

# WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN EATING DISORDERS AND THE MEDIA?

INFORMATION BRIEF  
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR & INFORMATION BRIEF

My name is Lindsay Rokito and I am a senior in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, majoring in Communication and minoring in Psychology and Human Development. I have been part of the YRO lab since my sophomore year and my work revolves around the intersection of media and mental health. This is my second blog post (the first discusses depression and media) and I examine the relationship between eating disorders and the media. With the increase in media use it is important to be aware of the negative impacts that it has on mental health.

Take a minute to consider how often you consume media. I am not just referring to how much television you watch or the number of hours you spend on the Internet, but consider the apps on your iPhone, any magazines you have read and whether you have listened to the radio. What would your reaction be if I told you that studies show that 8 and 18 years old are engaged with some form of media for about 7.5 hours a day? Even more concerning is that low-income kids are spending more time in front of screens because their parents worry about sending them outside to play<sup>1</sup>. Would you consider both the physical and mental health repercussions of consuming this much media? For years, researchers have done just that, and have specifically focused on eating disorders. When one says eating disorders, most people think of anorexia and bulimia, but neglect to include obesity. All three are forms of eating disorders, and an overwhelming amount of data has shown a correlation between them and the media. In order to fully understand the relationship

between eating disorders and the media, I have decided to separate this blog into general sections that will hopefully answer some pressing questions.

## WHAT IS MASS MEDIA?

When most people think of media, they only consider electronics. However, mass media is actually “defined as modes of communication that generate messages defined for very large, heterogeneous, and anonymous audiences with the goal of maximizing profit”<sup>2</sup>. This means that although television, movies and the Internet are all forms of mass media, magazines also fall into this category. It is important to acknowledge how visual media has changed over the years. While historically figures in art were romanticized as otherworldly, today’s visual media “blurs the boundaries between a fictionalized ideal and reality”<sup>2</sup>.

As consumers, we can no longer always tell the difference between what is attainable and what is impossible. Never has this been clearer than through the presentation of actors and models. Mass media is especially important to consider in connection with eating disorders due to the overwhelming hours spent consuming these mediums. Researchers have found that over 80% of Americans watch television daily, and on average these people watch at least 3 hours per day<sup>3</sup>. More specifically, an average child spends 4 hours per day watching television and only 1 hour per day completing homework<sup>4</sup>. Through these statistics we can clearly

see how significant media is in today's society. Just because everyone is taking part in consuming media does not mean that it is a beneficial activity. Rather, it is possible that this obsession with watching television, reading magazines and scrolling the Internet is negatively impacting people's health.

## WHAT ARE EATING DISORDERS? AND, WHAT IS THE "THIN-IDEAL"?

Eating disorders are illnesses characterized by irregular eating patterns and extreme concern over body weight. The three most common forms of eating disorders include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder. Anorexia is defined as an obsessive fear of gaining weight and the refusal to maintain a healthy body weight. Many people with anorexia limit their food intake and see themselves as overweight when in fact they are underweight. Bulimia involves compensating for overeating after repeated binge eating. Similarly, binge eating disorder is characterized by losing control over eating but these behaviors are not followed by compensatory behaviors. For this reason, many people with this disorder may suffer from obesity. The exact cause of eating disorders is unknown but it is generally believed to stem from biological, psychological and environmental irregularities<sup>4</sup>.

The "thin-ideal" is the portrayal of thinness as a desirable trait. It is important to note that the thin-ideal may be communicated by the portrayal of fatness as an undesirable trait as well. The thin-ideal is repeatedly seen in television characters. Research has shown that less than 10% of women appear on TV as being overweight and the majority of female characters are thinner than the average American woman<sup>2</sup>.

## WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MEDIA AND EATING DISORDERS?

### TELEVISION

TV is extremely prevalent in today's society. Over 80% of Americans watch television daily and of those people, most watch over 3 hours per day<sup>3</sup>. It is not surprising then that so much research has looked into the effects that television consumption has on its users. Becker conducted one of the first studies in 1995 on eating disorders and television exposure, by comparing the rates of eating disorders before and after the arrival of TV in Fiji. Fijians have typically encouraged healthy appetites and a rounder body type has actually signified wealth and the ability to care for one's family. Prior to the study, only one case of anorexia nervosa was reported. However, in 1998, the rates of dieting increased from 0-69%, and the participants consistently stated that the appearance of attractive actors on shows was their inspiration<sup>4</sup>.

More recent studies have analyzed the changing portrayal of female characters. Content analyses show how over the past 50 years, female TV characters have steadily grown thinner, so much so that more than half of them meet the criteria for anorexia nervosa. Taken together, this research seems to suggest that TV exposure is positively correlated with eating disorders. However, it is important to note that researchers have found that it is not merely the amount of TV that is being consumed, but rather the type of content that is being watched. Specific types of programs, including soap operas and music videos, are related to body image disorders and restrictive eating. Further research should look into what it is about these genres that may lead to users developing eating disorders.

### MAGAZINES

While we are currently seeing the rise of digital media, women's magazines still play a huge role in today's society. Over 50% of young women read fashion and beauty related magazines<sup>5</sup>. In fact, more than any other form of mass media, women's magazines have been criticized the most for promoting the unrealistic thin ideal. It is important to distinguish between men and women's magazines as a study found that women's magazines included 10.5 times more advertisements and articles that promoted weight loss compared to

men's magazines<sup>6</sup>. In a study conducted by Nichter and Nichter, adolescent girls described their ideal body as reflecting the models that they saw in fashion magazines. More specifically the "ideal woman" was described as being 5'7", 100 pounds and a size 5 with long blonde hair and blue eyes. Clearly these standards are unrealistic and represent the danger that comes from reading magazines<sup>2</sup>.

## ONLINE GROUPS

Through the Internet, we have also seen the emergence of online social groups. In fact, more than 90 million Americans have reported seeking online groups as a support resource. The Internet allows users to escape the real world and communicate with similar individuals anonymously. Recently, these online forums have turned into platforms that support living an eating disordered lifestyle. The main function of these pro-eating disorder sites is to validate the behaviors of those with eating disorders. The websites include topics such as "thinspirational" photos, tips about how to purge and restrict eating, and inspirational quotes<sup>7</sup>. Bormann conducted a fantasy theme analysis, in which 12 message boards were analyzed in order to better understand how members of pro-eating disordered groups constructed their reality. The results show that some of the groups were positive, and enforced the notion that the eating disorder was abnormal.

On the other hand, the negative groups constructed a reality in which the members face social standards of eating disorders<sup>3</sup>. Another study conducted in 2006, showed that 41% of those diagnosed with an eating disorder had visited a pro-eating disorder website<sup>7</sup>. This percent is huge and it is extremely important to consider the negative information that we could be consuming from visiting these online groups. These pro-eating disorder websites have also extended to social networking sites. Facebook has more than 250 pro-anorexic groups, and some of them have over 1,000 members. YouTube also has more than 8,000 pro-anorexic videos<sup>7</sup>. The fact that these pro-eating disorder websites are expanding to social networking sites is especially concerning due to the vast amount of adolescents who use Facebook, YouTube and the like.

## WHAT DOES INTERNALIZATION MEAN?

Much of the research on eating disorders has focused on the idea of internalization. Internalization is explained as the "extent to which an individual cognitively 'buys into' socially defined ideals of attractiveness and engages in behaviors designed to produce an approximation of these ideals"<sup>8</sup>. More generally, internalization of the thin-ideal occurs when individuals completely subscribe to unrealistic ideals of attractiveness and in turn take action in order to produce these ideals. The standards of attractiveness are often forced onto individuals by society, and these societal pressures impact the media's effect on women's notion of body dissatisfaction.

Three researchers, Heinberg, Thompson and Stormer, created the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ), which measures internalization and awareness. The researchers define internalization as the "endorsement or acceptance of media and societally based pressures regarding appearance" and awareness as "acknowledgement that such pressures exist"<sup>2</sup>. In their study, college females were shown 10-minute videotapes of stimuli emphasizing societal ideals of thinness and attractiveness. The overall finding was that internalization is significantly correlated with body dissatisfaction and eating disturbances<sup>2</sup>.

## WHAT CAN WE DO? ARE THERE PREVENTATIVE MEASURES TO TAKE?

After making a clear point regarding the overlap between eating disorders and the media, you are probably wondering what can be done in order to limit the significance between the two. Many researchers have supported parental involvement. Parents should limit their children's exposure to media and promote

healthy eating as well as moderate physical activity. In addition, parents should speak to their kids about the messages that are being presented on media channels. The American Academy of Pediatrics' suggests that children should watch no more than 1-2 hours of quality TV per day. Additionally, it might be helpful to have family dinners on a daily basis. While the recommendation is to provide healthy snacks and meals to your children, parents should still allow for a reasonable number of sweets. The key here is moderation<sup>4</sup>.

While it is important that parents play a role in monitoring their children, the government can also help to reduce eating disorders stemming from the media. Researchers suggest that the government distribute funds to media companies to produce campaigns that promote exercise and self-esteem. A final recommendation is to promote and teach media literacy to young girls. Media literacy involves knowing how to view and consume media in a way that enables the user to resist unrealistic social persuasion. The GO GIRLS! (Giving Our Girls Inspiration and Resources for Lasting Self-Esteem) program takes place over 16 weeks, and teaches girls about social marketing and media analyses<sup>2</sup>. In these psychoeducational programs professionals need to identify how the media portrays female beauty, thinness, and appearance.

Parents, the government and professionals need to continue to work together to ensure that the media presents realistic standards of beauty while teaching children about media literacy. While society is moving in a positive direction and recognizes the overlap between eating disorders and the media, we need to continue to ensure that we educate the youth on the proper ways to use and consume all mass media platforms.

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