



Individual responsibilities, collective issues: The framing of dietary practices in Latvian media

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ABSTRACT

Topics concerning food and diets have gained prominence in academic writing, policy debates and media coverage, not least due to public health problems, sedentary lifestyles, and concerns regarding dietary habits and the impact of food production on climate change. The purpose of this paper is to reveal the ways dietary practices have been framed in the media through an analysis of Latvian print and digital media articles. A selection of 192 media articles published between 2014 and 2019 were analysed through the perspective of framing. The analysis identifies three prominent frames found in Latvian media: (i) a biomedical frame, (ii) a psychological frame, and (iii) a social practice frame. The frames are connected by several cross-cutting themes: individualisation, self-disciplining, gendering, and medicalisation. The results suggest that the media portray unhealthy dietary as the responsibility of individuals, whilst ignoring, with some exceptions, the impact of broader societal and food system processes. These results call for more attention to be paid by media content creators to the diversity of actors involved in food production, consumption and distribution and their inter-connections, as well as the impact that food systems have on economic, social, and ecological sustainability.

1. Introduction

Food and dietary habits are becoming increasingly prominent in public debate worldwide. In particular, the prevalence of non-communicable diseases, sedentary lifestyles, and unhealthy consumption habits have given rise to concerns as to the dietary practices of individuals and their impact on overall public health and sustainability of food consumption in Europe (see [EC, 2020](#); [Lakerveld et al., 2020](#); [OECD, 2018](#)). Furthermore, according to the Pan-European *Farm to Fork* strategy, one out of five deaths (in 2017) in the European Union was the result of unhealthy diets. Thus, it is crucial to incentivise healthier and more sustainable dietary choices, consisting of more plant-based products and less meat ([EC, 2020](#)). Latvia has not been immune to this trend. For example, several recent studies have indicated that a high number of people living in Latvia are overweight (e.g. [Spinelli et al., 2019](#); [Velika et al., 2019](#)), and these issues have attracted media attention ([Antīņa, 2020](#); [LSM, 2019](#); [LSM, 2020](#); [LTV "Rīta Panorāma", 2020](#); [Petrova, 2020](#)).

While overall public health is hugely dependent on the dietary habits

of individuals, the depiction of these habits in the media plays a crucial role in influencing the way public debate proceeds and assigns blame and responsibility ([De Brún et al., 2013](#); [Moghimi & Wiktorowicz, 2019](#)). This may provide biased frames, or ways of making sense of dietary habits, that shape our understanding of health issues, their causes and, consequently, the appropriate way to respond to them ([Bos et al., 2018](#); [Im & Huh, 2017](#); [Jallinoja et al., 2016](#); [Nisbet & Newman, 2015](#)). Such frames can encourage either individual or societal strategies for tackling public health issues with contrasting policy implications.

To identify ways dietary habits are presented and reflect public debate around the consumption of food, an analysis of print and digital media was carried out as part of the project SINFO.¹ This paper presents the results of the analysis of Latvian print and digital media published between 2014 and 2019. To structure our approach to the analysis of the selected material, we employed the concept of *frame* ([Goffman, 1974](#)), or a way of presenting and describing a topic or issue. The paper answers the following research questions: (i) what are the dominant frames of diets in Latvian media; (ii) what problems do these frames pose and what solutions do they offer; (iii) how are these frames interrelated.

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We commence by providing a general overview of frame analysis and the way it has been used in relation to food, health, and diets. We argue that, while there are many contrasting approaches to framing, issues around food show an emphasis on individual identities, behaviours, and strategies. We continue by explaining our methodology in gathering and coding the data, describing the material we use and the way frames for further analysis were identified and developed. Afterwards we present and describe the main frames identified in Latvian print and digital media and discuss cross-cutting themes and notable thematic absences. Finally, we conclude by suggesting that diets are generally perceived as individual problems, and obstacles precluding individuals from healthy diets are thought to be personal, rather than a reflection of broader societal issues whose resolution would require collective effort. This, however, may hamper policy response to public health issues.

2. Making sense of dietary habits

2.1. Frame analysis

According to Erving Goffman, a 'frame' is the interpretation one uses to make sense – 'locate, perceive, identify, label' – an event (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). This allows individuals to formulate their understanding of implied social realities (Persson, 2019). The general idea of frames as a kind of story that organises and gives meaning to events is well established in the social sciences (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017). Nonetheless, there are several approaches to frames and framing, which vary in terms of how these concepts are used in empirical research, despite references to similar theoretical antecedents (e.g. Erving Goffman and Gregory Bateson). Consequently, there is a certain generality to the way they are applied and, as a result, a lack of consistency between authors (Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011). Nonetheless, a general distinction can be made between two primary ways of approaching frames and framing (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017): (i) *emphasis framing*, which assumes that frames *provide an opinion or perspective* on a particular issue or topic, and (ii) *equivalence framing*, which looks at *different presentations* of a particular issue or topic.

Scheufele and Iyengar (2017) suggest that sociological research is more closely aligned with emphasis framing, though studies frequently operate with a general definition of frames that render precise analysis difficult. A case in point is the use of frame analysis, as developed by Erving Goffman. Even though his approach is widely referred to across a variety of disciplines (Baldy, 2019; Colleen et al., 2003; Korthals, 2012), the practical applications of framing tend to forego the philosophical discussion in his work. What is more, some authors argue that Goffman's approach in *Frame Analysis* (Goffman, 1974) is often too abstract for practical application and empirical examination (de Vreese, 2005; Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011). Furthermore, his approach makes frames static (Denzin & Keller, 1981), and recently there has been a shift from frames to framing (as a process) in order to account for the processual nature of meaning production (de Vreese, 2005; Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011).

In view of the above, we wish to provide a sociological account that makes our approach to framing as transparent as possible. For the purposes of this paper, we define framing as *a way of talking about an aspect of common experience* – dietary habits in our case. Framing is thus a way to organise experience by relating different social or political events to one another; it tells us how to think about things, but, crucially, not why (Ferree & Merrill, 2000). Framing, therefore, can be understood as a process and work that creates a frame of something. A frame in this context is a scheme by which a phenomenon is presented and understood to organise experience and give it meaning (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Approached from a sociological perspective (as opposed to a psychological one), framing inevitably has a social component. It is a result of culture, norms, and shared beliefs and perspectives (Persson, 2019). It is linked with common understandings, narratives, and boundaries. More broadly, a common cultural (social) framework is a

precondition for meta-communication within a group – a mutual implicit understanding of indirect cues. Namely, framing and sense-making of specific phenomena is not an isolated individual process, rather it is based on a collective understanding of connotation and context, drawing on a shared repertoire of cultural resources.

2.2. Framing understanding through media

Unsurprisingly, frames and framing are often used in media and communication research, and it has even been argued that it is one of the buzzwords among communication researchers (Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011). There is general support for the underlying assumption that media can shape policy and public opinion by providing frames that structure how people make sense of the information they are exposed to (De Brún et al., 2013; Moghimi & Wiktorowicz, 2019; Nisbet & Newman, 2015; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017). Nonetheless, analyses often lack precision, and support for strong claims about the impact of media remains fragmented. For instance, it has been noted that researchers often work with implicit assumptions about what influences the way media content is presented, whether it be individual journalists, or the political and economic interests of news agencies (Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011). What is more, empirical support for claims regarding the effects of media-driven frames remains episodic, and the extent to which audiences approach content critically is contested (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017; Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011).

In view of the above, we wish to stress that we will make no specific claims as to whether the frames evident in the media determine, or align with, public opinion on dietary habits. Furthermore, it is important to note that frames are ambiguous in that they can be used to deceive people, further a particular political agenda, but they can just as easily be a way to coordinate people around a shared social norm (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Frames can have an impact on public perception and even policy making, though this claim should be backed up by sound empirical research. Whether or not a particular frame actually influences public opinion has to be empirically established, and our analysis does not allow making any claims to this effect.

To summarise, in what follows we proceed on the assumption that frame analysis provides a means to understand that the way phenomena and practices are described, characterised, and depicted in the media and more generally shape, though not necessarily determine, the way we understand and make sense of them. Furthermore, the process of framing relies upon a cultural repertoire of meaning that allows new frames to be constructed based on the assumption of pre-existing cultural knowledge that media outlets can deploy to build frames in an attempt to shape public opinion about food and dietary habits (see Zhou, Shapiro and Wansink, 2017).

2.3. Framing food and dietary habits

Studying the way issues are framed allows one to better understand possible causes for disagreements if they arise. Baldy (2019) suggests that people often use the same frame but understand it differently. This results in a misleading consensus that inhibits decision making – people might agree on which issues are important but not on why they are important. Baldy (2019) and Candel et al. (2014) provide examples of policy reforms in which actors can share the view that something is a problem (i.e. food [in]security) – but offer different causes, responsibilities, and solutions associated with it. Studying the problems and solutions a frame offers can be revealing. In this article, our interest is in exploring how dietary habits are presented, with the assumption that poor public health is a concern for all the parties involved. Specifically, we are interested in exploring whether dietary habits are framed stressing the role of the individual behaviours and strategies, or more emphasis is placed on social aspects of eating and food.

Previous studies looking at the depiction of food and dietary habits in different contexts have revealed that when the emphasis is on the

individual, narratives around food and diets in the media are depicted as overwhelming and confusing (see Dodds & Chamberlain, 2017). It is argued that people may need help determining where to look for advice about food (EC, 2020; McKinley & Wright, 2014), and some food knowledge might be excluded from public discourse (Korthals, 2012). Studies looking at the framing of food knowledge note the importance of who is giving the advice and whether people find the message valuable and the source trustworthy (O'Key & Hugh-Jones, 2010) and act on the basis of the information provided (Jin & Han, 2014). Another aspect is how effective the transmission of food knowledge is through different channels because it is difficult to determine the impact of all the possible sources individually (Barry et al., 2013; McKinley & Wright, 2014). According to these researchers, it is important to pay attention to the sources of information and determine what food knowledge is deemed legitimate and who is the main authority in these matters.

To this effect, Korthals (2012) has looked at unequal power relations that are implicated in frames that determine what is included in the food and diet issue and what is left out. He compares different frames of malnutrition, obesity, and healthy eating to explore these ideas. For instance, obesity and malnutrition are closely related to the medicalisation of food, and they are framed in a simplified way of energy input/output imbalances, disregarding the complexity of food consumption (Korthals, 2012; see also; Dodds & Chamberlain, 2017; Moghimi & Wiktorowicz, 2019; Stanford, Tauqueer and Kyle, 2018).

Boero's (2007) analysis of frames in relation to healthy eating indicates that there is a link between the perception of "natural" eating habits and the white, educated middle-class individuals, while O'Key and Hugh-Jones (2010) remark that some social groups are assigned an intuitive knowledge about good food, in their case, mothers, who are also often blamed for childhood obesity (De Brún et al., 2013). Rodney (2018) looks at the way food is framed on healthy living blogs and suggests that, contrary to magazines that frequently frame food as pathogenic, bloggers provide a broader perspective on food, whilst still being coloured by gender, race, and class. Nelson and Fleming (2019) have noted that perceptions of food are marked by gender differences. These are just a few examples of the variety of actors that have different levels of authority regarding food knowledge.

However, there have been suggestions that focusing on individuals and individual dietary strategies may be insufficient. For instance, Stanford, Tauqueer and Kyle (2018) note that public health strategies have often focused on promoting healthier individual nutrition and physical activity behaviours, and the media tends to focus public attention primarily upon individual behaviours without addressing the various collective issues that lead to, among other things, obesity. Similarly, Moghimi and Wiktorowicz (2019) suggest that media framing of fast-food consumption in Canada evinces a conflation of health and weight that focused discussion on caloric intake, while other (e.g. social) determinants of health were not discussed. This individualistic approach provides limited understanding because it disregards the complexity and interrelatedness of various problems and simplifies solutions.

Nonetheless, we note that frame analysis has been applied to examine the social, political, and environmental aspects of food as well. For instance, the production and transportation of food is a major cause of carbon emissions and thus is framed as one of the key causes of climate change (Baldy, 2019; EC, 2020). Similarly, the environmental impact of intensive agriculture as a dominant mode of production is discussed (Candel et al., 2014). Furthermore, food production and/or consumption is framed as one of the possible solutions to climate change. Certain products are framed as sustainable alternatives to conventional products that have major environmental impact and as a way to mitigate climate change – for instance, by framing non-dairy milk as a substitute for cow's milk (Morris et al., 2018).

Overall, however, we note that, with some exceptions, studies show an emphasis on individual identities, behaviours, and strategies, despite claims that this may be insufficient to address public health and environmental issues.

3. Methodology

To identify ways dietary habits are presented, a qualitative analysis of a sample of print and digital publications in Latvian media was carried out. Overall, Latvian media is subject to the laws regarding freedom of speech and freedom of press. The media is, broadly speaking, politically independent, free of censure, and reflects a wide range of opinions. Generally, the mass media environment of Latvia follows global trends, with decreasing demand for print media and increasing consumption of digital content. Latvian media outlets are diverse and range from public to private, from national to regional. Different sources were used for the purposes of analysis, representing both public and private, national and regional newspapers and magazines, and covering different political backgrounds.

For the purposes of article selection, the key phrase "dietary habits" (*ēšanas paradumi*² in Latvian) was used, and the period was set from June 1, 2014 until June 1, 2019. This five-year period was chosen to narrow down the available data and identify the currently dominant ways of framing dietary habits. The chosen period was sufficient to obtain a broad spectrum of articles about food and diets, yet it is short enough to grasp and conduct an in-depth analysis.

After a general survey of the articles published in the selected period (filtered by the keywords 'eating habits'), the decision was made to focus on a sample of publications (see below). The intention was to create a sample of 100 articles per type of medium, and a total of 192 articles were selected (92 print, and 100 digital) and analysed with the CAQDAS software Atlas.ti. The selection of printed media articles was reduced due to an overlap between the two databases used (see Section 3.1.1), while some articles were not available due to technical reasons. The number of articles per year was quite similar between printed and digital media (see Table 1). On average printed media articles were longer than digital media articles (see Table 2).

3.1. Selection of the material

3.1.1. Print media

The search was done using two databases and together they provided a selection of 835 articles: (1) Commercial database News.lv (managed by the IT company Lursoft) was chosen because it provides access to 140 local newspapers that cover a wide spectrum of articles. The search tool in this database allows to narrow the selection down to articles published in concrete dates (the format used – dd/mm/yyyy); (2) The periodical database of the National Library of Latvia (LNB) was chosen because in addition to regional and national newspapers already available in News.lv, it also includes an extensive collection of magazines published in Latvia that probably provides information to a wider variety of readership. The LNB database does not offer a 'sort-by-date' tool, more precisely, the search can be narrowed down to the publishing year of the article (the format used – yyyy), which slightly complicates the selection process.

Search in News.lv resulted in 617 articles from which every 10th was chosen, which provided 60 articles from 22 sources in total. Search in the LNB database provided 218 articles from which every 5th was chosen to reach around 100 articles in total. Altogether 43 articles from 33 sources available were selected. Ultimately, 92 articles from 41 print media sources were chosen for coding (see Table 1). Some of the sources overlapped between the 2 databases.

Most articles came from newspapers (59 out of 92 articles). Regional newspapers were best represented (24 articles), followed by national ones (20 articles), and some from the international news agency Baltic News Service (15 articles). Regional newspapers focus more on local issues, events, and people but also offer information and opinions on

² Henceforth words and phrases in Latvian are mentioned in brackets due to the possibility of different translations.

Table 1
Number and distribution of articles selected for analysis by year and media type.

		Year					Total
		June 2014–May 2015	June 2015–May 2016	June 2016–May 2017	June 2017–May 2018	June 2018–May 2019	
Number of articles	Print media	14	18	21	23	16	92
	Digital media	20	18	25	20	17	100
	Total	34	36	46	43	33	192

Table 2
Amount of text in articles selected for analysis.

	Total word count	Average word count per article	Number of pages (500 words/page)
Print media	103 893	1117	208
Digital media	68 775	853	138

topics that are relevant on national level. Just under half of the sources were magazines (20 out of 41 printed media sources). Most of these magazines are widely known lifestyle magazines that contain interviews with Latvian celebrities, recipes, and a variety of suggestions for different spheres of life (e.g. maintaining/improving health, raising children). There were articles also from specialized magazines that are rarely published (e.g. magazine on diabetes). Some articles were from special issue magazines. They focused on cooking and relaxation. Some newspapers and magazines were represented more than once. Almost all the articles were written by women (57 of 63 authors) and some of the authors had written more than one article in the sample.

3.1.2. Digital media

A total of 100 digital media articles were selected for analysis. They were selected from the 10 most popular Latvian media websites according to Gemius Latvia³ (2019). The time frame for the selected articles was the same as for print media (June 1, 2014–June 1, 2019). Generally, the websites are either news media sites (the online version for newspapers in some cases) or entertainment websites.

As search engines currently do not offer a 'sort-by-date' tool, the key phrase ('eating habits') was entered, the time frame was set, and every 10th article was selected to reach the goal of 100 articles. Adjustments were made to compensate for faulty search results that did not include the desired theme and keywords. In such instances, the next article on the list was selected. As the results were not displayed chronologically, the selected articles are not equally distributed within the five-year period, which should be considered when considering trends (see Table 1). The vast majority of the digital media sources do not include information about the authors. However, it should be noted that the experts consulted for the articles are very few (i.e. 23 articles refer to specific experts, and in more than half of those it is either Lolita Neimane or Anatolijs Danilāns).

3.2. Coding of the material

Atlas.ti software was used to manage and code the material selected for analysis. Some code groups and codes were created prior to coding to facilitate the initial categorisation of the material (source, author, title), parties concerned (e.g. children, experts), processes in society (e.g. in Latvia, abroad), health information (recommendations, illnesses), and information about food (e.g. nutrition, recipes, advice). Other codes and sub-codes were subsequently added upon reading the articles. All articles were read at least twice because coding was an iterative process and

required that the material be revisited to revise the initial codes applied to it. Print media was coded prior to digital media. Consequently, digital media was coded using some of the same codes as well as several additional codes. The coding was done by two coders – one was responsible for print media, while the other focused on digital media. The coders regularly communicated and reflected on the process and collaborated in creating a cohesive and unified approach to coding both print and digital media. The thematic content, word count, sources, and text format of print and media articles were compared with and contrasted against each other to identify differences and similarities. Coders also considered the likely target audience for each article and to what extent the messages across articles differed depending on the potential audience, i.e. what ideas and concepts were prevalent in the articles targeted at all readers in contrast with articles targeted at specific groups, e.g. women or mothers. While the process was inductive and similar to grounded theory, it did not entail the development of a full-fledged theory.

The result was five code groups: *Food, Actors involved, Impact on the Environment, Societal processes, Health*. The code groups were ordered based on how many times the codes were applied in Atlas.ti, as well as the number of articles to which a specific code was applied. The biggest code group concerned food, including descriptions of eating, nutritional information, specific products, additional information (seasonality, quality, costs, country of origin, etc.). Unexpectedly, given the focus of SINFO, the code group concerning the impact food systems have on the environment was rarely applied. This code group included information about food waste, animal welfare, poverty, resource consumption, etc. Instead, the health-related code group concerning obesity issues dominated.

The frames that we identified are based on the thematic overlaps within the code groups. Among subcodes of the previously mentioned code groups, some were used rarely while others grew to encompass different aspects of eating habits. We developed subcodes that categorised themes that clashed or overlapped across the articles. These themes were compiled and arranged according to their popularity (i.e. how often the theme appeared in the selected articles). Codes that appeared more often were grouped with related codes (e.g. codes that collected information about the nutritional value of products were grouped together, and the content revealed a juxtaposition between "good"/healthy food and "bad"/unhealthy food). Based on these compilations, a summary of the main themes was written and shared among the authors. The summary allowed us to see how these themes were connected (e.g. did the theme *healthy eating habits* often overlap or clash with the idea of self-control). Subsequently, several frames were formulated and described following a problem-solution model that outlined the problems and solutions associated with each of the identified frames. This approach was applied because the articles in the sample rarely aimed to inform in a neutral way. Rather, they aimed to provide a perspective on a topic in terms of why it is problematic, and/or provide recommendations for tackling the problem. While there were individual "positive" issues related to food in Latvian media, our focus gravitated towards 'problems' because that is what most of the authors of the selected media articles focused on - they viewed the existing dietary habits as problematic due to the growing rate of overweight people and offered recommendations to their readers to improve their habits and stop them from gaining weight. What is more, the authors considered a somewhat limited array of factors in relation to dietary habits.

³ The websites were: apollo.lv, delfi.lv, diena.lv, jauns.lv, LA.lv, lsm.lv, mammamunteti.lv, NRA.lv, skaties.lv, tvnet.lv.

Ultimately, the frames we identified were: (i) a biomedical frame, (ii) a psychological frame, and (iii) a social practice frame.

The biomedical frame was based on the code groups *food*, *actors involved*, and *health*. When giving recommendations for healthier diets in the sampled articles, food was often reduced to its nutritional components and the energy it provides for the body. Namely, food was depicted as input for the biomedical system that is the human body.

The psychological frame was constructed mainly via the code groups *food* and *actors involved*, and to a lesser extent those of *societal processes* and *health*. In contrast to the biomedical frame, in this frame dietary habits and food were disconnected from their biological functions and instead were treated as a cause/effect of psychological processes (e.g. low self-esteem, or anxiety).

The social practice frame was mainly built from the *food* and *societal processes* code groups. In these articles, the social aspects of eating took precedence – how it is affected by culture, history, societal trends, social ties and norms. When talking about dietary habits from this perspective, the media emphasised that the problems are shared/collective.

Table 3 shows our assessment regarding the degree to which information from each code group was used in our chosen frames.

3.3. Limitations

While care was taken to select a representative sample of publications, several limitations should be noted. Firstly, the analysis was carried out as part of the project SINFO, which focuses on the role of social innovation in food provision. This likely influenced the analytical focus of the researchers in the coding process. Secondly, the key phrase employed in the selection of articles was chosen to narrow down the focus of the sample.⁴ However, it should be noted that the choice of related keywords (e.g. diets, healthy diets) might have provided a more complete picture of the way dietary habits are discussed in Latvian media. Thirdly, not all publications were represented in the sample. This means that publications with a narrower readership that focus on topics of interest to SINFO were possibly missing, thus leading to an underrepresentation of certain issues in the material selected for coding. Fourthly, the aim was to obtain a general understanding of the way dietary habits were depicted in Latvian media, without focusing on the differences between different sources. Consequently, this paper approached Latvian mass media as a whole, and paid limited attention to internal differences. Fifthly, the coding of print and digital media did not commence concurrently, meaning that the codes identified in print media influenced the analysis of digital media, though there do not appear to be significant thematic differences between the two types of media. Sixthly, only media sources and articles in Latvian were included in the sample, and we acknowledge that there might be differences in the media coverage and framing of eating habits by sources published in Russian, which would deserve further exploration.⁵ Finally, the technical limitations of search engine functionality mean that the digital media articles were likely ranked in a biased manner, inadvertently influencing the selection process. Nevertheless, while not comprehensive, the identified frames illustrate the dominant ways mass media in

⁴ The decision to use “dietary habits” as a keyword was due to the specific interests of the project SINFO. By studying how dietary habits are presented in Latvian media we aimed to identify trends in consumer demand for sustainable and healthy food, understand interpretations of good food, study perceived risks concerning food and the role of social innovation in these. The conclusions of the media analysis were used as an input for elaborating a questionnaire for a consumer survey and a research protocol for focus group discussions that examined consumer motivations, attitudes and practices concerning their food consumption. The combined results from these investigations will be used to draft recommendations for producers and policymakers.

⁵ Russian is the second most used language in Latvian print media, and approximately 40% of Latvia’s inhabitants state that Russian is their native language.

Latvia talk about dietary habits.

4. Dominant ways of presenting dietary habits in Latvian media

4.1. Dominant frames

Latvian print and digital media depict food and diets in a variety of different ways. One can identify publications that frame diets as a cultural tradition or ritual, a cause of environmental pollution, or a result of food industry manipulations, or drivers of change in the food industry. Nevertheless, in this section we focus on the most prominent frames identified in the media analysis. There are some aspects that were more prevalent in either digital or print media. In such cases it is noted in the text. Overall, our analysis suggests that diets and dietary habits are most frequently discussed and framed as (i) a biomedical problem, (ii) manifestations of psychological distress, and (iii) in relation to tensions around social belonging.

4.1.1. (Bio)medical frame

By far the most common way of framing dietary habits in Latvian media is to show them as a biomedical problem. In the selected articles, food and dietary habits are viewed from a limited perspective – as a source of energy necessary for the body to function or in relation to medical consequences. Eating is presented as either the cause of, or solution to, medical conditions. In this frame, the main concern is that public health in Latvia is poor because of a growing number of overweight people. Moreover, when other health issues are addressed in the media, they are primarily associated with excess weight. These statements in the articles are seldom backed up by verifiable data. Unhealthy diets are framed as a cause of the problem, and healthy diets are offered as a solution.

While in the context of this article we focus on media representation of dietary habits, it cannot be ignored that the biomedical frame is a broader frame that involves other problems and solutions regarding health and healthy living. In the articles employing this frame, medical professionals depict healthy eating in conjunction with physical activities that are supposed to raise energy levels, well-being, while simultaneously contributing to weight loss. Conversely, unhealthy dietary habits are associated with the prevalence of chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disorders and diabetes. In general, healthy eating is promoted either for losing weight or not gaining extra weight.

Our analysis suggests that there was no emphasis on a demographic group that is more at risk of becoming obese, apart from children due to the dietary habits of their parents. It is stressed that a child’s diet is the basis of their health and requires vigilant monitoring. Parents should strive to be role models for their children in what and how they eat. Many articles deal with specific recommendations on how parents should determine what their children should and should not consume, offering lists of healthy products, meals and snacks, and the recommended daily intake adjusted to children’s bodies. They also stress the importance of having three regular meals per day, particularly emphasising breakfast:

“Wrong breakfast habits also contribute to weight issues. A balanced breakfast creates the basis for eating routine throughout the day, helps to avoid unhealthy snacks and too hearty of a dinner before bedtime, which are particularly important for people who care about their weight.”⁶ (Māja, 2014, November 21)

“As far as food is concerned, the frequency is also very important: it is important to introduce three meals per day. If families do not teach this

⁶ Henceforth citations from media articles are translated from Latvian to English by authors of this article.

Table 3

Distribution of code groups across the frames. Note: Black – the code group was significant in the frame; grey – there was some overlap between the code group and the frame; white – the frame is not represented in the code group at all.

Code group/frame	Biomedical	Psychological	Social practice
Food			
Actors involved			
Impact on the Environment			
Societal processes			
Health			

habit for a child at an early age, the risk of becoming overweight is higher in teenage years." (Baltic News Service, 2016, November 4)

The articles mention that various health issues are linked to weight gain or with unhealthy dietary habits in general. Nevertheless, they rarely elaborate on the ways and the extent to which weight gain is connected to these diseases; authors of the selected articles never explain how much weight is too much. Disease prevention is the main focus.

The articles offer lists of healthy produce and daily nutrient intake. There is an explicit division between "good" products and "bad" products. Good products include fruits and vegetables, fermented dairy products, eggs, and fish. Bad products that are overconsumed include sweets with high sugar content, red meat, fatty foods, and white flour products.

Some articles offer advice about portion size, pace, and regularity of eating because, according to experts in the media, people have problematic habits. A balanced diet that consists mostly of the "good" products is offered as a long-term solution. Unhealthy snacks should be replaced by healthier alternatives, or people should avoid snacks between meals in general. This quote from *Dienas Bizness* annual handbook *Horeca* (2018) illustrates this approach quite well:

"Considering that a large part of inhabitants of Latvia have excess body fat, and more than 20% of people are affected by diseases linked to obesity, along with that there is a tendency for children to gain weight, doctors recommend how much and what to put on the plate. Also, while eating people should chant a mantra to themselves – where are my fruits, where are my vegetables".

The specifics of the advice provided differ from expert to expert; it largely depends on the field they work in. Although there is consensus among health experts about what is problematic in contemporary dietary habits, they offer a diverse array of solutions that often contradict one another. Frequently, the uniqueness of each individual and their body is stressed, and a universal approach to food is rejected. Several articles mention the individual differences among people and thus the uncertainty surrounding (healthy) diets. Consequently, a universal healthy diet everyone should strive for does not exist:

"What [diet] works for one, does not work for someone else. But the search [for a healthy diet] continues." (apollo.lv, 2017, August 27)

The recommendations listed above frequently revolve around controlling various aspects of individual diets including nutrient intake,

number of meals per day, and portion size. However, at the same time, the articles suggest that control must not be excessive. For example, it is essential for children to have a certain degree of freedom when it comes to their dietary choices. In general, strict diets are mentioned as bad examples associated with people, mostly women, who want to lose weight with aesthetic considerations in mind. A portion of the articles in the sample address dietary habits of women in specific stages of their life, i.e. pregnancy and menopause. By contrast, none of the articles directly addressed the dietary habits of men.

Overall, food and diets are framed as something bio-medically complex and the professional knowledge regarding food is occasionally assessed as insufficient for drawing conclusions and universal recommendations. Instead, it is suggested to find diets that are suitable to each individual, rather than looking for something universal:

"Although I must say – [...] the more I study and learn the more I understand that we know very little [about food and diets] and a standard formula that works for everyone does not exist [regarding a healthy diet]". (mammamuntietiem.lv, 2019, March 15)

Seeing diets as a biomedical problem involves associating food purely with the biophysical human body, and such articles frame food and diets as strictly related to energy input and output. Nevertheless, some articles that heavily relied on nutritional information also mentioned the psycho-emotional aspect of diets.

4.1.2. Psychological frame

Another prominent frame we identified located dietary habits within the broader context of emotional (dis)satisfaction. In this case the main problem is regular overeating episodes due to strong, usually negative, emotions. For people who struggle with regular overeating, which mental health experts call compulsive eating, the solution put forward is seeking professional help (e.g. psychotherapy) or working on oneself and eating slower. According to the experts, compulsive eating usually arises from emotional issues rather than a need to sate hunger, and this realisation often leads the person to feelings of shame. The person can even start avoiding social situations in which people are eating together because of the shame about one's personal eating habits.

Experts portray this as aggression towards oneself, craving for love, boredom due to lack of mental stimuli, and mental health professionals argue that, if left untreated, it can develop into an eating disorder. The articles contain warnings that compulsive eating can result in obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, increased risk of cancer. (Rapid) weight gain or weight fluctuations might be what draws attention to a

potential health problem, but excess body fat is believed to be a side effect rather than the main problem, because the emphasis is on the deteriorating state of the person's mental health. An example of this way of framing the phenomenon is a quote from a women's lifestyle magazine *Ieva* (2018) in which a mental health expert recalls her own personal experience with an eating disorder:

"Eating was my protective mechanism so that I would not feel what was happening to me. Weight gain is only the result, the cause is much deeper. That's what I'm still looking for because there's no single concrete reason, there are a lot of different events and unresolved situations that have contributed to the eating disorder. I understand that a major trigger was the divorce of my parents, when I couldn't react, cry, grieve, because my mother was feeling very sad". (Ieva, 2018, October 10)

She continues by saying that:

"In my case, it was compulsive overeating – uncontrolled devouring of food, which always ended in disgust with myself, which is not seen as serious as anorexia or bulimia, because it does not endanger life unless the excess weight exceeds all norms". (Ieva, 2018, October 10)

It is argued that dealing with previous psychological issues might help differentiating physical hunger from emotional cravings and recognising emotional triggers that lead to compulsive eating. Meals should be controlled events in which the person is emotionally and mentally present in the eating process.

However, not all articles delve so deep into the mental states of people. Some provide general observations that people live a fast-paced life and do not leave themselves enough time to enjoy a proper meal, without explaining what constitutes a proper meal. Furthermore, food that is recommended for its health benefits is occasionally called normal food with no further explanation. Nevertheless, articles advise people to experience the moment of eating and to eat slowly, referring to the concept of mindful eating. It involves focusing on the physical sensations while eating, enjoying food with all the senses. It is also assumed that mindful eating would lead to healthier diets because being aware of one's dietary habits would naturally lead to interest in nutritious and healthy food. Consequently, the experts state that there is no need for specific diets or restrictions.

The advice sometimes combines some contradictory notions. On the one hand, meals should be controlled, but, on the other hand, eating and dietary habits should be instinctive, resembling those of a small child:

"We were all born with this feeling. Mindful eating leads back to the ability to eat as a child. As a child, we cried, demanded food, and mother fed us. When it was enough, we spat it out, and we started to play. Until a certain moment, the child cannot eat more food than he needs to satisfy hunger", says Inese Millere." (36,6°C, 2017, October)

"Awaken the "inner child" and get to know and taste the food, as if you have seen it for the first time in your life - pay attention to the tiniest details: texture, colour gamut, aroma, and even sounds that come from eating or drinking." (Diabēts un Veselība, 2016)

Children should be taught to recognise when their hunger has been satiated starting from an early age to prevent the possibility of acquiring unhealthy eating habits.

In the sample of digital media articles various forms of fasting are recommended or discussed in relation to dietary control. Regarding changing dietary habits in order to live a healthier life, self-control is framed as one of the central elements. It is suggested that a healthy diet is a matter of control, whereas a "mindless", uncontrolled diet has negative effects on the health and psyche of the individual.

4.1.3. Social practice frame

The framing of diets as a biomedical or psychological problem focuses on the individual and domestic aspects of diets and eating, but

these habits are influenced by a wider social group. Eating is not just an individual activity. Several articles recognise the problem of social isolation that is characteristic of, for example, various employment models and excessive use of social media, and the social pressure to alter one's dietary habits. Part of the solution is eating together with other people to establish new relationships or to maintain existing ones, while other problems require more complex interventions.

Preparing food and eating together is depicted as something that creates and maintains social (and cultural) belonging. People are encouraged to have meals with friends, colleagues, and family members, and cook from scratch more often. Parents are urged to cook and eat together with their children to spend more time together, teach them healthy dietary habits, and introduce children to different foods.

There is advice for people preparing food for others, for example, when organising gatherings of family and friends. By learning about and trying to accommodate guests with alternative diets and by offering them food they are comfortable eating, one can make them feel more included in the social gathering. For instance, an article about vegetarianism invites people to show interest in the dietary habits of others:

"You should certainly put something sating in the menu. A lot of legumes are used in vegetarian food. [...] Think about the recipes you usually prepare. There will certainly be something without meat, or it can be left out or replaced, for example, by legumes. [...] Just show the vegetarian which food on the table is available to him. [...] Of course, from time to time you can ask whether everything is alright and whether the person has eaten, but don't make the vegetarian and his diet a central problem of the dinner." (Ieva Domā Zaļi, 2018, June)

As the author mentions, vegetarians do not want to be at the centre of attention due to their dietary choices, and people who follow alternative diets often have to endure confused looks, unwanted comments, questions, advice and even apologies.

Although sharing food and eating together can create stronger bonds between people, it can create social pressure as well. Several articles mention overeating in celebrations as a common but unhealthy occurrence that happens due to the vast amount of food that is offered. It is assumed that people have problems controlling themselves due to a wish to try all the different foods. Belonging to a group comes with expectations that are put on group members. The social environment affects individual choice and potentially pushes people to be healthier or unhealthier:

"According to experts, our peers have a significant role in our meal choices. That is, if your friends order a salad you probably won't order French fries and vice versa." (delfi.lv, 2014, December 12)

In some articles, this observation is made regarding school children and their behaviour towards school meals, which are provided free of charge at the primary school level in Latvia. A common practice among school children, especially teenagers, is to buy and consume unhealthy snacks. It is argued that they feel pressure to conform to the dominant opinions about which food is tasty or worth buying, and which is not. Some of the people working in schools observe similar situations during lunch in school cafeterias when younger children decide not to eat something following the reactions of more outspoken peers and without even tasting the food for themselves. Moreover, some of the younger children must be taught about a balanced diet and how to act around the table:

"Of course, there are those who don't like the taste of something or are dissatisfied with something. In addition, the children are easily influenced by others, it is enough to say "ew!" loudly, and several people say at once that food doesn't taste good." (Latvijas Avīze, 2015, January 6)

"The most worrying thing is at the beginning of the school year, when first-year students and students from other schools who often have poor eating habits come to us," says Mr Vizulis. "A lot of children are used to

their mothers coming home from work and dropping sausages into a pot, boiling pasta, and that's all the food. It takes longer for teachers to teach them what a balanced and healthy diet is and how to eat properly, including how to behave properly at the table." (Latvijas Avīze, 2015, January 6)

"It doesn't mean that there can never be any cookies, candy or other snacks but there must be clear boundaries between what is a snack and what is normal food. The child must accept that one primarily must eat normal meals, not snack on treats." (mammamunteti.lv, 2018, September 10)

This problem comes back to the advice for parents to prepare healthy meals together with children, or at least to have meals together, so teaching children about different foods and how to behave at the table.

Moreover, food and dietary habits exist within a specific historical and cultural context. The media touches upon eating as a practice that is affected by history, geography, social norms, and dietary trends. Some articles indirectly address recent dietary trends. On the one hand, eating habits are framed as dynamic, and changing that might be problematic. As a result of globalisation, products from around the globe are available all year round. Some of the articles frame geographically diverse diets as unnecessarily complicated and suggest simplifying the diet by shifting dietary habits towards more regionally and historically appropriate food. On the other hand, when explaining various dietary recommendations, they are framed in terms of fashion and trendiness:

"I agree that veganism has emerged and spread as a new trend. It is because people are informed, educated and worried about the environment. In my opinion, it is the trendiest lifestyle that hurts no one – animals, nature or ourselves." (tvnet.lv, 2019, July 24)

Such dietary choices serve as indicators of the level of income, opinions, and attitudes with regards to, for example, environmental issues associated with food production and ethical consumerism. To some groups of people, choosing which products to consume is a very deliberate act, which incorporates non-monetary motivations. Although there are mixed opinions in the media about the level of knowledge people have about the food they consume, some authors argue that there is growing interest about the ingredients and origins of products.

Gender differences were also invoked in relation to dietary habits. For instance, men are said to eat more meat than women. Occasionally recipes even have a note that the specific meal would "feed a man". Women, on the other hand, are talked about in a way that stresses their wish or need to control their eating. Moreover, most of the recipes and advice are in magazines and website sections that are targeted at women. In our selection, there were no articles about food and food preparation from magazines or website sections meant for men.

It is often implicitly or explicitly assumed that women are more likely to control what they are eating. This is associated with concerns over excess weight and appearance, and occasionally also with suffering from eating disorders due to stress, trauma, or attempts to meet prevailing beauty standards. Some health professionals mention their experience with people, particularly young and middle-aged women, who have tried several restrictive diets from questionable sources of information and have done harm to their health and only then have looked for professional help:

"Let's be honest: women are willing to torture themselves in different ways if they need to lose some weight. But quite another thing is to convince family members that we'll eat differently now." (Kurzemes Vārds, 2014, June 14)

"There are also trends that adults, more often women, harm their health with a variety of suspicious diets. The Internet and bookstores are full of information about all sorts of panaceas. Often, only when all the dubious methods have been tried and the health has already been damaged are people finally referring to a nutritionist." (Taka, 2016, July)

In this context the concept of diet is used more in the popular sense – dieting is done to lower one's weight for aesthetic reasons. Some of the interviewed people talked about their own experience struggling with excess body fat and its impact on their self-esteem in social and private situations:

"Besides, the excess weight often lowers self-esteem, people feel less confident because of it. Just like Don Quixote's tilting at windmills, many fight the excess weight and relax when a small victory is achieved. It all starts once again in a short while." (diena.lv, 2015, August 29)

4.2. Cross-cutting themes

In addition to the three primary frames identified above, we note that they feature several cross-cutting themes. These form a connective tissue of sorts that is indicative of thematic overlaps and relations between the frames we have identified.

4.2.1. Individualisation

By individualisation we mean placing the responsibility for obesity prevention and healthy dietary habits on the individual (see Delormier et al., 2009; Lantz et al., 2007; Mayes, 2014; Moghimi & Wiktorowicz, 2019). Although, for instance, a high obesity rate is a social phenomenon and a public health issue, it is still framed as an individual problem that should be dealt with by individuals. Moreover, individuals have the responsibility to learn to navigate the plethora of health information on the product packaging and in the media, provided by experts, celebrities or peers and part of which is misleading and provided by the food industry itself.

The healthiness of a diet is often linked to self-control, strong will, and motivation. The success or failure of weight-loss or healthy lifestyle decisions in general are individual. Furthermore, even when dietary habits and decisions are brought up in the context of broader psychological and emotional shortcomings (like low self-esteem or stress), they are still ultimately framed as the responsibility of individuals that require individual solutions.

4.2.2. Self-disciplining

The need for control over one's impulses is most pronounced in framing dietary habits with reference to psychological problems and social practice. This reflects the often-cited view that in Western culture thinness is seen as good and it is achieved through self-discipline and restraint which is also valued in other spheres of life, while fat/excess body weight is associated with laziness, weakness, lack of self-control, and greed. There is an implied dichotomy between healthy and unhealthy diets in terms of control, though it borrows elements from the biomedical frame. More specifically, an unhealthy diet, often described as containing too much sugar, fat, and/or calories, is conceptualised as the natural state to which humans default. In the biomedical frame, the media frequently bring up the tendency to crave sugar, fat, and processed foods, which must be controlled.

The media emphasise that a healthy diet demands effort, and it frames unhealthy diets as passive. By contrast, a healthy diet is framed as active and requiring self-control. According to experts, eating should be controlled in daily life, as well as on special occasions and in times of emotional distress and contentment. The media occasionally suggest limiting the daily eating period with arguments based on religious, psychological, biochemical, and evolutionary considerations.

4.2.3. Gendering

In both print and digital media, it is implied that dietary habits are primarily a women's issue, and this manifests itself in various forms that are not restricted to specific frames. In the case of digital media, the articles are mainly published in the sections of the website dedicated to women. If the article is from a magazine, frequently the target audience

of the magazine is women. At times the reader is addressed with gender specific pronouns or conjugations. In both digital and printed media, it is often implied and sometimes even explicitly stated that women are the ones who care about their weight and appearance, who make the decisions about dietary habits in the family and shopping and for children's health. Decisions about children's health and dietary habits also include women who are currently pregnant – they must resist their cravings for unhealthy snacks, instead they should opt for homemade healthy alternatives. They are also advised to practice healthy eating habits even before pregnancy. As already mentioned in the methodology section, most of the printed media articles were written by women (57 of 63 authors) adding to the view that food and eating is something in which only women are interested. Finally, most of the images feature women.

4.2.4. Medicalisation

A common thread running through the first two frames was the medicalisation of dietary habits, which is the process of transforming social phenomena into medical acts (see [Clarke & Shim, 2010](#); [Conrad, 2005](#); [Mayes, 2014](#)). Occasionally, medicalisation of dietary habits was accompanied by healthicisation, which in contrast to medicalisation “proposes behavioural or lifestyle changes for previously biomedically defined events (e.g. heart disease)” ([Conrad, 1994](#), p. 387), but they do not cancel each other out. Medicalisation manifests itself in various forms in the biomedical and psychological frames (e.g. food as a composition of biochemical elements and a source of energy for a system of input and output; see also [Leroy et al., 2018](#)), and the media often frame dietary habits of the general population as either a symptom of an illness or in a way that will lead to an illness or health problems. An additional element we note is that the articles often emphasise uncertainty regarding food and diets. On the one hand, articles offer concrete advice and recommendations regarding food and a healthy diet, but some articles focus on the differences between people and the different diets they require to be healthy, adding to the idea that the human body is a complicated system.

5. Discussion

In line with the research questions put forward in our study, the analysis of Latvian print and digital media shows that there are three primary frames of dietary habits at play that attempt to organise the experiences associated with dietary habits. Moreover, they are broadly consistent with the emphasis framing approach ([Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017](#)) as they provide a particular perspective on dietary habits. We contend that, consistent with our literature review, there is some consideration given to social aspects of dietary habits (especially in the social practice frame), but the focus is on individuals and their relationship with food. In addition, the responsibility to resolve these issues is placed on the shoulders of individuals, rather than public authorities or food producers and distributors, even though the collective component is recognised. Furthermore, we suggest that the frames in question are connected by broader cross-cutting sociological themes that are implicit in, and form the basis of, the claims put forward by authors of the media articles we analysed (see [Table 4](#)).

If we consider the narrative regarding food and dietary habits constructed by Latvian media as a whole, (certain) eating practices are

problematised by stressing their medical consequences, and it is suggested that (specific) medical issues have dietary solutions. However, we note that none of the articles define what they mean by the term ‘overweight’ and mostly approach excess weight from an aesthetic perspective. Often media, health experts, and researchers conflate being overweight with obesity (see also [Rich & Evans, 2005](#)). In general, Latvian media analysis mirrors what several authors ([Conrad, 1994](#); [De Brún et al., 2013](#); [Rich & Evans, 2005](#)) have observed in their research – more focus is placed on the appearance of overweight people rather than their actual health. Being overweight is often depicted as something people should strive to avoid, a moral or psychological failing of, for instance, parents of overweight children or of overweight people themselves. It is something individual people can control but do not – due to their poor lifestyle choices either because of their laziness, shortage of time, or lack of self-discipline. In the context of psychological distress, the focus is on personal emotional trauma, rather than wider social processes and social pressure. Overall, this resonates with the findings of [de Moraes Prata Gaspar et al. \(2020\)](#), who suggest that medical-nutritional information is shaped by social, cultural, and moral factors.

Similarly, we contend that the emphasis on control and discipline is related to individualisation, and more control over dietary habits is often presented as a solution to various problems linked to diets. In general control is associated with an individual's willpower. While dietary habits are certainly tied to a person's identity ([Plante et al., 2019](#)), we note that there were few mentions of collective attempts to improve dietary habits at the group or societal level. One example was of a mother who had to try to convince her family to accept and adopt her new eating habits, another was an informative campaign that was focused on giving age-appropriate food to infants. This approach ignores the social dimension of food consumption that comes with belonging to social groups and the normative expectations regarding food consumption (e.g. excessive drinking or eating on festive occasions; see [Dodds & Chamberlain, 2017](#)).

The frames and themes we have listed above are by no means exhaustive of the thematic range of articles concerning dietary habits, though they are certainly pronounced. There are others which are present, but to a significantly lesser extent. However, we were struck by the fact that some topics that have become prominent in a wider national and international policy debate were seldom mentioned. Firstly, we note that dietary habits are approached as something personal and isolated from the broader food system. Dietary habits are seldom discussed in relation to where food is sourced, nor are the social, economic, and environmental impacts of the food production and distribution system and consumption practices discussed in detail. These sustainability aspects are virtually absent in the publications we analysed. Similarly, there is almost no mention of possible difficulties associated with gaining access to fresh food or having the time, money, and knowledge to choose, purchase, and prepare a healthy and nutritious meal. Moreover, ethical aspects of dietary habits are largely overlooked. Issues such as sustainable diets, food waste, eating seasonal and locally grown food, vegetarianism, the impact of food production and consumption on different social groups as well as animal welfare were seldom addressed in our sample. It is possible that a more purposeful selection of materials (e.g. publications dedicated to sustainability) would indicate that these topics are much more prominent in specific Latvian publications. However, our sample suggests that these topics are underrepresented in mainstream digital and print media, and examples to the contrary are likely exceptional, though lip-service to sustainability issues is frequent.

Overall, we suggest that the dominant media approaches to dietary habits are highly medicalised and emphasise a person's abilities and responsibilities to control one's food intake and align it with certain expectations about how bodies should look and how individuals should behave. Thus, there is both an implicit and explicit invocation and recognition of norms and normative aspects to the way we consume food. Indeed, the third frame raises the issue of social pressure and group

Table 4
Broader themes cutting across the identified media frames.

	Individualisation	Self-disciplining	Gendering	Medicalisation
Biomedical	X		X	X
Psychological	X	X	X	X
Social practice		X	X	

behaviours explicitly. Nonetheless, even in these instances the proposed responses are not necessarily collective.

6. Conclusions

In trying to understand how Latvian media frame and allow readers to make sense of dietary habits, we carried out media analysis of print and digital media. We employed the concept of frames introduced by Erving Goffman, and identified the dominant frames in Latvian media, the problems and solutions they proposed, and the relationship between the frames.

While there may be limitations to our sample, the analysis allowed us to identify three primary frames: (i) a biomedical frame, (ii) a psychological frame, and (iii) a social practice frame, with corresponding problems and solutions. Furthermore, we noted several cross-cutting themes, which suggest that dietary habits in Latvia are predominantly discussed in an individualised, gendered, and medicalised way, whilst emphasising the need for self-discipline. Consequently, while we must acknowledge the recognition that there are social aspects to dietary habits (especially in the third frame), the focus is frequently placed on an individual and her relationship with food, be it personal or in a social setting. In addition, the responsibility to resolve the problems postulated by the frames is almost invariably placed on the shoulders of individual consumers, rather than public authorities, food producers, wholesalers, caterers, or other food system actors.

This trend is further illustrated by the absent or near-absent themes in our sample, such as the role of economic inequality, ethical aspects of food provisioning, and environmental sustainability concerns. This, again, may reflect the specific characteristics of our sample and selection procedure to a certain extent. However, we argue that by talking about the pervasive health problems in an individualised way and ignoring the socioeconomic and cultural factors that have an impact on health status (De Brún et al., 2013; Delormier et al., 2009; Fleming-Milici & Harris, 2020; Lantz et al., 2007), public discourse is impoverished, and a more diverse set of solutions are precluded from emerging. The emergence and normalisation of healthy dietary habits demands engagement on a societal level and asks for continual effort from the media and the state (Delormier et al., 2009; Le Bodo et al., 2019).

To address the issues listed above, mainstream media should strive to show a more diverse array of actors involved in food production, distribution, and consumption. This would highlight how they are connected, how they impact each other, and what effect they have on wider social, economic, and environmental processes. Furthermore, the experiences and challenges of at risk or marginalised groups should be part of the conversation about food in the media because it would lead to wider recognition among the broader public and state officials of different opportunities available to different groups regarding healthy dietary habits. The media should be more inclusive by explicitly addressing the dietary habits and responsibilities of both genders thereby adding to the gender equality discourse that could also aid in policy making. For instance, when addressing the family meal planning or, indeed, feeding oneself in a healthy way, greater attempts must be made to engage with practices that are more common among men. Finally, the findings of this study confirm the claim put forward in the European Green Deal *Farm to Fork* strategy – in order to improve the health and quality of life of the population, clear and unambiguous information on healthy and sustainable diets is necessary for citizens/consumers to make healthy decisions regarding their eating habits (EC, 2020). In short, there should be action based on the recognition that collective issues also require collective responses, without expecting individuals to shoulder the responsibility.

Ethics approval

The data of the study involves solely publicly available documents, i. e. newspapers and magazines. Ethics approval was not required.

Author contributions

Lina Orste contributed to elaboration of the methodology for the media analysis, selection of articles in printed media for further analysis, data coding and analysis, literature review, writing-up of the paper.

Alise Krumina contributed to elaboration of the methodology for the media analysis, selection of articles in digital media for further analysis, data coding and analysis, literature review, writing-up of the paper.

Emils Kilis contributed to the elaboration of the methodology for the media analysis, conceptualisation of the findings, literature review, as well as review and editing of the initial drafts of the paper.

Anda Adamsone-Fiskovica contributed to the elaboration of the methodology for the media analysis, conceptualisation of the findings, as well as review and editing of the initial drafts of the paper.

Mikelis Grivins contributed to the elaboration of the methodology for the media analysis, conceptualisation of the findings, as well as review and editing of the initial drafts of the paper.

All authors have approved the final article.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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