# Eating disorders and the media

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**Purpose of review**
In June 2015, the newspapers in England once again pointed at the media industry as responsible for the spread of eating disorders.

**Recent findings**
This article reviews this argument and previous research on the role of the media industry in the perpetration of images that may foster eating disorders.

**Summary**
It has been recently argued, coherently with previous research, that the media may be responsible for the spread of eating disorders. This article reviews this literature, and evaluates what the real role of the media in the spread of eating disorders is. The article argues that considering the portrait of thin models in the media industry as responsible for eating disorders is a misanalysis of the problem and evaluates some of the more profound reasons that may lead to the adoption of the disordered eating symptomatology.

**Keywords**
eating disorders, fashion, media industry, State intervention

## INTRODUCTION

In June 2015, after a period of relative silence, the ghost of the thin woman in the media, haunting young girls and pushing them into the obscure abyss of eating disorders made its appearance again. The BBC alerted that numbers of admissions for eating disorders has nearly doubled between 2010 and 2013, and pointed once more the finger at the media industry [1▪]. In May, even the cartoon Frozen was called into the dispute: Elsa, it was suggested, may 'inspire' young girls into becoming anorexic [2].

Leaving aside how this may be read as a (probably unintentional) insult to the intelligence of young girls, who, in these kinds of alarming statements, are presented as wax capable of being moulded into whatever wanted by devious magazine directors or film producers, as people so highly mentally fragile as to be persuaded that thinness is better than life just by means of exposure to photos or cartoons. Even leaving this aside, blaming the media risks blurring the sight of the more profound reasons that may cause eating disorders. This is not to suggest that media images may not influence people, or that the use of emaciated women and men in the media (or in children's narratives) is unproblematic. It is of course problematic under many perspectives (not last, it may involve making unethical requests of women who wish to make a career in certain professions), and as we shall see, it may have a role in cementing the culture over which eating disorders develop. However, the media appears in these arguments rather as an easy scapegoat. As it often happens, scapegoats are made to appear for a variety of reasons and one is to shed responsibility, to externalize a problem for which various parties have a role and responsibility [3].

This article proposes an alternative way of understanding some of the more profound reasons that may lead to the adoption of eating disorders.

## EATING DISORDERS AND THE MEDIA

The appeal to the 'media' as one of the causes or triggers of eating disorders is not new; indeed perhaps it is one of the first popular arguments to explain the spread of eating disorders. In 2000, The British Medical Association published a booklet called *Eating disorders, body image and the media* [4] in which it again suggested that the media play a significant role in the causation of eating disorders

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## KEY POINTS

- Studies on the relationship between media influence and eating disorders do not provide conclusive scientific evidence that the media is, at least primarily, responsible for the spread of eating disorders.
- Historical evidence of the use of thin models in the media industry can be interpreted in different ways, and no conclusive evidence is provided that the use of thin models in the media has preceded or caused the upsurge in eating disorders.
- The use of thin models in the media industry relates, like anorexia, to the value attached to thinness; a pertinent question is thus why thinness is valued.
- Even accepting that the use of emaciated models in the media is ethically questionable, and that therefore there is legitimate scope for State intervention in the regulation of the use of models in the media industry, blaming the media for the spread of eating disorders may eclipse a more serious analysis of the problem of eating disorders.

in vulnerable individuals, by suggesting that being 'thin' means being successful [5].

In 2006, the regional government of Madrid banned overly thin models at top-level fashion shows [6]. Following this, the major of Milan imposed a similar ban for girls with body mass index (BMI) below 18 from the catwalks [7], and a year later ordered the removal of the photographs by Toscani [8] of Caro [9] from the streets of Milan. Dove (Unilever), the producer of deodorants and soap, introduced 'normal size models' in its advertisements, encouraging use of models of BMI between 18 and 25 which is in accordance with United Nations' guidelines for health [10]. In 2013, the Israel's Act Limiting Weight in the Modelling Industry 57722–2012 came into effect. This Act establishes that all models aged 18 and over should have a minimum BMI of 18.5 [11].

In England, the Royal College of Psychiatrists in 2010 published a statement in which again it was argued that media images may trigger the onset of eating disorders, and thus recommended that the next Government set an ethical code for advertising/media companies, calling on the use of diversity of age, shape, weight, ethnicity and disability in the media [12].

However, publishers of women's magazines argued that the media are not to be blamed for using emaciated models: the reason why they use them is that people buy more magazines if they portray very thin models [13,14]. The New York's Elite modelling agency complained that forbidding the use of models below a certain BMI was discriminatory against many models, and would curtail the freedom and creativity of designers [6]. The head of Marks & Spencer similarly argued that it was up to the designers to decide the size of their models [16].

The argument that the offer responds to the demand is interesting, and it raises the question of why people prefer to buy magazines that picture emaciated models, or what it is that people like about thinness; we shall get back to this point later. Yet, the other responses were ill-founded. When images are believed to cause psychological or social damage, the State intervenes to restrict their usage. This is why the broadcasting of films with strong images and language is regulated, and this is not thought to impinge upon the freedom of film directors. Even if it did, it would be a limitation justified by the protection of people's greater interests. But is it true that the media have a role in the spread of eating disorders? This question does not have a straightforward answer.

Some studies suggest that the media contribute to create a social context for eating disorders, and may make recovery more difficult [17–21, 22▪,23▪]. Studies in psychology also show that people's self-esteem is susceptible to manipulation operated by the media: 'Women also appear to be more easily manipulated by media images than men although there is an indication that men's self-esteem too is influenced by what is portrayed on the media' [24]. It has also been suggested that the media can influence body satisfaction in other ways – for example, increases in requests of 'cosmetic' surgery has been related to media portrayals [25].

Even though these studies provide important and interesting information on the relationship between eating disorders and media influences, they do not provide conclusive evidence that media portraits do indeed have a causal role in the adoption of eating disordered patterns [26].

But even accepting the arguments that people may be susceptible to repeated images, that self-esteem may be influenced by media images, and thus that it is likely that some connection exists between exposure to images and susceptibility to eating disorders, such arguments give rise to another question: why thinness? Why is thinness associated with beauty, or perfection, or success, or acceptability? Why thinness rather than, say, red hair, long fingers, freckles, or small feet? Rather than whether and to what extent media exposure may foster the adoption of disordered eating patterns, thus, a different and perhaps more complex question arises from the examination of the literature, and it is what is valuable about thinness. In this short commentary, a throughout historical analysis of the value of thinness cannot be provided: yet, hopefully some pertinent considerations can enrich the conceptual analysis of the problem of eating disorders and its relationship with media portraits. Thinness is not an intrinsic element of beauty and indeed has not always been an attribute of beauty.

''For example, from the Middle Ages the rounder 'reproductive figure' was considered attractive and plumpness was erotic and fashionable. In line with this, the women painted by Rubens in the 1600s had full rounded hips and breasts, and in the 1800s Courbet painted women who could be considered fat by today's standards'' [27].

It is not surprising that what is regarded as sensual or beautiful changes over time. Our tastes for clothes and cars change too. But why do they change in one direction rather than another?

Studies on the history of thinness shed some light on this. For example, a review of the models of the 'Miss America' competition and of the magazine Playboy registers a decrease in weight and 'curves' particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, times at which more women were acquiring or were expected to acquire traditionally 'male' roles, and to demonstrate their 'intellectual skills' [28]. During the 1970s, the 'tubular' androgynous body was imperative: one of the most highly paid models was Jean Shrimpton, also called 'the shrimp'. Another was Twiggy. Thinness, thus, appears to correlate with the modification of the role of the woman in modern society [29–32]. If this argument is persuasive, it follows that thinness is valued for what it symbolizes in a particular social context [33▪]. Thus it does not have just aesthetic value, but normative value.

But there is probably even more than this to eating disorders. Thinness, the ability to control food intake, also corporealizes the ability of a person to master the body. At least since Orphism [34], western thought around the human person has been vastly dominated by metaphysical dualism: human beings are thought to be composed of a mind and a body, and such dualism is so entrenched in western philosophy and common thought that Ryle [35] called it 'the Official Doctrine'. The schism of mind (or soul, or rationality) and body is not purely descriptive: it is normative – the body needs to be mastered, and the person of virtue and value is that who is capable of exerting control over impulses and passions coming from the body.

The person who is able to exert control over hunger, one of the most powerful physiological impulses, has thus often been presented as an example of moral integrity [36–38]. Fasting is still often associated with the idea of purity (think of how many alleged 'health farms' propose 'detox' programmes); this of course implies that eating is always, more or less, a form of pollution. Fasting 'cleanses' the organism. Being empty of food is being clean.

It is possible that eating disorders and the veneration of thinness are to some extent fostered by the media – and to some extent related to the social changes in the roles of women (and men) in modern societies; but also to some extent relate to the value of what thinness symbolizes in a certain sociocultural context. Not coincidentally, people with eating disorders usually display personality traits such as self-control, perfectionism, responsibility, hard work and valuing intellectual achievement; these traits, as has been noted in the literature, have strong moral connotations and echo and mirror classic Protestant values, still deeply entrenched in contemporary western societies [39–42]. From this perspective, the background of eating disorders is a set of moral values that centre around self-control and willpower. This is perhaps why the more the sufferer becomes emaciated, frail and vulnerable, the more powerful she feels; and this is perhaps why the longer eating disorders last, the harder it is to recover (what sometimes misleads healthcare professionals to regard long-term eating disorders as 'chronic').

The claim that the media may be responsible for eating disorders is thus somehow incomplete. It may lead to relate eating disorders to vanity, but this would be a misanalysis of the problem. On the contrary, the backdrop of eating disorders is a profound denigration of the body.

Media images, the public preference for extreme thinness are, like eating disorders themselves, the expression of normative values.

This does not mean of course that being thin is moral and that people who have anorexia are more moral than others. It means that a moral background may provide the substrate for eating disorders and for the aesthetic value of thinness. As we discussed earlier, this normative value relates to a metaphysical conception according to which human beings are composed of a body and a mind (or soul or rationality). This partition is highly morally charged: the body is not much more than organic material or compound of cells unless a well functioning mind gives meaning and purpose to it. There is something immoral in the inability of mastering the body. This is also why fatness is often associated with 'vices' such as indolence and lack of strength of character. It may be worth remembering that Gluttony and Acedia are in the history of

Catholicism among the seven Capital Sins. Dante in the Inferno Canto III of the Divina Commedia so described, with the voice of Virgilio, the indolent:

'Sad souls of those who lived without honours or infamy [...]
Not rebel to God but neither faithful [...]
Of the Heavens, they would cloud the beauty
And down below they would make the damned proud
Who would think to be better than them [...]
The world does not want to know about them
Pity and justice refuse them
Thus don't consider them, but take a look and move on [...]'

Then Dante takes the voice again:
That was the party of the indolent
Despised by God and by its own enemies [43]

It is the value of self-control, discipline, austerity, which is in the psychological background of the eating disorder sufferer. As Duker and Slade [44] have poignantly noted, 'it is the continuity between the sufferers' moral attitude and that of their social group or culture that again explains why the condition can be lethal' and, we could add, that explains why it is so difficult to understand eating disorders: understanding eating disorders challenges us to rethink about our own assumptions and values.

## CONCLUSION

Eating disorders are not likely to be primarily caused by media. It is methodologically difficult if not impossible to examine the historical evidence of the use of thinness in fashion, arts and the media and assess either the chronological or the causal connection between such use and the spread of eating disorders. This article has rather reflected on the merits of the popular argument that media portraits may cause eating disorders or may make people more susceptible to them. This argument raises a conceptual issue: why is thinness portrayed as a desirable trait? Why is thinness an attribute of beauty, of social acceptability, of success? This is not to deny that the media can have a role in the spread of eating disorders, and regulation of the use of emaciated models could have a positive impact on people's body satisfaction and correct one of the factors that can precipitate eating disorders and may be ethically legitimate, but continuing to blame the media for eating disorders risks eclipsing other pertinent considerations. It is necessary to understand why people identify self-worth with thinness: it is this core value that needs to be addressed if we are serious about resolving eating disorders.


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■ of special interest
■■ of outstanding interest


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