



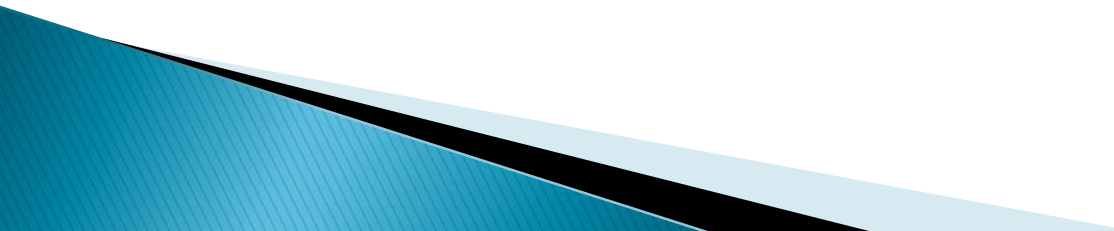
# An analysis of the representation of the obesity epidemic in Ireland



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# Research Questions

- ▶ Is obesity a major issue in the Irish media?
  - ▶ How have the media portrayed and framed the issue of obesity and has this portrayal evolved over time?
  - ▶ Is the media discourse on obesity aligned with the public discourse on obesity?
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# Background: Obesity

## Prevalence

- ▶ 37% of the Irish adult population are overweight and 24% are obese (IUNA, 2011).
  - 67% increase in obesity since 1990

## Causes

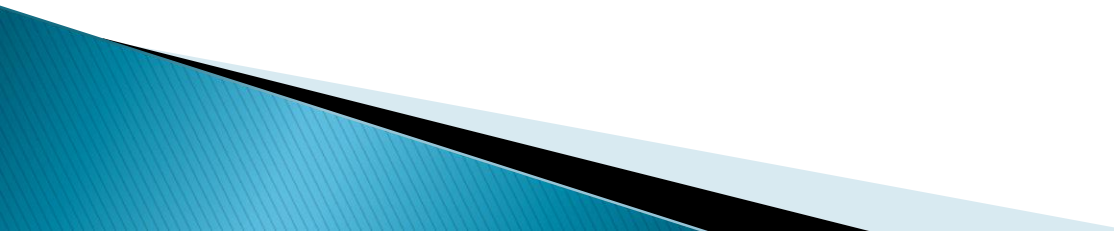
- ▶ Energy imbalance
- ▶ Obesogenic environments
- ▶ Genetic/Developmental pathways
  - Gene x environment interaction

# Obesity

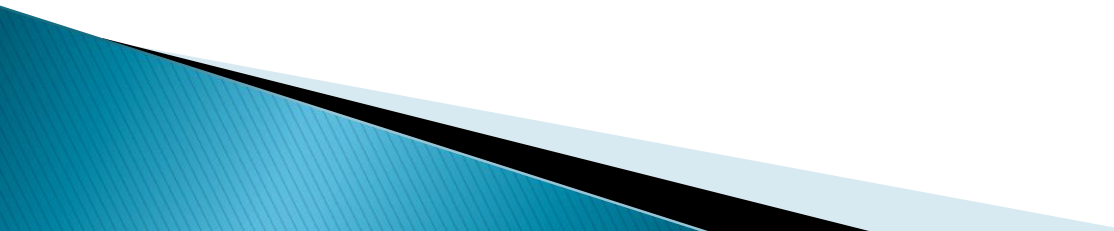
## Consequences

- ▶ **Physical:** Type 2 diabetes, cancers, CHD, hypertension, gall bladder disease, respiratory problems (NTFO, 2005)
- ▶ **Social:** Highly stigmatised condition, prejudice "borders on socially acceptable" (NTFO, 2005), discrimination in areas of education, employment and healthcare (Puhl et al., 2005)
- ▶ **Psychological:** Depression, anxiety – as result of both physical and social consequences of obesity
- ▶ **Societal** – economic costs, healthcare, costs to business,


# Media Influence Theory

- ▶ Media set agenda for public discourse by their selection of what is newsworthy (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).
  - ▶ **Framing**: how an issue is characterised in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences (Entman, 2004).
  - ▶ News frame: organising idea for news content that suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration.
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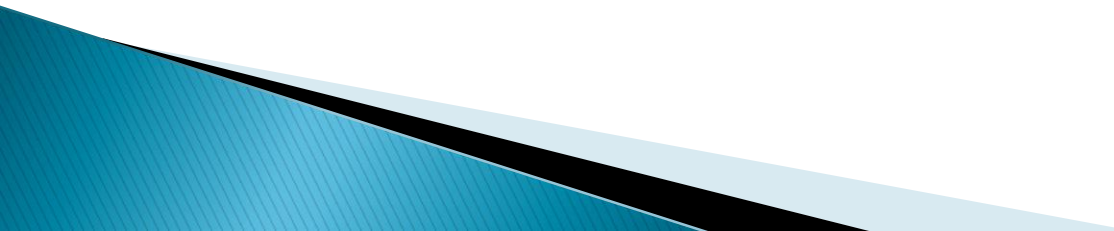
# Value of Media Analysis

- ▶ Evidence suggests lay public seek health information through the media (e.g., Carlsson, 2000) and that the media is the primary source of nutrition information for people in UK and Ireland (Buttriss, 1997; Institute of European Food Studies, 1996).
  - ▶ Irish people = high-level media consumers, e.g., 86% of adults are regular newspaper readers (JNRS, 2010).
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# Common Sense Model (Leventhal et al)

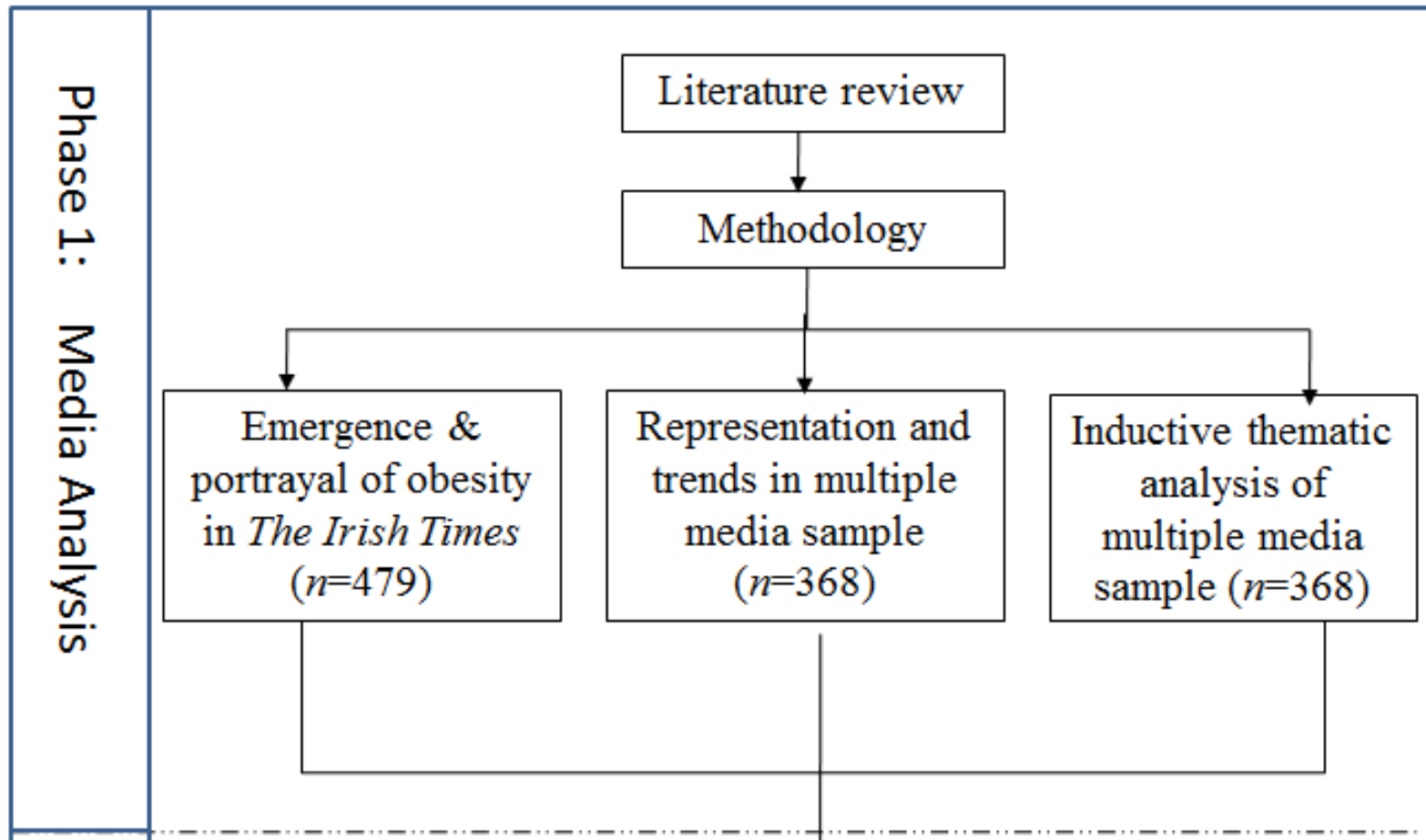
- ▶ Illness representations: people's beliefs and expectations regarding a disease/symptom (Leventhal et al., 1980; Martin et al., 2003).
  - ▶ Illness representations, organised into schemas, influence an individual's assessment of a disease/health behaviour.
  - ▶ Developed through exposure to a variety of sources incl. education, experiences, and the news media
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# CSM


- ▶ IRs contain five dimensions: label, cause, consequence, control/cure, and trajectory
  - ▶ Beliefs on these dimensions can influence health behaviours, e.g., Wang & Coups, 2010.
  - ▶ Value: Offers practical way to examine media discourse, complements framing, implications for audiences understandings of health issues
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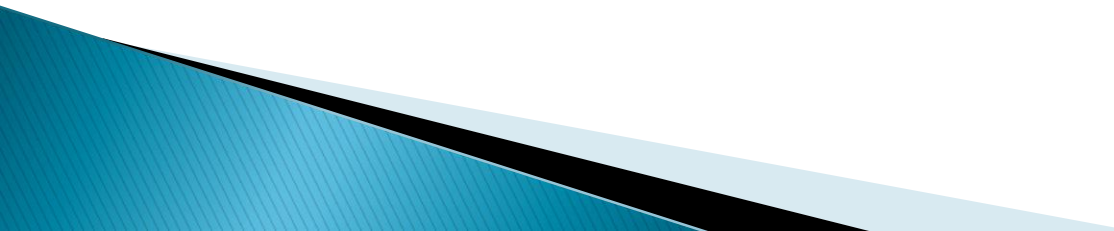
# Research Framework



# Study 1: Emergence of obesity in the media

- ▶ The Emergence and Portrayal of Obesity in the Irish Times: Content Analysis of Obesity Coverage 1997–2009
  - ▶ How has obesity been represented in the *Irish Times*? Has this portrayal changed over time?
  - ▶ Analysis based on Illness Representations framework (Leventhal et al., 1980)
  - ▶ Hyp. I: Behavioural causes and solutions will be cited most frequently.
  - ▶ Hyp. II: Environmental causes and solutions to obesity will become more frequent over time.
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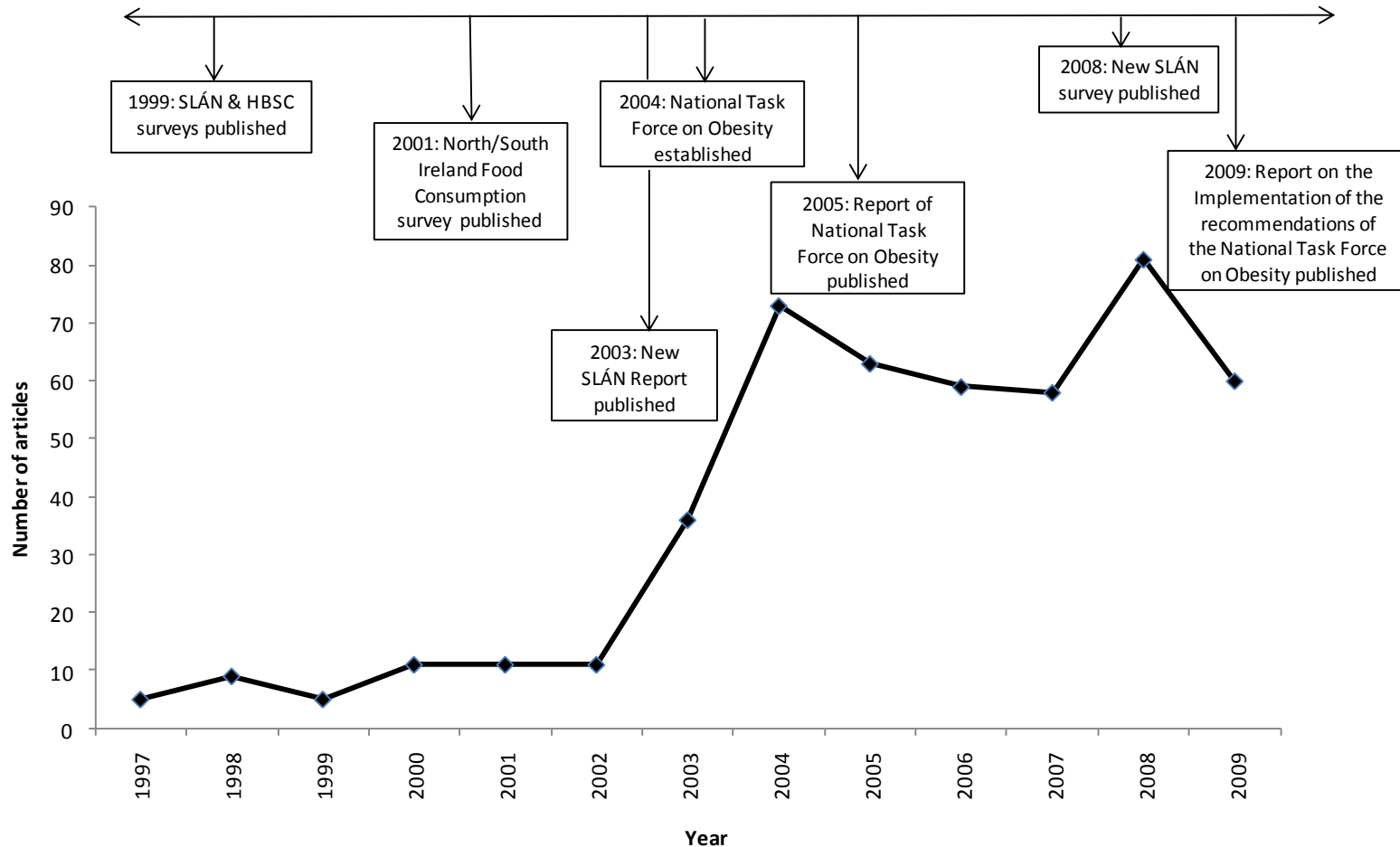
# Method

- ▶ Article search in *LexisNexis*, inclusion criteria applied
  - ▶ All IT articles that met the criteria ( $n = 479$ ) and were published during the period 1997–2009 were analysed
  - ▶ Coding frame developed during a pilot study with 75 randomly selected IT articles.
  - ▶ A content analysis coded articles for article characteristics and the presence/absence of various causes, consequences, solutions and descriptions.
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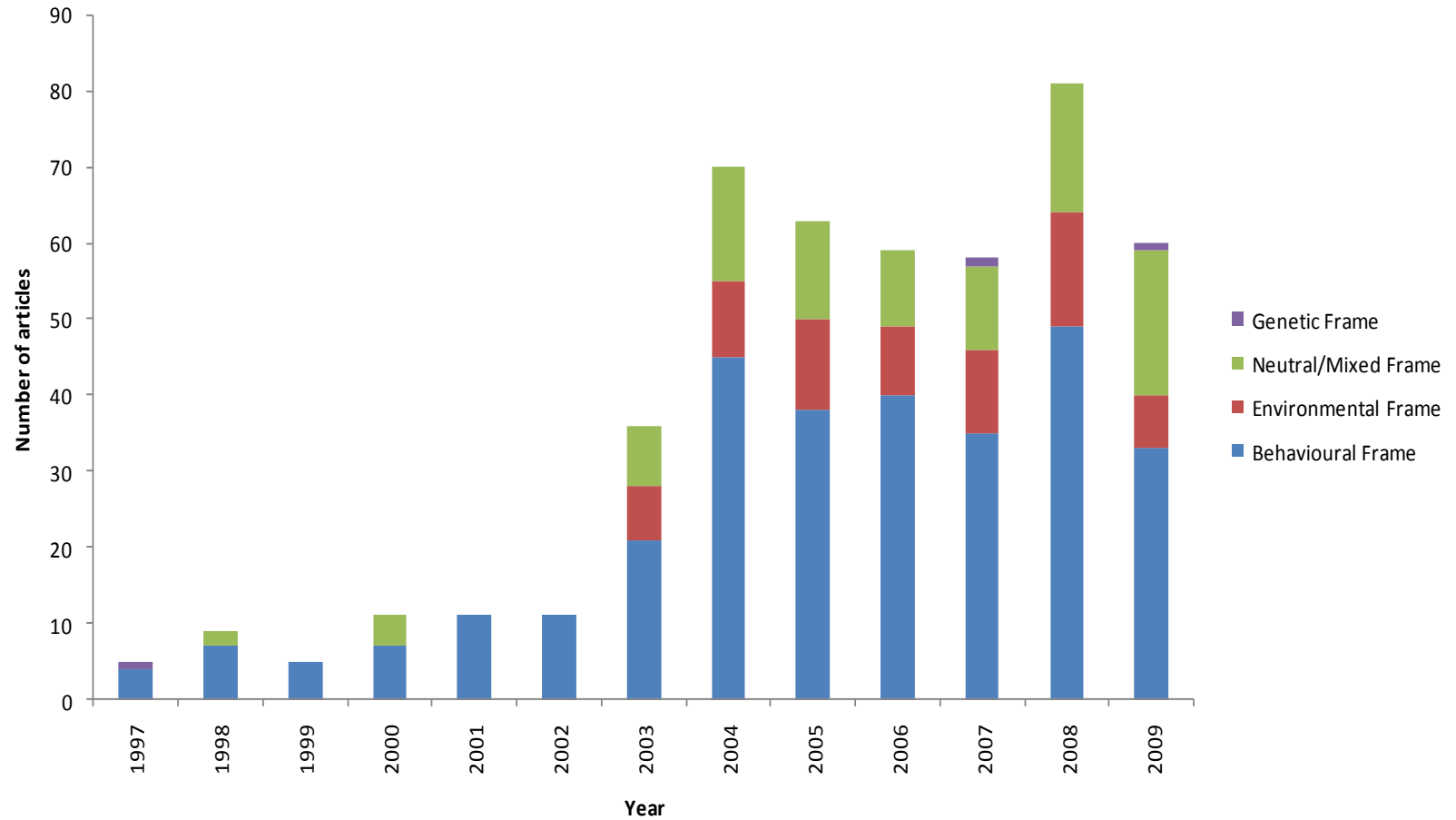
# Findings

- ▶ Characteristics of the sample:
  - 45 front-page articles on obesity (9%).
  - The tone of articles was mostly neutral (52%) but there were almost twice as many negative (31%) as positive articles (17%).
  - Obesity was described as an 'epidemic' most frequently and war metaphors were also frequently used
- Sig. increase in number of articles over time  $p < 0.01$

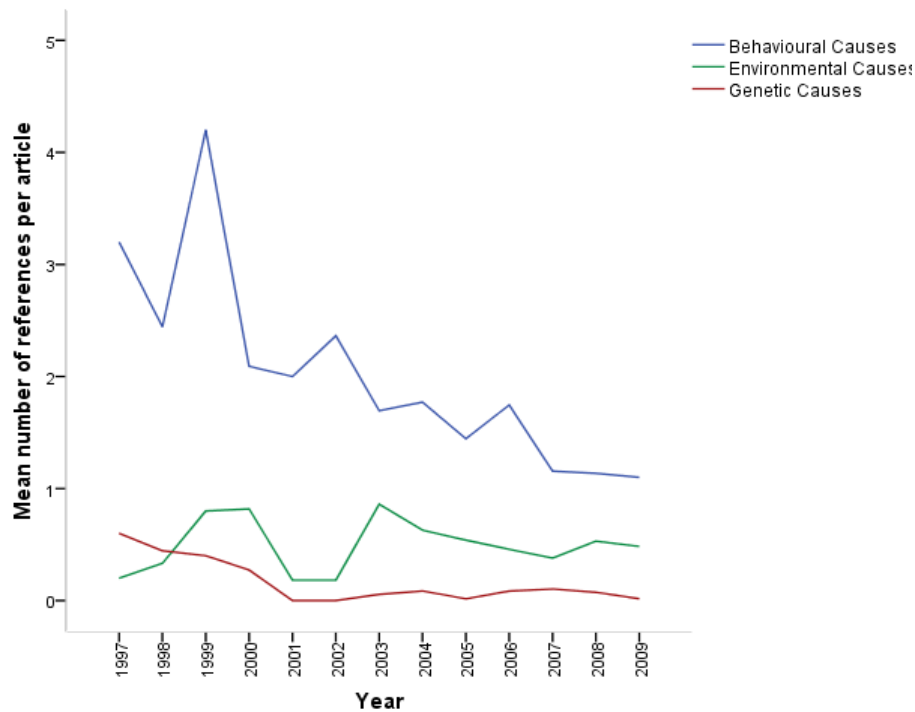
# Number of IT articles per year



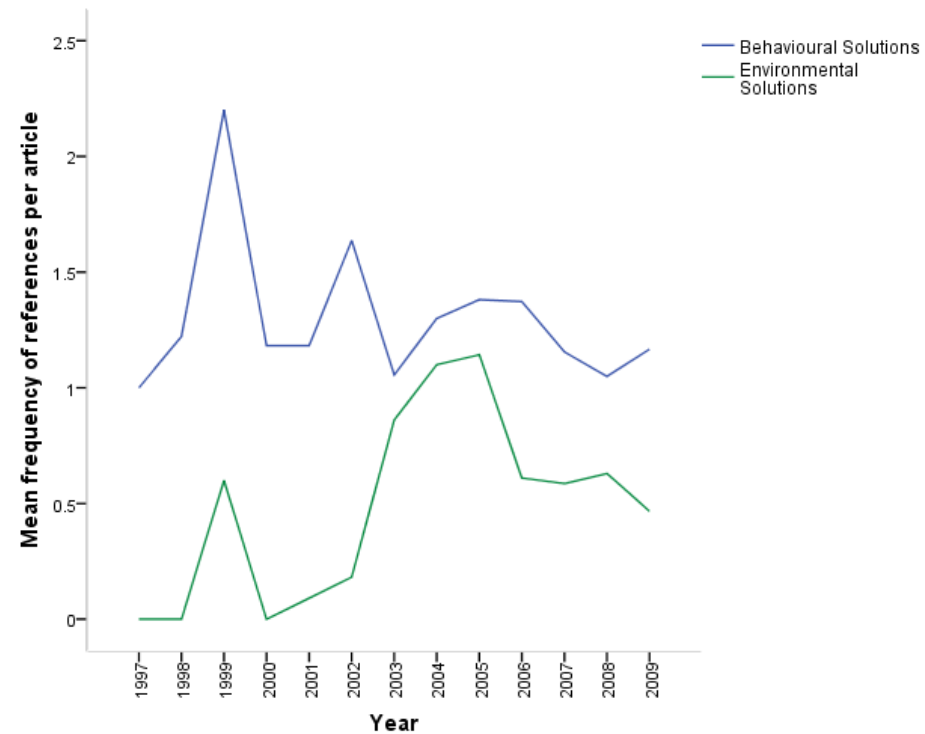
# Dominant frames by year (IT)



# Findings



Reported Causes of Obesity



Reported Solutions to Obesity

# Findings

- ▶ Articles reporting on economic costs as a societal consequence of obesity increased considerably
  - 1997–2002 = 7 articles
  - 2003–2009 = 72 articles
  - The highest number of articles in 2008.
- Reframing of the issue



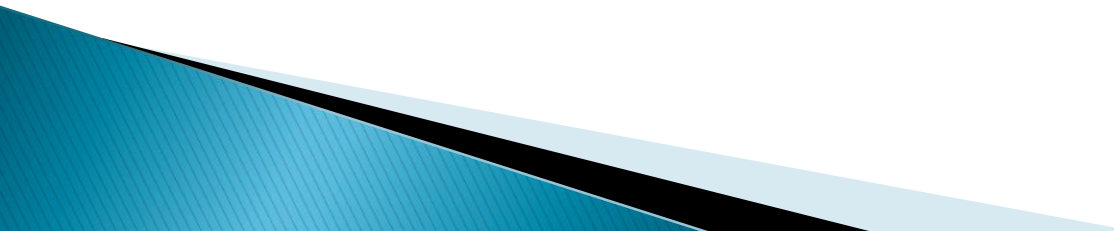
# Study 2: Multiple Media Analysis

- ▶ Using systematic sampling from six major publications, both broadsheet & tabloid, radio broadcasts and RTE online news articles ( $n=368$ )
- ▶ Causes, consequences, solutions, descriptions, tone, sources, debates, headline.
- ▶ CA and TA conducted
- ▶ Intercoder Agreement – ranged from 88–100%.



# Study 2: Qualitative Analysis

**Thematic analysis** revealed 4 major themes:

- ▶ **Gatekeepers** and gender roles/norms in diet and weight management
  - ▶ The **contestability** of obesity
  - ▶ **Barriers** to effective weight management
  - ▶ **Illness Representations** (cause, conseq, solution, timeline)
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# Study 2: Gatekeepers / Gender theme

Three sub-themes evident:

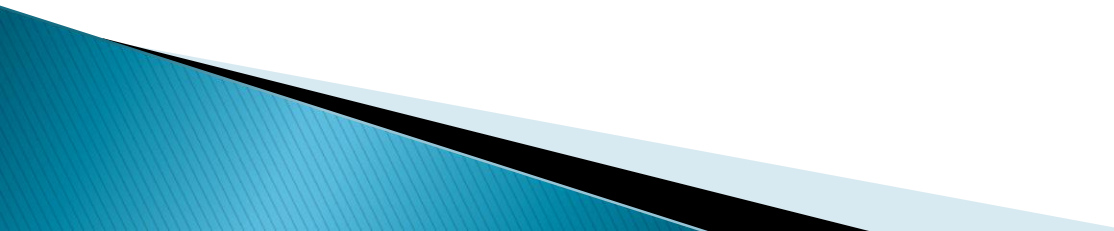
- ▶ Parents as Gatekeepers
- ▶ Women as Gatekeepers for men
- ▶ Caricatured portrayal of gender

## Parents as Gatekeepers:

- ▶ "On your child's behalf, you are welcoming with open arms the chance of heart disease, and, later on, you will not be thanked for your negligence...We have an unconditional responsibility to our kids until they're 16. That includes the consequences of their diet." (EH)

# Study 2: Gatekeepers / Gender theme

## Caricatured portrayal of gender:

- ▶ "We [men] just don't think about our bodies in the same way women think about theirs. If a woman detects a milligram of extra fat, she runs to the gym" (IT)
  - ▶ Extreme difference between men and women. Over exaggeration of an underlying truth?
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# Study 2: Gatekeepers / Gender theme

## Caricatured Portrayal of Gender:


- ▶ "Two lads are sitting in a bar, having a pint and a chat. "Look at you!" exclaims the first bloke. "You're so skinny – I hate you. You're like, what, a size zero?" The other bloke replies, "Oh, get away. I'm like an elephant. I've been going mad on the Guinness. I need to go to the gym big-time." "No, no, you look like you've been running marathons." "Oh, no, I've completely let myself go. I can hardly fit into these jeans." This conversation couldn't, of course, have happened between two typical Irishmen. We just don't talk to each other like that." (IT)

# Study 2: Contestability theme


## Four sub-themes:

- ▶ Vested interests in epidemic status
- ▶ Over-exaggeration/uncertainty
- ▶ Weight measurement and fit and fat debates
- ▶ **Mistrust of experts**
  - "Grub boffins (eggheads who must be right, right?)" (EH)
  - "We are told that obesity costs us EUR 500 million per year. How on earth would anybody know that? Think of a figure, double it, and then run with it to fan the flames of the latest official fear. "(IT)

# Study 2: Illness Reps theme

- ▶ Experts were quoted in the **majority (69%)** and reporting tended to align with expert opinion.
  - ▶ Dominant portrayal of obesity as a **personal** issue
  - ▶ Reporting served to **perpetuate weight stigma**, descriptions intended to appal and disgust
  - ▶ Consistent **Gov blame** for failure to act, advertising regulation a prominent sub-theme.
  - ▶ **Economy implicated**
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# Conclusions

- ▶ Media adoption of health agenda
  - ▶ Lack of modernisation in the media discourse around gender role in diet and weight management
  - ▶ Expectation that Irish media audiences would have a developed understanding of the risks associated with obesity.
  - ▶ Weight trends have continued to rise.
    - Optimistic bias, social comparison
    - Influence of uncertainty & contradictions in articles
  - ▶ Further research re: individuals IRs, public discourse required
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# Thank you for your attention



## Any questions?

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