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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Quality of recommendations on health-enhancing physical activity in the press. Content analysis of five Spanish newspapers

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### KEYWORDS

Health promotion;  
Public health;  
Life style;  
Health literacy;  
Mass media;  
Communication

### Abstract

**Introduction:** The pandemic of physical inactivity causes millions of early deaths globally. However, inactivity can be reversed if more and better information is made available. While the number of news stories on health and health-enhancing physical activity (HEPA) has increased globally and also in Spain, various studies show that the quality of these articles is often questionable.

**Methodology:** Content analysis was used to analyze twelve quality variables from the scientific and media perspectives and five variables about the themes in news stories on HEPA published in five Spanish general-interest newspapers in the years 2013 and 2014: *El País*; *El Mundo*; *La Vanguardia*; *ABC*; and *El Periódico*.

**Results:** The average score of quality of news stories ( $n=100$ ) is 6.3 ( $s=1.9$ ) on a scale from 0 to 10. The percentages of satisfactory quality variables are: medicalization (96%); objectivity (94%); sources (80%); context (62%); credibility (61%); availability (54%); novelty (52%); truthfulness (43%); alternatives (26%); emotion (20%); accessible language (19%); and magnitude (19%).

**Conclusions:** The average quality of the newspaper articles on HEPA is intermediate. Further work is required, particularly regarding the following variables: alternatives; emotion; accessible language; and magnitude. Suggestions to improve journalistic practice and scientific dissemination (sources) are accordingly included.

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## PALABRAS CLAVE

Promoción de la salud;  
Salud pública;  
Estilo de vida;  
Alfabetización de la salud;  
Medios de comunicación;  
Comunicación

## Calidad de las recomendaciones sobre actividad física saludable en la prensa. Análisis del contenido de cinco periódicos españoles

### Resumen

**Introducción:** La inactividad física es una pandemia que provoca mundialmente millones de muertes prematuras, pero es un hábito que puede modificarse aumentando la cantidad y la calidad de la información disponible. En España y en el mundo, las noticias publicadas en los periódicos sobre salud y actividad física saludable (AFS) han aumentado, pero su calidad es cuestionable, según muestran varios estudios.

**Metodología:** Se utiliza la técnica de análisis del contenido para analizar 12 variables de calidad desde las perspectivas comunicativa y científica en noticias sobre AFS publicadas en los periódicos generalistas con mayor difusión en España (2013-2014): *El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Vanguardia*, *ABC* y *El Periódico*.

**Resultados:** La calidad de las noticias ( $n = 100$ ) obtiene una nota media de 6,3 puntos ( $s = 1,9$ ) en una escala de 0 a 10. Las variables satisfacen heterogéneamente la calidad; de mayor a menor: medicalización (96%); objetividad (94%); fuentes (80%); contexto (62%); credibilidad (61%); disponibilidad (54%); novedad (52%); veracidad (43%); alternativas (26%); emoción (20%); lenguaje divulgativo (19%), y magnitud (19%).

**Conclusiones:** Aunque la calidad media de las noticias sobre AFS no es baja, existe un amplio margen de mejora. Sobre todo, en algunas de las variables analizadas para las que se aportan unas recomendaciones para la práctica periodística y para las fuentes de información científicas y profesionales.

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## Introduction

Physical inactivity is the fourth risk factor of early death globally<sup>1</sup> because it increases the risk of several non-communicable diseases.<sup>2-4</sup> Inactivity was related to 5 million deaths in 2008, i.e., 8% of global mortality.<sup>1</sup> The pandemic of physical inactivity persists and is considered a significant public health issue.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is calculated that the levels of physical activity of 60% adults and 81.4% teenagers are insufficient.<sup>4,5</sup> In 2010 the WHO published the *Global Recommendations on Physical Activity for Health*,<sup>6</sup> which focus on the weekly physical activity needed to attain the health benefits of exercise.<sup>7</sup> Physical activity can take place in different everyday life settings: home, transport, occupation (school, college and workplace) and leisure time.

## Theoretical framework

Physical activity is a health habit that can be significantly modified if information is more widely disseminated.<sup>8</sup> The strategies to fight physical inactivity, usually paired with diet recommendations, should include different intervention phases based on social marketing and in models and theories that originate from the social sciences. All these propositions entail a prior essential requirement, i.e., to properly advise the population<sup>9</sup> in order to achieve behavioral change toward lifestyles that are sufficiently active.<sup>10</sup>

The use of the media might prove effective to enhance the health of the population.<sup>11</sup> Agenda-setting theory attributes more influence to the written press than to television in determining the items that will feature in the

media.<sup>12</sup> However, the intermediation between scientists and the general population has disappeared in most cases in Spain and globally. Thus, the regulatory role of the press in the search for truth and objectivity appears to be missing.<sup>13</sup> In Spain, the financial crisis that started in 2008 resulted in a lack of resources for quality journalism reporting on science and health.<sup>14,15</sup>

Nevertheless, there is still a high volume of news articles with specialized health contents in the Spanish press.<sup>16</sup> The number of news stories on health-enhancing physical activity (HEPA) has also increased.<sup>17</sup> However, serious research and significant advances in health and medicine still only feature in a small percentage of publications.<sup>18</sup>

To our knowledge, no study has applied the Oxman Index, specifically validated<sup>19</sup> to measure the scientific quality of the news stories on health in the press. A study by Moynihan et al.<sup>20</sup> is considered groundbreaking and was followed by various international initiatives (Australia, Canada, USA, Germany, China and Japan) that use criteria based on the Oxman Index.<sup>21</sup> The most significant initiative in terms of number of news stories analyzed is the *Health News Review*, which started its activity in 2006 in the USA. After the analysis of approximately 3000 news stories, some of these initiatives<sup>22-24</sup> reveal lack of rigor and thoroughness in relation to the original finding.

In consequence, we believe that this content analysis<sup>25-27</sup> of news stories on HEPA published in the Spanish press is timely. The objective of the research is to assess the conformity to quality criteria with the aim to generate tools for journalists to create improved news stories. The research questions (RQ) raised are as follows:

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