



Negative stereotypes of the Scottish diet: A qualitative analysis of deep-fried Mars bar references in bestselling newspapers in Scotland, 2011–14



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ABSTRACT

The Scottish diet is associated in the UK media and popular discourse with unhealthy deep-fried foods. In addition to the stereotype's negative effects on perceptions of Scottish food, culture and people, there is evidence that the stereotype of the Scottish diet has negative effects on food behaviour and public health in Scotland, having been shown to encourage consumption of deep-fried foods and discourage positive dietary change. The most notorious deep-fried food associated with Scotland is the deep-fried Mars bar (DFMB), arguably invented in Stonehaven (near Aberdeen), and first reported in the Scottish and UK press in 1995. This article reports findings from an analysis of newspaper references to the DFMB in the two highest selling newspapers in Scotland, the Scottish Sun and the Daily Record, between 2011 and 2014. A keyword search ("deep fried Mars bar") using the online media database Lexis Library generated 97 unique records, and the resulting dataset was analysed thematically and discursively. Analysis showed that both newspapers clearly associated the DFMB with Scotland. Further, both newspapers portrayed the DFMB and the broader "deep-fried" Scottish diet stereotype ambivalently (mixed positive and negative associations). However, the Daily Record actively criticised the DFMB stereotype much more often than did the Scottish Sun. These findings suggest that the Scottish population encounters different messages in the press about food and nutrition from people elsewhere in the UK, and that these messages vary depending on choice of media in Scotland. Given the known negative effects of the stereotype, differences in Scottish media discourse should be considered a potential factor in persistent health inequalities affecting Scotland. Educational efforts, and opening discussion with journalists and amongst the Scottish public, may be helpful.

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1. Introduction

The Scottish diet has long been associated in the UK media, public discourse, and popular perceptions with unhealthy deep-fried foods. These include iconic items such as the deep-fried Mars bar, deep-fried pizza, and deep-fried haggis, as well as deep-fried pies and burgers, other deep-fried chocolate bars, and fish and chips. The most notorious of these is undoubtedly the deep-fried Mars bar (DFMB), which the Carron Fish Bar (formerly the Haven) in Stonehaven claims to have invented in the 1990s (Dow, 1995). In 2004, a survey of Scottish fish and chip shops found that 22% sold DFMBs, and 17% had done so in the past. Researchers concluded that "Scotland's deep-fried Mars bar is not just an urban

myth" (Morrison & Petticrew, 2004: 2180).

The DFMB was first reported in the UK press in 1995 (Dow, 1995), generating significant national publicity (eg, Arlidge, 1995; Low, 1995), and instigating an ongoing series of references to the DFMB in the UK media that has lasted 20 years. Such publicity, which also includes the promotion of the DFMB to international tourists to Scotland as a local speciality (eg, Rough Guides, 2016), has no doubt increased availability and demand. Nonetheless, outside the UK there is very limited association of the DFMB or other deep-fried foods specifically with Scotland. The DFMB and other deep-fried chocolate bars are certainly sold in other countries around the world, including widely at state fairs in the United States (Smith, 2013: 306; see also Hirsh, 2010; Fritsch, 2012; Gamble, 2012).

In incidental findings from previous interview studies with people in Scotland, the stereotype associating the Scottish diet with

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deep-fried foods has been shown to have negative effects on food behaviour. This includes discouraging positive dietary change (Fuller, Backett-Milburn, & Hopton, 2003: 1045S), and encouraging consumption of deep-fried foods by young people from minority ethnic groups in order to “claim” Scottish national identity (Hopkins, 2004: 265). These impacts on health behaviour are in addition to the stereotype's negative effects on perceptions of Scottish food, culture, and people (by Scots themselves and others).

Stereotyping of the Scottish diet by English writers and cartoonists dates back to at least the eighteenth century, and has often surfaced at times of particular political tension between the two nations (Fraser, 2011). However, such stereotypes have taken on a new form and new significance in the contemporary context of concerns about obesity and nutrition-related disease, notably heart disease (Knight, 2016). The relationship between these real problems of public health in Scotland (discussed further below) and stereotypical patterns of representation is the focus of this paper, which constitutes the first investigation of this topic. It asks: What messages do people in Scotland receive via the media in relation to the “deep-fried” stereotype of the Scottish diet?

Scotland has some of the highest rates of obesity, and diet-related disease such as heart disease, worldwide. Most recent available figures for OECD nations place Scotland 5th in the world for overweight and obesity combined, and 6th for obesity alone (Castle, 2015: 19–20). Moreover, Scotland faces serious health inequalities, with marked disparities in mortality and life expectancy in the West of Scotland (in particular) relative to other parts of the UK and comparable developed nations. Although much of this excess mortality can be accounted for by socio-economic deprivation, a significant proportion remains unexplained – a phenomenon known as the “Scottish effect” or “Glasgow effect” (Landy, Walsh & Ramsay, 2012; McCartney, Collins, Walsh, & Batty, 2011; Popham & Boyle, 2011; Walsh, Bendel, Jones, & Hanlon, 2010a, 2010b). These problems of Scottish public health, and the widespread attention they have received in the UK media, are both relevant to this study. They are also significant policy concerns for the Scottish Government, with corresponding investment in addressing them (Scottish Government, 2010).

Previous qualitative research on diet and nutrition in Scotland has often been situated within the wider British public health and social context (eg, Backett-Milburn, Wills, Gregory, & Lawton, 2006; Backett-Milburn, Wills, Roberts, & Lawton, 2010; Jones, Furlanetto, Jackson, & Kinn, 2007; Wills, Backett-Milburn, Gregory, & Lawton, 2006), rather than a specifically Scottish context. Thus there has generally been a lack of attention to national or regional identity, culture or place in examining nutrition and public health discourse(s) in Scotland. A notable exception is the work of O'Brien, Hunt, and Hart (2009) exploring how men in the West of Scotland (around Glasgow) constructed their health beliefs and behaviours in the focus group setting, in relation to masculinity. The quotation used in the title of their paper, “The average Scottish man has a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, lying there with a portion of chips”, clearly indicates the centrality of deep-fried foods to ambivalent stereotypes of unhealthy masculinity in (the West of) Scotland, and ties their consumption to other unhealthy practices such as smoking and a sedentary lifestyle. Many participants distanced themselves from this version of West of Scotland masculinity: “Participants expressed a mix of horror, disgust and amusement in discussions of the excesses of the ‘junk food diet’ (particularly the deep-fried Mars Bar) and other poor lifestyle ‘choices’ they had observed in Glasgow” (371). However, others appeared to recognise that the version of masculinity that such behaviours represent remained “desirable” and “exalted” in working-class Glasgow (371).

Likewise, Emslie and Hunt (2008) report that participants in the

West of Scotland related men's health behaviours to broader damaging stereotypes of unhealthy “macho” masculinity in the region, involving poor diet, drinking, smoking, and low physical activity (812–15). Relatedly, Haddow, Mittra, Snowden, Barlow, and Wield (2014) identify the national stereotype of Scotland as the “sick man of Europe” (5–6), and argue that a second narrative has emerged more recently in which Scotland is marketed as a “living lab” (9–10): an ideal place to conduct medical research, especially genetic and genomic research, because of its sick population and low rates of migration. Finally, a study in the Western Isles highlights another specific regional discourse within Scotland in relation to diet and nutrition: McKie, Clark, MacLellan and Skerratt (1998) found that participants reported a “traditional island diet” (pre-World War 2) that included significant quantities of fried and high-fat foods (377). Participants suggested, however, that this diet was wholesome and healthy overall because these fried/high-fat components were balanced by high levels of physical activity (377).

Research on the representation of diet and nutrition in the UK media aligns with work carried out elsewhere. In particular, nutrition information in the press is generally inaccurate (the problem being more pronounced in “tabloid” than in “broadsheet” newspapers) (Cooper, Lee, Goldacre, & Sanders, 2012), and there was increasing coverage of obesity in the 1990s and 2000s, with studies showing a peak in coverage variously between 2006 and 2008 (Hilton, Patterson, & Teyhan, 2012; Ries, Rachul, & Caulfield, 2011). Importantly for this study, different media in the UK report obesity and public health differently. For example, “quality” newspapers (historically, those in broadsheet format) are more likely to highlight societal factors as causes of obesity (Hilton et al. 2012: 1694), and an earlier study on the reporting of public health policy found that quality newspapers in Scotland (the Scotsman and Glasgow Herald) were more likely to highlight health inequalities (Davidson, Hunt, & Kitzinger, 2003).

Useful insight into the significance of class and region in UK media discourses about diet can be gleaned from research on the reality television series *Jamie's Ministry of Food* (JMF), in which celebrity chef Jamie Oliver attempts to improve the culinary skills and diet of working-class people in the Yorkshire town of Rotherham. Hollows and Jones (2010) locate JMF “within a wider discourse of class pathologization” in the UK (308), and Warin (2011) further links this to the programme's construction of place, pointing out that “Oliver taps into stereotypical discourses of life in a northern English town”: his “approach feeds directly into a well-established discourse in the United Kingdom about the north-south divide, in which northerners are represented as in a constant state of post-industrial degeneration and stuck in impoverishment” (29).

Finally, scholars in film, cultural and media studies highlight the tendency to represent Scotland (including by Scottish writers and producers themselves) through a negatively stereotyped representation of Glasgow as a place of “multiple deprivation and crime”, which can be traced back to nineteenth-century industrialisation (Blain & Burnett, 2008: 8–9). On other topics (such as sport), research on the representation of Scotland in the UK media shows that tensions between England and Scotland are very much “live” in newspaper reporting (Bloyce, Liston, Platts, & Smith, 2010), and London-based UK media outlets are prone to derogatory, stereotypical representations of Scotland and Scots (Reid, 2010). The Scottish media “push back” against these representations (Reid, 2010), and (beyond the context of sports reporting) Scottish editions of the London-based newspapers “alter stereotypes or negative judgements to suit the imagined national audience” (Rosie, MacInnes, Petersoo, Condor, & Kennedy, 2004: 451). For example, Rosie et al. (2004) discuss a column in the Daily Mail by Ephraim Hardcastle (24 October 2000) which compared a Scottish MP's “thick” accent to porridge. They show that the version in the

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