

Media and Body Image

In high school, I became increasingly interested in the relationship between society and eating disorders. Two years ago, the first lady, Michelle Obama, launched an anti-obesity campaign, "Lets Move!" The campaign has had many critics and negative feedback, such as: changing school lunches; talking about her own children on national television; and bringing up an issue most people believe should be a family matter, rather than a public matter. The laws and advertisements to stop the war on obesity have been seen as potentially harmful rather than helpful to children.¹ Austin Hospital's Medical Director of Mental Health, Richard Newton, said he believed nine and ten year-olds being treated for eating disorders were becoming ill from "the panic" created by anti-obesity campaigns. "We need to be giving healthy weight messages that don't vilify fatness, but actually encourage health," Newton explained. "Some of the health messages we give create panic. We have to reassure young people that if they do have a weight problem, it doesn't mean that makes them a bad person. We need to encourage people to not just consider physical health, but emotional their well-being as well."

The public school environment, for me, was a place of judgment. You were judged on what clothes you wore; if you did your homework; spoke up in class; if you had glasses or braces; and if you were fat. With the "Lets Move!" campaign, weight is addressed on a daily basis in schools. Obesity is not the only epidemic; eating disorders are an epidemic as well. Are eating disorders encouraged or overshadowed by the way advertisers create ads? Why is it acceptable to be an emaciated fashion model walking the runway, but it is not acceptable to be a young growing child with obesity?

Obesity is usually diagnosed by a BMI (Body Mass Index)² test; a BMI is a test that calculates a number from averaging one's height and weight. BMI is a fairly reliable indicator of body fatness for most people. BMI does not measure body fat directly, but research has shown that BMI correlates to direct measures of body fat, such as underwater weighing and dual energy x-ray absorptiometry (DXA). BMI can be considered an alternative for direct measures of body fat. Additionally, BMI is an inexpensive and easy-to-perform method of screening for weight categories that may lead to health problems. A BMI reveal how much percentage one weighs more in comparison to ones age group. My personal BMI calculator says I weigh more than 57% of the world's 17 year-olds. That percentage doesn't phase me, but what if you told a seven year-old girl she weighed more than 57% of other girls? You have just instilled a thought into a vulnerable girl's mind.³

17% of all children and adolescents in the U.S. are obese, 30% of parents of children age 6-14 report worrisome eating behaviors and physical activity in their children; 17% of parents report that their children are worried about their weight; 7% say their children have been made to feel bad at school about what or how much they were eating. Children are dieting and worrying about what they eat. When I was a child, I worried about breaking a limb if I jumped off the swing set too high, or if I could get across the monkey-bars before the school-bell rang. Comparing my childhood and how much of a role politics took in my life to how much of a role

¹ FoxNews.com.2012.NewsCore. 13th, February <http://www.foxnews.com/health/2012/02/13/anti-obesity-campaigns-may-be-harmful-to-some-healthy-children-scientists-warn/>

² Center of Disease Control web. 2011. CCD. 13th, September. <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi/index.html>

³ Times Ideas wed. 2012 Anthony T. DeBenedet. M.D., CNN, 21, February <http://ideas.time.com/2012/02/21/is-the-fight-against-childhood-obesity-creating-eating-disorders/?iid=op-main-lede>

they play in children's lives today makes me worry. Children shouldn't be exposed to adult issues or have the public tell them how they should look and what they should eat or not eat. More care needs to be taken towards the viewer when portraying images, campaigns, and advertisements. Children and young adults are at a vulnerable time in their development and everything and everyone influences them. Society should encourage acceptance by viewing health not just physically but mentally as well. We need to focus on overall health, factoring a growing body *and* a growing mind. In this paper, I will focus on research of eating disorders—how they start, how young they can start, and what can be done to stop the epidemic.

Eating Disorders

A disorder⁴ is a confusion, an irregularity, a disturbance in physical or mental health or functions. An eating disorder can start with an unhealthy outlook on food or body image. An unhealthy view can lead to an unhealthy diet, cutting calories and cutting corners. In anorexia and bulimia, calories are often restricted to no more than 500 to 850 a day, putting the body into starvation mode. The body starts to burn muscle instead of fat, weakening the body. The less food given to the body, the less food is available to keep the organs alive. The organs will eventually shut down and cause many health problems if the starvation and unhealthy habits continue. With bulimia, the constant binge and purge will deteriorate the stomach, fill one's throat with toxins, and create mouth problems. With any disorder, a person faces potential consequences to their mental and physical health, but the media today does not focus on the fatal issue of eating disorders. If advertisers took the time to show how dangerous and unhealthy dieting can be, and how it can progress into an eating disorder, we may not have these problems. Instead, they might offer a small disclaimer about a product, diet, or gym plan. A small disclaimer is not enough to catch a person's eye with all of the other media.

An eating disorder is an unhealthy view of the body and food followed by abnormal eating or exercise habits. Most common eating disorders are: Anorexia, Bulimia, Orthorexia, and EDNOS (Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified). All of these disorders can be tied to image. The image that creates the disorder could be a self-image.

Eating Disorders & Perception

An image is a conception, an idea, and a mental representation. It can be the visible creation of absent thoughts of our mind. It is most commonly perceived as a likeness or depiction of a person, animal, or thing made visible. Images are stored and created in our mind from the minute we open our eyes to the moment we slip into our dreams. They can be positive and negative, resolving conflicts and stirring up trouble. Depictions are interpretations and recreations; we never can exactly interpret a moment or scene the same way it happened. Therefore, how something is depicted in someone's mind is not the same way it is depicted in another. An advertiser can put an image out in the world and can view that from a positive lens, but a viewer has the ability to translate that image however they wish. It's all about interpretation. Image interpretation can spiral into chaos.

⁴ disorder. (n.d.). Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition. Retrieved November 28, 2012, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/disorder>

An image is two-dimensional; it is a picture; it is not a three-dimensional representation of a life-form. It is not real. Why, as a society, do we place a certain humanness to a image? Images greet us everywhere—from television, magazines, computers, billboard advertising, on buses, trains, and park benches. Imagine how many images have built up in the corners of your own mind. An image can turn from a friend to an enemy in a quick stream of thought. When we build our “houses” of images, we become vulnerable to them. Images become real to us, even if the portrayal of the images are fictional. This is dangerous because we could create a fictional view of our body, seeing a body as larger than it is; one might be unable to see how emaciated and unhealthy she is becoming.

How is an eating disorder connected to image? When the media screams “thin!” our minds begin to think thin *is* beauty. By seeing images repeatedly of what the media thinks we should look like, we begin to thrive and live to become that image. We create a negative image of ourselves and create “positive” goal images. Those goal images may not be healthy though, and humans possess a natural drive for success, doing whatever it takes to get to that goal. Some people may have more of a natural drive than others. We all view images differently, but it’s clear that the media and images given to us play a rather large role in eating disorders and eating disorder recovery. Using the images advertisers put out, people suffering from an eating disorder have created promotional anorexia and bulimia blogs and websites, calling them “pro-ana” and “pro-mia.” These websites believe anorexia and bulimia are “normal” and see the disease as a friend. By using images from advertisers, these sites encourage people to follow the site or blog to “do good” by not eating or purging.⁵

Advertisers and Representation

Representation is the expression or designation by some term, charter, symbol, or the like. It can also be one’s ability to influence. Today, our main “representer” is the media. Anywhere, on any given day, we can feel pressure from the media.⁶ Walking through the grocery store, there are advertisements for diet pills, shakes that claim to slim you, and “low-fat” or “reduced fat” products. Then, you come to a checkout line and all you see is magazines covering the shelves. The magazines will tell you what’s “in,” what’s “out,” who is thin and who is fat. For example, when Demi Lavato came out of an eating disorder treatment center, magazines were very supportive, but now when you read replies and critiques under online magazines pages, all you read about are critics who talking about her weight gain. This pressure media creates can begin to make you feel like judging yourself, or that people are judging you. Due to the way the media represents information, news, and celebrities, we begin to question how we represent ourselves.

In the documentary, *America The Beautiful*, a twelve year-old model travels to Paris to expand her career. She was rejected by the Paris scene because she was not small enough. Paris fashion designers specifically cut fabric to fit size 2 and smaller models. The average woman is not a size 2, but a size 12. Paris is not accurately representing what reality is, but what they wish it could be. The cycle can start there and progress. By the end of the movie, that little girl didn’t

⁵ <http://family.go.com/parenting/pkg-teen/article-773764-educate-yourself-about-pro--ana-and-pro--mia-sites-t/>

⁶ representation. (n.d.). Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition. Retrieved December 03, 2012, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/representation>

think she was pretty enough, and said she would probably go on a diet. The only reason she felt this way about her body is because people in the media and advertising world told her there was a problem to fix. She then saw her body as a problem.

A distorted view starts with an image of how one thinks they should look like. It turns to a representation of that image, and then it turns to the feeling of representing oneself and what one can do to change to fit into the mold the media portrays of beauty. Clouded with social pressure, the pressure to grow up the way the world sees fit is overpowering, and one cannot clearly depict what is supposed to real.

Media Impact

Perception is the act of apprehending by means of the sense or of the mind; cognition; understanding. A single unified awareness derived from a sensory process while a stimulus is present. Our sensory process can be our eyes and our stimulus can be an image the media presented.⁷ We will then perceive it in our mind. To some people, the media is just something to ignore. To others, particularly young women, the media can change their view of themselves and others. We live in a web of perception that can quickly turn into a web of lies.

Perception of self plays a large part in eating disorders. If one sets a goal of how they should look, they will never reach the desired goal. Some will set a weight goal, but when they reach that goal, they still might not feel small or light enough. They will set yet another weight goal. When the media perceives “beauty as thin” and “large as bad” we begin to think we must be thin to be beautiful. One day, we might feel thin enough, but the next day feel fat. Perception of one’s body can lead to how much one will eat; the plates can get smaller, along with the portion size. An eating disorder can onset quickly or be a prolonged process. Regardless, eating disorders are a life-threatening illness.

Distortion and Perception

A distortion is a false representation of facts or reality, twisted, misshapen or deformed. It is morally or mentally twisted; as with an aberration or bias.⁸ When you look at an image, do you instinctively think it must be edited or do you see it as an original? A large percentage of images advertisers put into the world are manipulated through Photoshop, but they never advertise that they are photoshopped. The viewer, as a result, is manipulated to think that every image they see is of something real—not transformed bodies and cropped images.

In the mind of one with an eating disorder, the clipped and edited pictures become a distorted reality. The only goal is to strive to be that impossible version of photoshopped beauty. We create a distortion of ourselves in our mind—how we look and how we should look. Like a photo, we will always see ourselves as larger or smaller than we are. When comparing physical

⁷ perception. (n.d.). Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition. Retrieved December 03, 2012, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/perception>

⁸ distortion. (n.d.). Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition. Retrieved December 03, 2012, from Dictionary.com website:

traits to others, one can grow incredibly self-judgmental and run the risk of having an eating disorder.

What is “skinny” or “beauty” anyway? Advertising campaigns can say they are selling “true beauty,” “weightless, airless products,” but it is still a cover up. We look at the ads and some of us will think we want to be a perfect commercial model, not thinking twice that it is impossible to ever look like a photoshopped model. Even the model, herself, will never look like the very ad she is depicted in.