‘femme-fatale’ and a ‘sex novelist’ (Adcock 2010: 144), and both Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton were sexualised in the U.S. election coverage; Palin was defined by her ‘sexiness’, described as ‘Caribou Barbie’ and a ‘trophy’, and Clinton was scrutinised for her cleavage, figure and her clothing (Carlin and Winfrey 2009: 331). Musicians, reality television stars and actors are subject to disproportionate media sexualisation, with female thinness being glamourised and the female body being objectified in visceral detail (Vandenbosch 2017), and those who do not fit the rigid beauty standard norms are shamed and insulted (Hirdman 2017: 366).

The pervasiveness and popularity of social media has served to amplify and exacerbate women’s negative perception of their bodies. Studies have found that social media use correlates with higher levels of body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, internalisation of the thin-ideal, body surveillance, self-objectification, and dieting (Fardouly and Vartanian 2016). During lockdown, and the changes in behaviour it brought with it, the effects of this insidious side of social media increased. For example, the rise of the ‘#quarantine15’ trend, so-called as it refers to the ‘excess’ 15-pound weight gain (or perceived weight gain) during lockdown, emerged during this period. ‘Quarantine15’ and COVID-related posts included content that conveys strong fears of gaining weight or becoming ‘fat’, including before and after quarantine body photographs, memes exaggerating weight gain, ill-fitting clothes and excess

eating (Pearl 2020: 1180). Quarantine Instagram content tended to show appearance-focused images of lower-weight individuals, oversimplify weight gain as an issue of food consumption and lack of physical activity, and demonstrate an explicit dislike towards weight gain and being higher-weight (Lucibello et al. 2021). During lockdown, celebrities and social media influencers contributed to images and discourses of weight, sharing their own efforts at losing (gained) weight, their at-home workout routines and their new and improved diets (e.g. Pocklington 2020). The proliferation of weight loss content on social media simultaneously lamented the potential of weight gain during lockdown and encouraged (directly or indirectly) people to lose weight – both of which are preoccupied with appearance and are weight stigmatising. Viewing such content during COVID-19 lockdown, which in itself was detrimental to people’s mental health, is likely to have contributed negatively to individuals’ body image, psychological wellbeing and health behaviours (Pearl 2020; Lucibello et al. 2021), with women and those with a history of disordered eating being disproportionately affected (Robertson 2021).

This paper is situated at the intersection between the well-established sexualisation, objectification and anti-fat *modus operandi* of the traditional media and the explosion of lockdown-enhanced weight stigmatising and ‘aspirational’ content on social media. By examining the ways in which celebrities’ weight-related stories are represented and refracted by the mass media, we are able to better understand the inter-related public discourses of weight and weight loss during the first COVID-19 lockdown in the UK.

Methodology

This paper draws on a corpus of 285 articles and 141,376 tokens of celebrity stories about weight published in the UK national press between 23 March 2020 and 06 July 2020 – the duration of the first and strictest national lockdown. The articles were all collected from the Nexis UK database, using the search terms *weight* and *lockdown* appearing in the headline or lead paragraph of the article, either together or separately. *Weight* was used deliberately to allow for stories about weight *loss* and weight *gain* and was preferred over alternatives such as *obesity* for the same reason. The initial dataset downloaded with these search parameters contained 712 articles. After an initial check, 165 articles were removed because the sense of the word *weight* was different to that in which we were interested; for example, lifting weights (e.g. ‘created a makeshift gym and weights’) and figurative uses (e.g. ‘the weight of the pressure’). Following this process, our corpus contained 547 articles.

This resultant corpus was heavily skewed towards tabloid newspapers, which accounted for 458 (84%) of the 547 articles.² This meant that some types of news story were over-represented in the data. An initial keyword analysis, which identifies words which have an unusually high frequency in the corpus relative to some comparison point (Hardie 2018: 30), found that words relating to celebrity stories proliferated the data to such an extent that they (statistically) characterised the corpus as a whole. When compared against the one-million-word BE06 Corpus of British English (Baker 2009) words such as *star*, *Instagram*, *fans*, *revealed* and *followers* were all amongst the most key words in the corpus. Furthermore, we used the program ProtAnt (Anthony and Baker 2017) to identify the articles that were most prototypical of the whole corpus. ProtAnt calculates keywords for the entire corpus and then

² In the UK the national tabloid newspapers are *The Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *The Sun*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The People*, *The Daily Star* and their Sunday sister newspapers.

counts how many of those keywords appear in each article, ranking articles according to the number of keywords in them. The more keywords an article contains, the higher its rank, and the more typical it is considered to be of the corpus from which it is taken (Anthony and Baker 2015). In a prototypicality analysis of our corpus, again using the BE06 corpus as a reference, 79 out of the top 100 ranked texts were stories about celebrities.

Therefore, we focused our analysis only on those articles in our corpus that were about celebrities and their weight loss. We manually identified all articles in the dataset that were entirely or primarily about a celebrity or celebrities and created a separate ‘Celebrity Stories’ sub-corpus for analysis in this paper, comprising 285 articles and 141,376 words, almost entirely from tabloid newspapers (Table 1). As we will see, women are overwhelmingly the subjects of these stories, with the exception of the ten articles from three traditionally ‘broadsheet’ newspapers (*The Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*) which were about men. Although a comparison of reporting across newspaper type is not an aim of the study, this fact alone indicates a difference between broadsheet and tabloid coverage on this topic.

The analytical approach taken here is a corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis, which combines the quantitative tools of corpus linguistics with the qualitative rigour of critical discourse analysis. Following the practice of Baker et al. (2008: 284), corpus tools were used

Table 1. Breakdown of the ‘Celebrity Stories’ sub-corpus

Newspaper	Articles	Words
<i>The Daily Mail</i>	70	37,514
<i>The Mirror</i>	63	26,783
<i>The Daily Star</i>	61	23,098
<i>The Sun</i>	55	30,070
<i>The Express</i>	18	11,686
<i>The Times</i>	7	4,185
<i>Metro</i>	3	1,130
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	3	2,694
<i>The Guardian</i>	2	2,383
<i>The People</i>	2	1,510
<i>The Independent</i>	1	323
Total	285	141,376

to establish keywords and concordance patterns, providing a ‘map of the corpus, and pinpointing areas of interest for a subsequent close analysis’. A keyword analysis was performed in AntConc (Anthony 2019), comparing the Celebrity Story corpus with the one-million-word BE06 Corpus of British English (Baker 2009), using a Log-likelihood threshold of $p < 0.01$ + Bonferroni and ranking the resultant keyword list by the effect size measure LogRatio (Hardie 2014). Following a keyword analysis, we focused our qualitative examination on one key lemma – *flaunt*. The qualitative analysis involved the manual

examination of all concordance lines for *flaunt* and its derivational forms and the thematic categorisation of discourses surrounding the verb, paying particular attention to its grammatical objects in the data. On the basis of these categories, we identified three emergent patterns in the discourse anchored around this word (c.f. Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery 2013): flaunting the body, flaunting weight loss and the thinner body, and overtly sexualised weight loss. Our analysis draws on extracts from the data that are representative of these patterns throughout and offers interpretations of the ways in which these recurring discourse themes enact the (re)production of power, ideologies and social inequalities (van Dijk 1993: 249) surrounding women, their bodies and weight loss.

Analysis: *Flaunt*

The keyword analysis produced a total of 454 keywords, the top 20 of which are shown in Table 2, with people’s names removed. The keywords reflect three prevalent elements of the celebrity stories. They are predominantly reports about posts which celebrities have made on social media (*instagram, snaps, trolls, followers, captioned, twitter, selfie*), the reports and/or original posts are appearance-oriented (*abs, slimmer, svelte, bombshell*), and they make mention of lockdown-related behaviours, be those related to food, physical activity or

Table 2. Top 20 keywords in the ‘Celebrity Stories’ sub-corpus

Rank	Freq	Keyness	Effect	Keyword
1	286	1192.28	11.97	instagram
2	148	616.86	11.02	coronavirus
3	79	329.24	10.12	snaps
4	791	3230.95	9.86	lockdown
5	52	216.70	9.51	abs
6	46	191.70	9.34	covid
7	45	187.53	9.31	slimmer
8	40	166.69	9.14	trolls
9	157	633.43	9.11	followers
10	38	158.36	9.06	flaunted
11	29	120.85	8.67	gyms
12	52	207.05	8.51	captioned
13	26	108.35	8.51	flaunts
14	26	108.35	8.51	twitter
15	25	104.18	8.46	podcast
16	25	104.18	8.46	selfie
17	24	100.01	8.40	svelte
18	20	83.34	8.14	bombshell
19	19	79.18	8.06	leggings
20	19	79.18	8.06	takeaways

clothing (*takeaways, gym, leggings*). Of course, the backdrop of COVID and lockdown is also present (*coronavirus, lockdown, covid*). The lemma that we are most interested here, however, is *flaunt*. *Flaunted* and *flaunts* are the only verbs in the top 20 keywords with an animate subject (*captioned* is ranked 12th but does not refer to a social actor). In addition, *flaunt* and *flaunting* are ranked 34th and 93rd respectively, with a frequency of 12 each, giving a total of 88 instances of *flaunt** across the Celebrity Story corpus. As well as its statistical salience, *flaunt* and its derivational forms are an important lexical choice in this context. As a somewhat crude way into unpacking this contextual significance, we can briefly defer to its dictionary definition:

1. Of persons: To walk or move about so as to display one’s finery; to display oneself in unbecomingly splendid or gaudy attire; to obtrude oneself boastfully, impudently, or defiantly on the public view
2. Of things: To be extravagantly gaudy or glaringly conspicuous in appearance.
3. To display ostentatiously or obtrusively; to flourish, parade, show off.

(*Oxford English Dictionary*)

To *flaunt* is to self-present for public view. To this end, and in relation to posting on social media, it taps into the self-presentational, self-promotional and self-objectifying nature of posting on social media generally (Ip, Pang and Wu 2017) and body-related content specifically (Ghaznavi and Taylor 2015). Not only that, but to *flaunt* is to self-present in a ‘boastful’, ‘impudent’ and ‘ostentatious’ way and this speaks to celebrities’ and influencers’ use of social media to present a particular aspirational or desirable identity in order to increase their visibility, attract new fans, and promote their commercial value and positive image (Guo and Ren 2020: 8). This also underscores the representational power of *flaunt*; describing someone as *flaunting* attributes a type of agency to them that may not be present. That is, the intention behind an individual posting a particular photo (or indeed having their photo taken by someone else, such as the paparazzi) may not be to flaunt, but it is nevertheless portrayed that way in the press. This positions the semantics of *flaunt* at a crucial intersection between self-presentation on social media and representation in the traditional media.

The verb *flaunt* is not inherently or exclusively sexualised. The most common noun collocates of *flaunt* in English include *wealth, money, style, skills and success*.³ However, as a sample of concordance lines for *flaunt** in the celebrity story corpus shows, the verb is overwhelmingly used to sexualise the celebrities in question and their social media posts (Figure 1).

³ In the 14.7 billion-word ‘News on the Web’ (NOW) corpus (Davies 2022).

Figure 1. Sample of concordance lines for *flaunt** in the ‘Celebrity Stories’ sub-corpus

Geordie Shore house, six years ago Chloe flaunted a fresh face and a trim figure. After a couple of seasons o
 Chloe Ferry flaunts boobs and weight loss as she dons barely there lingerie; G
 Kourtney Kardashian flaunts her curves as she poses in the desert wearing a bikini after
 ll it lockdown challenge complete after she flaunted her fantastic weight loss. The former TOWIE babe looks i
 t in lockdown She is no stranger to flaunting her incredible physique with her 1.2 million followers or
 naterial hugging her figure beautifully and flaunting her incredible transformation. The reality TV star’s sexy c
 brother’s home. In the first snap, Gemma flaunted her killer curves as she posed standing up with her arms
 abulous chefette in the world,’ and happily flaunted her new looks in a grey crop top. In the post, Charlotte sh
 ye-popping display, the blonde bombshell flaunted her plunging cleavage in a denim playsuit as she candidl
 cheddars EMILY Atack continued to flaunt her recent one stone weight loss in a bikini while drinking v
 /ay Is Essex Gemma Collins has once again flaunted her slimmed-down figure as she continues to parade her
 p the heat during the lockdown as she has flaunted her staggering weight loss with another stunning snap.)
 virus pandemic Alexandra Cane has flaunted her weight loss in a teeny bikini as she announces her we
 ess Gemma Collins has flaunted her weight loss transformation in a new Instagram snap.
 Ricky Hatton flaunts impressive lockdown stone weight loss during GMB appea
 Emily Atack flaunts one stone weight loss in gym gear after slamming trolls; E
 Meanwhile others accused the foursome of flaunting social distancing rules. One fan exclaimed: "There's no v
 treet Colson Smith is unrecognisable as he flaunts 'ten stone' weight loss; Coronation Street actor Colson Sm
 Rebel Wilson flaunts weight loss and killer cleavage as she strips down to bra; F
 Atomic Kitten’s Natasha Hamilton flaunts weight loss in miniscule pink bikini; Natasha Hamilton, kno
 Gemma Collins likened to Adele as she flaunts weight loss in plunging dress; Gemma Collins has been tol
 Chloe Ferry flaunts weight loss transformation in teeny silver string bikini; Ger

These concordance lines show that celebrities are represented as flaunting one of three things: (parts of) their body (e.g. ‘the blonde bombshell flaunted her plunging cleavage’), their weight loss (e.g. ‘she flaunted her fantastic weight loss’) or both (e.g. ‘Chloe Ferry flaunts boobs and weight loss’). A manual categorisation of the grammatical objects of *flaunt** in all of its 88 concordance lines finds four types of ‘things’ being flaunted: body (general), body (specific), weight loss and multiple (Table 3). From this point, the analysis focuses on three thematic patterns emerging from this categorisation: flaunting the body, flaunting weight loss and the thinner body, and overtly sexualised weight loss.

Flaunting the body

Of the 88 instances of *flaunt** in the Celebrity Stories corpus, 85 (97%) are attributed to women. Therefore, it is clear that to flaunt the body and/or weight loss is perceived as a gendered behaviour in which women engage far more frequently than men. In 25 instances, *flaunt** is being used straightforwardly to refer to a woman’s body, for example:

- (1) The star took to her Instagram story to **flaunt her figure** in a selfie. (*Daily Star Online*, 19 May 2020)

- (2) Gemma’s Instagram grid has recently become filled with snaps of the blonde sensation **flaunting her figure** as she enjoys the UK lockdown amid the coronavirus pandemic. (*Daily Star Online*, 09 June 2020)

Table 3. A categorisation of *flaunt** objects in the ‘Celebrity Stories’ sub-corpus

Category	Object
WEIGHT LOSS	<i>10lb weight loss (x2), amazing weight-loss, dramatic weight loss, fantastic weight loss (x2), fruits of her labour, impressive lockdown stone weight loss, major weight loss (x3), one stone weight loss (x2), recent one stone weight loss (x2), recent weight loss (x2), results of her recent lifestyle overhaul, 'ten stone' weight loss, three stone weight loss, two stone weight loss, weight loss (x9), weight loss transformation (x3)</i>
BODY (GENERAL)	<i>bikini body, bod, body, figure (x2), gym-honed figure, incredible figure, new body, new frame, new looks, slimmed-down figure (x4), slimmer frame (x2), stunning figure, toned body, toned physique, trimmer frame</i>
BODY (SPECIFIC)	<i>ample cleavage, bronzed tan, curves (x4), incredible curves, killer curves (x3), pert bum, plunging cleavage, rock-hard abs (x2), toned abs, toned midriff, toned pins (x2), underwear, youthful glow</i>
MULTIPLE	<i>boobs and weight loss, fresh face and a trim figure, weight loss and killer cleavage</i>

It is important here to acknowledge the textual context in which these examples are found. Although examples in which *flaunt** is used to refer to the body in general may not specifically mention weight, they are used in news articles wherein the overall topic is about losing weight during the lockdown. Therefore, the *flaunting* is attributed here to a post-weight loss figure. While the majority of the articles in our corpus relate to weight loss, a small number report on celebrity women flaunting their bodies despite perceived weight-gain:

- (3) Kourtney Kardashian **flaunts her curves** as she poses in the desert wearing a bikini after admitting to gaining weight under lockdown (*MailOnline*, 25 May 2020)

- (4) Love Island’s Anna Vakili **flaunts her incredible curves** in racy bikini snaps... after revealing she feels ‘upset’ after putting weight on in lockdown (*MailOnline*, 30 June 2020)
- (5) She recently claimed she gained weight while in lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic that has left most non-essential businesses including gyms closed across the country. But that didn’t stop Cardi B from **flaunting her incredible curves** in a series of snaps and videos posted to Instagram on Tuesday. (*MailOnline*, 27 May 2020)

Each of these examples contains a stigmatising message about weight gain during lockdown and any interpretation that examples of these kind are reflective of a ‘body positive’ or aspirational portrayals of weight gain is misplaced for three reasons. First, Kourtney Kardashian is reported as having ‘admitted’ gaining weight, as one might ‘admit’ wrongdoing, and reality TV star Anna Vakili is reported as ‘feeling upset’ at putting on weight. Both of these portray weight gain as a negative change. Meanwhile, US rapper Cardi B is represented as flaunting her body despite claiming she has gained weight (‘but that didn’t stop her...’), as if one might expect weight gain to prevent a woman sharing pictures of her body. Second, larger bodies are not being celebrated in these examples. Despite apparently self-reporting that they have gained weight during lockdown, all three of these women are still, despite gaining weight, relatively thin. Therefore, their bodies still fall within the remit of bodies considered to be socially acceptable. This is reflected in their curves being positively evaluated as ‘incredible’; see for example Figure 2 displaying the image used in the article about Kourtney Kardashian. Third, the manner in which their weight gain is discussed is highly sexualised with references to the shape of their bodies and the clothing they are wearing. This could be seen as being disempowering as opposed to body positive and aspirational (depending on each individual situation).

Figure 2. Photo of Kourtney Kardashain featured in the *MailOnline*



© Kourtney Kardashian/Instagram

While sexualising women in this manner can usurp their agency and be a form of disempowerment, the focus of our discussion is not on the direct sexualisation of the women in question, but the sexualisation of their weight and, more commonly, their weight loss. Given that the women under discussion in (3), (4) and (5) are far from what would be socially considered as ‘fat’, sexualising their weight gain could still lead to audience members comparing their bodies to the women in these stories. It is known that regularly comparing one’s appearance to others (particularly those who, like the women in these examples, are considered to be ‘attractive’) leads to negative body image and has a demotivational effect on weight loss efforts (Fardouly and Vartanian 2016; Tang et al. 2022). Therefore, simultaneously representing these celebrities as having gained weight *and* reporting on their ‘incredible curves’ is likely to exacerbate weight-related anxiety and negative body image for those reading who are experiencing their own weight change as a result of the conditions of lockdown. While we have managed to find rare examples of weight gain being sexualised in our corpus, the examples we provide throughout the remainder of the paper (representative of the majority of the news articles in the Celebrity Stories corpus), demonstrate how weight loss and the women who have undergone weight loss are sexualised.

In terms of perpetuating beauty ideals and objectifying women’s bodies, examples abound in the data in which reports about weight loss use *flaunt** to focus on particular areas of a woman’s (post-weight-loss) body:

- (6) It comes after Chloe was sure to set pulses racing as she **flaunted her ample cleavage** in a lacy lingerie set for another Instagram post on Friday. (*MailOnline*, 01 July 2020)
- (7) The 24-year-old television star **flaunted her pert bum** as she posed wearing nothing but a tiny white thong for one of her latest home photoshoots during lockdown. (*Daily Star Online*, 18 May 2020)
- (8) **Flaunting her toned midriff**, Alexandra opted for matching bottoms, which sat high-up on her hips to showcase her **curves and endless pins**. (*Daily Star Online*, 03 April 2020)

These examples emphasise and sexualise the parts of women’s bodies that typically drive men’s sexual attraction to women (e.g. Franzoi and Herzog 1987) and it is therefore not surprising that the gaze of the reader is directed to these areas. Not only does this objectify and overtly sexualise the women in question, but it also reinforces beauty ideals related to these parts of the body: cleavage should be ‘ample’, bum should be ‘pert’, midriff should be ‘toned’ and legs should be ‘endless’. The pre-occupation with the desired shape of a woman’s body parts could at least in part explain why weight loss and those who have undergone weight loss are sexualised.

So far, the few examples we have discussed have demonstrated that *flaunt** is used in our data to project two things onto weight and weight loss. Firstly, as can be seen in (3)-(8), it sexualises it, particularly when the surrounding co-text is also sexual in nature. Secondly, as seen in (1) and (2), it can indicate that weight loss it is something to boast about. The boastful manner in which *flaunt** is used within the context of weight loss places thinness on a pedestal and inherently denigrates fat bodies. Similarly, sexualising weight loss and a new, thinner body perpetuates the pervasive and stigmatising notion that thinness is equivalent to beauty. Further, sexualising weight loss can be demeaning and using *flaunt** to do so can reinforce harmful ideologies in regard to consent, an argument we will further explore next. These examples highlight an important theme that emerges from the articles – the newspapers’ pre-occupation with what the women are wearing. In (6)-(8) there are details about a ‘lacy lingerie set’, ‘tiny white thong’ and ‘matching (bikini) bottoms, the type of clothing that women are more likely to be objectified when wearing (Gurung and Chrouser 2007). Clothing therefore appears to be central to the act of flaunting the post-weight loss body and attracting a particular kind of attention; ‘the wearing of revealing clothes is often taken as a virtual invitation for sexual objectification’ (Tiggemann and Andrea 2012: 652). However, the question again arises as to whether the women are indeed ‘flaunting’ in such a way that they invite sexualisation and objectification, or whether this is an evaluative (mis)characterisation of their posts by the media. This question is all the more stark in examples where the women are wearing clothing that does not seem to warrant such sexualisation:

- (9) The *Inbetweeners* star, 30, looked incredible in the black dress which she belted at the waist to **flaunt her curves**. (*MailOnline*, 04 July 2020)

- (10) The blonde bombshell, 39, has taken to Instagram to once again **to flaunt her slimmed-down figure** in a floral-patterned mini dress. (*Daily Star Online*, 8 May 2020)

In (9) British actress Emily Atack is said to be flaunting her curves by virtue of wearing a belt with her dress, while reality star Gemma Collins is described as flaunting her 'slimmed-down figure' in a mini dress (10). Figures 3 and 4 show the images that are used in the articles in which Emily Atack and Gemma Collins are described as 'flaunting' their bodies, corresponding to these extracts.

Figure 3. Photo of Emily Atack featured provided in the MailOnline



© Nash/Backgrid

Figure 4. Photo of Gemma Collins features in the *Daily Star Online*



© gemmacollins1/Instagram

The first noticeable disconnect between the use of the verb *flaunt** and these images is that the image of Emily Attack (Figure 3), is a paparazzi photo, and not one that she shared herself. This brings into question how active her role is in the alleged ‘flaunting’ that has taken place. Additionally, as can be seen in both examples, ‘flaunting’ is attributed to women wearing clothes that are not generally considered revealing or provocative in the same way as perhaps bikinis and thongs may be, making the use of *flaunt** a curious linguistic choice. Two thoughts arise here. Firstly, one may wonder if women can do anything or wear anything without being branded as ‘flaunting’ their bodies. Secondly, perhaps it is the weight loss that both women underwent which inspired the use of *flaunt** in images which cannot be interpreted as sexualised or provocative in any way. Regardless, referring to a woman as ‘flaunting’ her curves, cleavage, bottom or legs assumes *and* implies that they are willingly inviting objectification and the sexualising male gaze. In other words, they are presented as ‘asking for it’, which is concerning given the widely-held rape myth that by dressing a certain way women are inviting sexual advances from men (e.g. Maurer and Robinson 2008). Such readings of the (mis)use of *flaunt* have implications for the reporting on women’s social media posts generally and are to be kept in mind when examining examples more explicitly related to weight loss, which is where our analysis now turns.

Flaunting weight loss and the thinner body

There are 20 instances of *flaunt* in the sub-corpus that relate to celebrity women flaunting weight loss in a way that could be described as not *overtly* sexualised, for example:

- (11) Toned Ferne McCann shares pics of epic 21-day body transformation as she sheds lockdown weight can officially call it lockdown challenge complete after she **flaunted her fantastic weight loss**. (*The Mirror*, 25 May 2020)
- (12) Gemma Collins has **flaunted her amazing weight-loss** while lapping up the sunshine in lockdown. (*The Mirror*, 06 May 2020)
- (13) Charlotte Dawson **flaunts her 10lb weight loss** as she celebrates her transformation by dancing around in a grey crop top. (*MailOnline*, 02 July 2020)
- (14) Emily Atack **flaunts one stone weight loss** in gym gear after slamming trolls. (*The Mirror*, 22 April 2020)
- (15) Natasha Hamilton, known for her back catalogue of hits with Atomic Kitten, **flaunted the results of her recent lifestyle overhaul** as she opened up about exercising in lockdown. (*Daily Star*, 02 June 2020).

We have argued above that *flaunt* has connotations of boastfulness and ‘showing off’, and this indicates that weight loss is considered something worthy of flaunting *either* by the women celebrities *or* the tabloid press, or both. Two additional elements to this representation are shown in these examples which reinforce this notion: the positive evaluation of weight loss by the media (‘fantastic weight loss’, ‘amazing weight-loss’) and the emphasis on amount of weight lost (‘10lb weight loss’, ‘one stone weight loss’). This celebration of the weight loss and the new thinner body carries with it stigmatising anti-fat messages that reinforce the pervasive societal link between thin bodies and traditional beauty ideals. These examples do not just embody the social inequalities between thin and fat bodies. Indeed, COVID-19 and the shockwaves that it sent through society and the economy deepened many other existing inequalities (Blundell et al., 2020). Generally speaking, wealthy celebrities found themselves in a vastly different situation to those who could not work from home, or who faced reduced income, redundancy and home-schooling their children and who were not able to invest the same time and resource to ‘lockdown challenges’ (example 11) or ‘lifestyle overhauls’ (example 15). Therefore, the widespread reporting of ‘amazing’ and substantial weight loss during the period of national lockdown and self-comparisons to these stories may intensify readers’ existing body image issues and weight-related poor mental health. It may also contribute to a sense of hopelessness when comparing their (un)healthy lockdown behaviours to those that celebrities are able to engage in. Whether or not the celebrities intended to ‘flaunt’ their weight loss in an ostentatious way or whether the tabloid media report it in such a way as to insinuate that is largely irrelevant to the possible effects these articles could have on their readers.

As well as having potentially detrimental connotations of boastfulness, we have also seen above that *flaunt* is used in an objectifying and sexualising way. Whereas examples (11)-(15) above are not explicitly sexualised, there are 17 instances of *flaunt* wherein we can begin to see how weight loss can be subtly sexualised. For example:

- (16) Gemma Collins has been turning up the heat during the lockdown as she has **flaunted her staggering weight loss** with another stunning snap. (Daily Star, 27 May 2020)
- (17) She has managed to shed three stone and is beaming in glamorous photos she posts to Instagram to **flaunt her new body**. (*The Sun*, 02 July 2020)
- (18) Emily Atack **flaunted her stunning figure** in stylish gym gear after losing one stone. (*The Mirror*, 22 April 2020)
- (19) The former Love Island star has shed 3lbs during lockdown and **flaunted her toned body** in the racy snap taken in a garden. (*Daily Star*, 28 May 2020).

It is in instances such as these that we see the merging and overlapping of body, weight and beauty discourses. We know from the discussion above that *flaunt** is a key discursive tool in the objectification and sexualisation of women’s bodies and we see weight loss being given the same treatment here. Specifically, weight loss is presented as the path to a new, better, version of the body and weight loss itself can be flaunted with pride. The positivity and sexual value ascribed to weight loss and the thin(ner) body is further reflected in the evaluation of the body-change. The women and their photos are described as ‘glamorous’, ‘stunning’ and ‘racy’. The message is clear; the thinner body is the better body. It is also within this message and this evaluation where we see a shift from overlapping discourses of the (sexualised and objectified) body and weight towards the more overt sexualisation of weight loss *itself*, and this is the focus of the final part of the analysis.

Overtly sexualised weight loss

In the previous examples we demonstrated how weight loss is, although arguably tenuously, linked to sexual attractiveness. However, we have yet to present those instances in which weight loss itself is overtly sexualised. There are 22 instances of *flaunt* in which such sexualisation of weight loss occurs, for example:

- (20) Chloe Ferry **flaunts boobs and weight loss** as she dons barely there lingerie (*Daily Star*, 15 June 2020)
- (21) Rebel Wilson **flaunts weight loss and killer cleavage** as she strips down to bra (Daily Star, 04 May 2020)
- (22) EMILY Atack continued to **flaunt her recent one stone weight loss** in a bikini while drinking wine and eating mini cheddars. (*The Sun*, 25 April 2020)

- (23) Atomic Kitten's Natasha Hamilton **flaunts weight loss** in miniscule pink bikini. (*Daily Star*, 02 June 2020)
- (24) The Love Island star, who has been spending lockdown at boyfriend Sam Thompson's West London home, thrilled her online following when she stripped down to a teeny pink two-piece, **flaunting her two stone weight loss**. (*Daily Star*, 19 June 2020)

In examples 20 and 21, weight loss is objectified in combination with ‘boobs’ and ‘killer cleavage’. In this way, the objectification of a woman’s breasts (as saw earlier in the analysis) is extended to weight loss and both are collected under the scope of being flaunted. This aggregation of a frequently objectified part of a woman’s body and weight loss is only found in these two instances in the full corpus. What is far more common are those instances in which weight loss *replaces* the body or a part of the body as the flaunted and the objectified, such as in examples 22-24. Although we have discussed above the sexualising effect of *flaunt**, in these examples, a good deal of the objectification and sexualisation is performed by other elements of the co-text – namely, focused attention on what the women are wearing. Our analysis above identified and described the effect of the media focusing on a woman’s clothing in such a way to objectify her or a part of her body, and here we can observe the same thing happening to the process and result of weight loss. Details of ‘barely there lingerie’, ‘bra’, ‘(miniscule pink) bikini’ and ‘teeny pink two-piece’ all emphasise the at least partial nudity of the women in the photos, and this emphasis on minimal clothing serves to sexualise the weight loss that is subsequently ‘on show’ for readers’ gaze. The pattern in which *flaunt* and some reference to weight loss is followed by an *in*-initial prepositional phrase, detailing what a woman is wearing, is a particularly productive way in which the tabloid press sexualise weight loss and is found repeatedly throughout the data (Figure 5). Although this focus on clothing in the objectification of women’s bodies in the media is well-established, what is being objectified here is specifically their *weight loss*. Therefore, this is clear evidence of the discursive correlation in our data between weight loss and sex and sexual attractiveness. The danger of overtly sexualising weight loss in this way is that it forcefully reiterates the high social value on weight loss and reinforces the fatphobic ideology of thin is beautiful, further entrenching the weight stigma that pervades western societies.

Figure 5. Concordance lines for weight loss in relation to prepositional phrase providing detail of clothing

Emily Atack flaunts bod in skimpy gym wear after one-stone weight loss transformation; I'm A Celeb's Emily Atack
Chloe Ferry flaunts boobs and weight loss as she dons barely there lingerie; Geordie Shore bombshell Chloe Ferry
Gemma Collins flaunts dramatic weight loss in £2k Gucci tracksuit for shopping spree; TOWIE bombshell Gemma Colli
Charlotte Dawson flaunts her 10lb weight loss as she celebrates her transformation by dancing around in a grey crop top
Geordie Shore star, 24, has been flaunting her new figure in lockdown after losing weight, posing in the neon pink set and Nike high top
'refette in the world,' and happily flaunted her new looks in a grey crop top. In the post, Charlotte shared a before and after of her transfc
on; I'm A Celeb's Emily Atack has flaunted her one-stone weight loss in a skimpy workout bra and leggings after 'cooking herself slim' at
EMILY Atack continued to flaunt her recent one stone weight loss in a bikini while drinking wine and eating mini cheddars. The be
Zara McDermott has flaunted her recent weight loss in a pair of tiny Daisy Duke shorts for her latest Instagram reveal. The t
en to Instagram to once again to flaunt her slimmed-down figure in a floral-patterned mini dress. Gemma oozed body confidence as she
l 3lbs during lockdown. And she flaunted her slimmer frame in the snap of herself in pink lingerie. Zara is seen staring at her phone in tl
on Instagram
Emily Atack flaunted her stunning figure in stylish gym gear after losing one stone. The Inbetweeners actress, 30, w
Chloe Ferry has continued to flaunt her two stone weight loss as she showed off her tiny body around in skimpy lingerie. The forme
lemic
Alexandra Cane has flaunted her weight loss in a teeny bikini as she announces her weight loss and fitness plan has droppe
Chloe Ferry flaunts major weight loss as she bares all in tiny lace knickers; Geordie Shore's Chloe Ferry informed h
Rebel Wilson flaunts major weight loss in lycra-clad lockdown snaps; Rebel Wilson has stunned fans by showing off
Gemma Collins flaunts major weight loss in skimpy minidress as she shuts down trolls; Diva Forever star Gemma Colli
Emily Atack flaunts one stone weight loss in gym gear after slamming trolls; Emily Atack has been keeping herself
: ATACK Emily Atack continues to flaunt one stone weight loss in a bikini while drinking wine and eating mini cheddars
EMILY At
tomic Kitten's Natasha Hamilton flaunts weight loss in miniscule pink bikini; Natasha Hamilton, known for her back catalogue of hits wit
has wardrobe malfunction as she flaunts weight loss in lockdown workout; Gemma Collins sent Diva on Lockdown viewers wild as she tr
ia Collins likened to Adele as she flaunts weight loss in plunging dress; Gemma Collins has been told she looked like superstar Adele as :
na Collins oozes glamour as she flaunts weight loss in skintight denim jeans; The Only Way Is Essex and Diva on Lockdown star Gemma
wows Loose Women fans as she flaunts weight loss in skintight lycra; Loose Women's Saira Khan continued her weight loss crusade as
Chloe Ferry flaunts weight loss transformation in teeny silver string bikini; Geordie Shore star Chloe Ferry shared a
Love Island's Zara McDermott flaunts weight loss transformation in tiny thong; Love Island babe Zara McDermott has showed off her

Readers of the tabloid press were exposed to this sexualisation of weight loss while under strict lockdown and facing unprecedented changes to their own behaviours. It is the potential effects of the discursive representations of the body and weight loss being consumed by a locked-down nation facing challenges with changes to their own weight and health to which we turn in the conclusion.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed the ways in which celebrity women's bodies and weight loss were objectified and sexualised by the British tabloid press in the three months of the first national COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. While the objectification of women in the media is now well-established and well-analysed, the same objectification of the process and product of weight loss has not featured in the literature to date. We cannot know for certain any effect that reading the articles in our corpus had on women during lockdown. However, we do know that the objectification of women and the promotion of thin beauty ideals in traditional and social media at any time are associated with self-objection and lower self-esteem and are detrimental to women's mental health (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Lavine et al. 1999; Ghaznavi and Taylor 2015). At the same time, we also know that during lockdown, people generally engaged in behaviours which are associated with weight-gain (Robinson et al. 2020; Stockwell et al. 2021) and that women and those with past or current eating disorders

reported increasing concerns around body image and appearance (Robertson et al. 2021). Therefore, being exposed to objectified bodies and sexualised weight loss during lockdown may have worsened the effects of both. In reporting on weight loss and women’s bodies in the ways that we have observed here, the British tabloid press was at best contributing to the fatphobic, weight-stigmatising beauty ideals by which women are bound, at a time when they were particularly vulnerable to the effects of these messages. At worst, it was exacerbating an already dire public health crisis.

In methodological terms, we hope the analysis here demonstrates the benefits of corpus linguistics in identifying statistically salient but otherwise banal lexical items (such as *flaunt**) and underlines the responsibility of critical discourse analysts to examine the minutiae of linguistic choice, and the representational power of such choices. More generally, a brief moment can be taken here to reflect on the word *flaunt** and its specific role in the discourse under analysis. The majority of the news articles that comprised our corpus for this study were of a particular and peculiar kind, in that they reported on posts that celebrities had made on social media. Whether or not the women made the posts to intentionally flaunt their bodies and weight loss is unclear and also largely irrelevant to our argument. The research surrounding the objectification of women in the media is vast and what we are adding to this literature is evidence that weight loss is another aspect of a woman’s appearance which is routinely sexualised and objectified. We have discussed instances in the course of our analysis in which the women could not plausibly be interpreted as *flaunting* anything. However, there are some examples in our data where *flaunt** is attributed to images posted on social media in which the women are more posed, and where they may have more agency in *flaunting*. From a CDA perspective there is much which could be unpacked here. For example, the fact that the system under which the West lives socially rewards women who are considered attractive by the male gaze, may account for why women can feel compelled to post such photos on social media to achieve a certain ‘success’ in their industry. Either way, our focus on this paper has been on the sexualisation of weight loss. The gendered nature of the sexualisation of weight loss is stark as we have demonstrated. As a by-product of this, the women who have undergone weight loss are also sexualised. And whether they are fully clothed, posing or walking in the street does not change the impact of how weight loss is sexualised. By routinely representing celebrity women as *flaunting* their weight loss, the tabloids have invited objectification and sexualisation with a relentless focus on their weight, particular parts of their bodies and their clothes, regardless of the intention of the women. This removal or hijacking of the agency that women have over their bodies speaks to a much broader societal challenge which (wilfully) misconstrues women’s behaviour as inviting sex or sexual attention.

It is not the aim of this paper to argue that weight loss is bad or that individuals should not be happy or proud to have met their own weight loss goals. Nor are we unrealistically lobbying for the tabloid press to suddenly pay less attention to celebrities’ social media activity. What we can call for, on the basis of the data and analysis presented here, is for a more sensitive, and less sexualised approach to weight-related content on both traditional and social media. Future research can examine whether the representations we have identified here persisted over the course of the many more lockdowns that the UK endured in 2020 and 2021. The results emerging here suggest that the tabloid press can do much more to reduce the damaging effects of objectifying, sexualising and weight-stigmatising ideologies. Perhaps during a public health emergency would have been an opportune moment to start.

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