

The Implications of Mass Media on the Prevalence of Eating Disorders

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Introduction:

Beauty and the idea of the perfect body is a concept that has consumed the minds of women alike for decades. The definition of what one considers beautiful is a direct reflection of the media and the beauty industry which is furthermore perpetuated through the daily, social interactions and constant conversations between individuals. Body image is an important part of self-identity and self-esteem. Each one of us have a body image which includes ones physical and cognitive representations of the body. The perception of beauty has been illustrated as increasingly thin, and in turn has placed unrealistic pressures on women. The ever-present media provides the constant reminder to many women that they are imperfect and has also altered individual's approach on what to eat and when. There is virtually no point within the day where media is not integrated into our lives whether it be through the radio, in magazines, on the television, on billboards and now most recently phones and their social media platforms media can have an Orwellian influence on the dietary habits of women.

Although one is able to trace the effects of mediated messages earlier than the 20th century, it is the advent of technology that allows for the mass production and distribution of messages that enables producers to advertise their products continuously and to a broader range of people than ever before, which results in several negative ramifications to the audience who consumes them.¹ One side effect has been the occurrence of eating disorders. According to the National Eating Disorder Association, an analysis of many studies from Europe and North America revealed that rates of anorexia increased sharply until the 1970s and then stabilized². The National Eating Disorder Association has also reported that based on the Hudson et al., 2007 study of 9,282 people, approximately 20 million females in the U.S. have a clinically significant

eating disorder at some point in their lifetime.² There has been little to no improvement since, and with a problem this extensive, there is an absolute need for investigation.

Although there is no all-inclusive, direct cause of eating disorders-- as it would be too exclusive to disregard the individualistic differences of the array of human personalities--the media has exponentially helped cause the progression and development of such disorders through their messages surrounding food and eating habits and their projection of an ultra-thin ideology of beauty.

An examination of the relationship between eating disorders and the media is critical because of the severity of the issue. As mentioned before, the National Eating Disorder association has reported that 20 million people are affected by this eating disorder across the country and the majority of this population is young girls.² There are several different types of eating disorders that one may be clinically diagnosed with. Obesity is abnormal, excessive body fat that poses a risk to health. Anorexia Nervosa is a pathological weight loss due to the psychological rejection of food. Bulimia nervosa is a method of weight control where the individual is a participant in a constant diet and when control of this diet is lost then cycles of binge eating and purging occur in order to rid the food and guilt. Orthorexia nervosa is a way to control weight through the sole consumption of healthy foods based on a strict belief system and fear of social situations involving unhealthy or toxic food. Other disorders have emerged and been identified as torexia, bridorexia, pregorexia, computorexia, vigorexia, tanorexia and stressorexia.³ Although the list of eating disorders is extensive, in an Ohio State University review, it was found that the reports of those with a clinically diagnosed eating disorder is a misrepresentation of females who suffer from unhealthy and harmful habits. There is a range of

eating disorders and it is a difficult to encompass all of the problems in one spectrum. The commonality of each disorder is that they all pose a risk to health and wellbeing.

Eating disorders can have negative consequences on critical systems of the body. Consuming too few calories results in the body needs to break down its own tissue to use for fuel and one of the first tissues to be broken down is muscle. The heart is one of the most important muscles of the body and eating disorders can cause a malnourished heart which can be identified by a physician as a slow pulse. Consuming too many calories can also have negative effects on the cardiovascular system causing the heart to have to work much harder due to excessive body fat and vasoconstriction of the arteries. Purging in bulimia can cause gastroparesis which means slowed digestion which can negatively affect the gastrointestinal system causing malnutrition, infections and intestinal obstruction. Each of these disorders imposes neurological problems to the brain including memory loss, erratic social behaviors, inadequate blood supply to the brain and neuron damage.⁴

Body

The Media and Eating Habits

Through its constant and continuous existence and exposure, the media has altered the way that many individuals interact, the perception of normality, behavior in basic functioning, the formulation of values and the attributes and belief foundation among its consumers. One way that the media has manipulated human behavior is through their advertisements of food, eating and dieting. The media messages surrounding food can be categorized into five different subdivisions as identified by the Institute of Behavioral Science:

1. "Be thin!"

2. “Consume and eat!”
3. “Be afraid of food!”
4. “Food will disappear!”
5. “You are not feminine / masculine enough”

Some of the message categories are congruent as one correlates with the other, whereas there are some pairs which form double binds. A double bind is a message in which one aspect orders a certain action and that same action is forbidden by another part of the message at the same time. There is no adequate reaction to this, as either action violates one of the preconditions. Double bind communication can become harmful when the sender of the inconsistent message is relevant.³

The way the audience perceives the message can bring about the development of eating disorders. If one focuses on the “Be Thin!” message then they exclude the other which can bring about anorexia. If the audience has a difficulty dissociating between the message, they might try to incorporate both “Be Thin!” and “Consume and Eat” and develop bulimia trying to accomplish both.³ Due to this advertising, eating habits have become increasingly irrational in the last century and the various forms of eating disorders that exist in society are a product of this mentality.

Although the concept of eating disorders is not something completely unprecedented, it is primarily an issue of the 20th century when eating habits began to be dictated by external stimuli.³ People are basing their eating habits on the messages portrayed by the media instead of listening to their physiological hunger. This marketing was first seen in the late 19th century when brands were created as mass produced, ready-to-eat meals. Such companies included

Knorr, Maggi, Coca-Cola, Kellogg's and Dr. Oetker. These companies introduced scientific eating which is a type of feeding that prescribes how often and how much a child should eat. As a result, parents would follow these recommendations and feed their children accordingly. This method made it extremely difficult to detect and to learn natural hunger and satiety signals in early childhood.³

Historically, parents were the main influencers over a child's eating habits, however, due to the problems that society has with obesity and eating disorders, it is evident that the marketing through media has taken over as the main influencer of eating habits.

The disruption in natural eating habits has introduced a concerning problem into society; dependence. When the media directly influences what you eat, how much you eat and when you eat, this is entirely unnatural. Advertisements for foods effect food choice, the quantity of how much to eat and reasons to diet. By taking away natural inclination of when one is hungry, there are obviously going to be serious implications. If people are dependent on others to tell them how they should be eating and constantly comparing themselves to other people, there is going to be ramifications due to the total disregard that every individual is unique and requires their own specific needs.

The problem that these advertisements have introduced can be exhibited in the obesity issue. Since the 1960s the number of obese people has doubled and in some particular regions even quadrupled. Obese and overweight individuals have spent an average of 33 billion dollars on weight loss products in the United States.² Mass media offers an extensive platform of weight loss techniques, products and plans. There is an endless stream of reports on products and messages that have influenced consumers to be healthier and lose weight the correct way. However, in a study that examined 1,200 diet commercials in Hungry only 120 of these

commercials took health issues into consideration.³ Such commercials imply that being thin is the means to success, while being fat causes failure and depression. The goal of these advertisements is to make its consumer want to be skinny and not healthy which results in the development of body dissatisfaction as they do not possess the figure that is shown through these types of commercials and as a result must believe they should be dieting.

The end result has consumers reacting to advertisements of ultra-thinness and dieting and as a result feeling they are not meeting the “preferred standard”. Consumers then go to desperate measures to achieve such goals which all stem from feelings of body dissatisfaction.⁵

The primary causation of eating disorders is body dissatisfaction and that alone can introduce unhealthy and harmful behaviors. Levels of body dissatisfaction vary and only a small proportion of those with dissatisfaction will develop clinically diagnosed eating disorders.⁵ Many women experience body dissatisfaction but do not come forward or show intense levels of disordered eating they would put them at the criteria for a diagnosed disorder.⁶

Body dissatisfaction is the primary cause of eating disorders. It is an embedded, learned response from a majority of the female population. In a study by Ditmar and Howard approximately 50% of girls and undergraduate women have reported being dissatisfied with their body image and these feelings begin to emerge as young as seven years old.⁷ In a study done by Van Wink they found that 98 percent of women that they surveyed did not feel attractive, and only two percent of them chose the word ‘beautiful’ to describe their appearance.⁸ These feelings have been linked to critical mental health issues and physical problems and has been the most consistent and prominent risk factor for developing eating disorders.

The dieting industry is capitalizing on body dissatisfaction amongst its consumers as a profitable marketing technique. When one feels dissatisfied with their body, their morale is low. It is difficult to meticulously consider how body dissatisfaction is making one feel and create a realistic solution to the problem when one is surrounded with constant, depressive thoughts. The dieting industry uses harmful terminology that triggers these feelings. Many dieting advertisers present a harsh criticism of an overweight female but then offers a quick and effective solution. It is natural for consumers to choose to purchase their product because it promises an achievement of a skinny figure which was something that they were unable to accomplish on their own. By using the dieting product, it would promise not only to make them skinny but to make them happy, without feelings of body dissatisfaction. These dieting advertisements are introducing unhealthy behaviors into society with the sole focus on becoming skinny instead of becoming healthy which has caused the progression of eating disorders.

Projection of Ultra-Thinness

The media has developed a cultural ideal of female beauty obsessed with the idea of ultra-thinness resulting in an even larger discrepancy between consumers' ideal and actual self. It is the media that determines what is deemed beautiful using beauty icons. These models prepare for hours before public appearances, and only one or two photos are chosen from the hundreds which are then manipulated digitally making it almost impossible for the average woman to live up to these standards. On average models are 15% underweight which is the clinical criteria for anorexia and glamorous models are on average 20% underweight.⁵

Across magazines, movies, television and the internet, thinness is the emphasis and seen as the ultimate desire and source of reward. Thin characters are often associated with popularity, beauty, and success while overweight characters are unloved and unsuccessful.⁷ The association

between weight and worth that is seen throughout various forms of entertainment corrupts the minds of girls from a young age. Youth provides the greatest vulnerability to this type of unscrupulous bombardment of image, because those of younger years are by default, lacking in knowledge and worldly experience.

The thin ideal has serious psychological significance because appearance is central to female self-evaluation and societal success. The importance of self-presentation correlates with a women's social position and those who are sensitive constantly change their appearance and identities to suit current fashion trends and beauty icons. The pressure of achieving high social status means to compete with what the ideal symbol of beauty is. A study in 1954 showed that people evaluate themselves by comparing their own attractiveness with the appearance of models in advertisements.⁸ Women appeared to have increased body dissatisfaction after being exposed to the thin idealized images even though the images presented unrealistic figures.⁸ It's hard not to compare one's own body with what one considers as ideal or perfect because we are a society with a drive for uniformity and success.

Body dissatisfaction is worsened through constant exposure to thin images in the media. According to communication theories, repeated exposure to media leads viewers to begin to accept media portrayals as representations of reality. The depiction of thinness causes women to see the ideal as normative, expected and central to being attractive. Research in this area has produced more than 100 studies whose findings predict prospective eating pathologies and can cause bulimic patterns as an attempt at achieving this image.⁷ In a cohort study conducted in Navarra, Spain, a region-wide represented sample of 2862 girls who were 12 to 21 years of age completed the eating attitudes test and other questionnaire in 1997. As a result, 90 new eating disorders were identified out of the experiment and in a logistic analysis. This study also found a

higher risk of eating disorder was found to increase as the frequency of reading female magazines or listening constantly to the radio in an odds ratio of 1.2-3.8. Such results support the role of mass media influence in the onset of eating disorders.⁹

When a person begins to compare their own bodies to that portrayed body image in the media, the self discrepancy theory (SDT) created by Higgins in 1987 suggests that individuals will experience dissatisfaction with a discrepancy between the ideal and current body image. Higgins claims in this theory that there are three basic domains of the self: The actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self. The actual self, represents your sense of self and what aspects of your life truly belong to you. The ideal self represents the person you wish to become and what attributes that someone else has that you desperately wish to possess. The ought self, is a representation of the person you feel you should become or what society is pressuring you to be. There is a dissatisfaction when there is a discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal or ought self. This discrepancy can lead to sadness, depression and low self-esteem. With no discrepancy there is acceptance of the body as a whole and the individual experiences more accounts of happiness and satisfaction.⁸

The question stands to why these companies and the fashion industry use these abnormally thin models. There is a credence that size zero is better at selling a product because women will yearn to look like the image so they will buy the product. In a study by Gillian in 2000, it was found that statistics have repeatedly shown that using a beautiful skinny girl on the cover of a magazine will result in a higher demand of magazines and a higher (product sales) success rate.⁸ In a study showing contrary results, Tiggeman reported that when the media used an image which directly affected body satisfaction, both the product and the brand name, had a poorer recall.⁸ Tiggeman concluded women are sensitive for the impact of social comparison in

media, which in turn had an influence on their product recall and consumer behavior. A study of Halliwell & Dittmar showed that advertisements were effective, despite of the ‘thinness’ of the model which revealed that the media can easily use bigger models as they have used models of all sizes within their studies.⁸ These three studies have contradicting results, which begs for further research; however, there is a clear indication that many advertisers for industries involved in beauty, clothing, cosmetics, fashion and style have opposing views on the way to sell their products best. There remain industries that hold onto the mentality that using ultra-thin models is the best and most effective way to sell their product. But there is a new frontier of advertising for those industries concerned with beauty products. Today, companies such as American Eagle and Dove have been using models that represent a typical female instead of a photoshopped, plastic, altered and entirely unrealistic version.¹⁰

Discussion

American Eagle has started the Aerie Real campaign and Dove has developed the Campaign for Real Beauty within their advertisements. These two industries are the two front runners and prime examples of companies trying to shift the focus of advertisements from using ultra-thin models to realistic models that truly represent the female population. These companies use models of all different sizes, shapes and ethnicities in an effort to bolster self-confidence in girls and identify the corruption of the editing teams in the distortion of the models used within advertisements. In a study that evaluated the impact on young women’s body satisfaction of Aerie Real, 200 female students were randomly allocated to view either Aerie Real images or digitally modified images from previous campaigns. Subjects with high appearance comparison

reported a smaller decrease in body satisfaction after viewing the Aerie Real images as compared to those viewing previous images of ultra-thin models.¹¹

The results of both the Aerie Real and the Campaign for Real Beauty have had positive impacts on their audiences. The comments and reactions from consumers have been generally positive, besides the unavoidable negative individuals stuck in an old frame of mind, demanding that only skinny models should be used.

Such companies as Aerie Real and Dove are proving it not a necessity to use ultra-thin models to reach high success in the beauty industry. The body that is the ideal and the product that is the promise are related. The model should represent a visual of what the product promises. The advertisement is only credible when the model and the product are in harmony, so when there is congruence between the two there is higher customer satisfaction.

Some countries have taken the initiative to change the image of female beauty into a healthier, more realistic version. In 2017, the French government officially produced two decrees that are aimed at protecting the health of models and preventing anorexia. Models are now required to have a medical certificate that is valid for up to two years that confirms their general physical health and that they are not excessively underweight. In addition, the French government declared that any “commercial” appearance of a model whose appearance has been digitally altered must label the photograph as “photographie retouchée,” or retouched photograph.¹² Due to the newness of these implemented laws, the effects that they have had on national eating disorder levels have not yet to be examined. However, France is often seen as the fashion capital of the world and the strides that they have made in the past has set an example for the rest of the world.

The protection that France is providing for models is positive; however, while the new laws could be a step in the right direction, the mass media remains saturated with deceptive images. It should be noted that these laws are sending a message that the fashion industry should be responsible for the well-being of those that depend on them for a livelihood. They should also have the responsibility to inform their customers of the reality behind the images they are producing.

There are problems that these laws have also introduced. Banning models from participating in fashion because they are too thin is discrimination against those who naturally have such a body type. Perhaps they make up a smaller percentage of the population, but there remains a portion of society that is thin. Instead of banning a body type all together, we should celebrate every body for what they are. There needs to be more representation in the variation of body types used, instead of banning certain body types all together.

The new laws also have to abide with the fact that the beauty industry is a business. A vital goal of a business is to sell large quantities of products; thus, businesses are always looking for new ways to get customers to make a purchase. If a business believes that using thin models is the best way to sell their products, it has the right to use thin models. Companies looking to sell food products or dieting products, as a matter of business survival, use any way possible to sell their products, even if it is by playing on our insecurities or deceiving us of the unhealthiness of the food. Thus, although it is a picturesque ideal, it is improbable to expect all business to be ethically responsible for the well-being of customers.

It may be unrealistic to hold businesses to the strict, ethical changes necessary to make them all accountable to alleviating the psychological distress that media saturation has placed upon modern beauty standards. American Eagle and Dove are companies that are exceptions to

the norm. Having discussions about the problems of using ultra-thin models and celebrating examples of the success of companies like American Eagle and Dove is a step in the right direction. If we, as a people, are united in making a change in the public perception of beauty—and what motivates us to make a purchase decision, businesses will inevitably comply to popular opinion; after all, it is the goal of most any business to reach customers in the most persuasive manner.

It is the public that needs to alter the definition of beautiful.

Conclusion:

Based on the evidence presented there is a clear, causal relationship between the methods of the media and today's epidemic of eating disorders. Messages from the media dictate the way that we eat, the food choices we make, and the encouragement to engage in unhealthy, inconsistent dieting. The media has changed the way we think about food. The homogenous depiction of an underweight woman has altered opinions on what is considered attractive, has caused females to yearn to look like a photoshopped, unrealistic figure, and has drastically influenced the increase in body dissatisfaction that is the leading cause of eating disorders. The perception of an underweight woman as a symbol of beauty has distorted the public opinion about what being beautiful entails.

Companies like American Eagle and Dove should serve as an example for the future as they have opened a new chapter in the advertising industry by using females with realistic body figures that have never been altered by the electronic scalpels and special-effects wizardry of photograph-manipulating software such as Photoshop.

France has worked on developing decrees that protect the health of their models, which is another positive change. Our way of government does not allow one to monitor everything that circulates within the wide corridors of mass media. There will always be psychologically harmful material throughout every possible media platform.

In a 2014 Pew youth media study, it was found that 88% of teens have a mobile phone, over 90% access the Internet from their mobile device, and those who do so are online more frequently.¹³ The introduction of social media to the public allows savvy companies to leap past the days of passive observation by honing in on a young audiences' desire to participate by enabling individuals to further spread of the messages of their marketing departments. In this new approach, companies are befriending their customers, hoping that those same consumers express their own personality through their brand.¹³

As a nation we need to bring the focus back to the individual. We should be taking the time to bolster self-confidence in females everywhere by implementing programs that teach proper nutrition and body positivity. Education is a powerful tool that can use all of the same avenues as mass media—including social media—and is essential in changing the nation for the better and putting a stop to eating disorders.

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