

## AN IMAGE OF A HUMAN PROMOTED BY THE MEDIA VS. EATING DISORDERS AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Beata PITUŁA, Klaudia MORKISZ

### Abstract

*The text is a report on the authors' own research on the problem of eating disorders among children and adolescents in relation to the content promoted by the media.*

### Keywords:

*Eating disorders, media, health education*

### INTRODUCTION

Nowadays it is more and more difficult to meet a woman who is completely satisfied with her appearance. The acceptance of one's own body is certainly not enhanced by the modern media. On television, in films, commercials and glossy magazines there rarely appear people who are not physically perfect. The group that is most vulnerable to the image presented in the media is children and teenagers. Young people are often hypersensitive with reference to their appearance and, unfortunately, it is usually the appearance, not the achievements, values or beliefs, that becomes for them the main measure of their self-esteem. Quoting after Jowita Wycisk, adolescents, being susceptible to this type of media message, believe that owing to the perfect beauty they will become possessors of other attractive properties. Moreover, advertising campaigns imply that a new body determines the improvement of the social status of an individual

providing them with unlimited possibilities and ensuring a full success (Ziółkowska, 2005). Thus, young people while looking for patterns of authority and guidance in life fall into the trap of striving to achieve what for many of them is impossible, i.e. in the trap known as perfectionism. A negative body image overlapping with a low self-esteem can create a distorted self-image in the mind of children and adolescents. Dismorphophobia is a manifestation of a low self-esteem which is characterized by a subjective impression of the distortion of one's own body aesthetics despite the lack of visible defects in appearance (Brytek-Matera, 2008). Sometimes such people feel so unattractive that they cannot bear anyone to look at them and as a result they do not leave the house. It is essential to keep in mind that even a brief exposure to the stimuli associated with the ideal of a slim figure promoted by the media can lead to an increased dissatisfaction with their own appearance. Therefore,

the internalization of the media messages disseminating information related to the standards of attractiveness of the female body, and the socio-cultural pressure experienced by women to achieve the desired ideal is a frequent source of nascent discontent which, when sustained for some time, can become a breeding ground for psychopathology of eating disorders and a distorted body image (Brytek-Matera, 2009).

It is characteristic for maturing girls, in contrast to older women, to evaluate every part of their body separately, meticulously analyzing the size and shape of their breasts, the dimensions of the thighs, the buttocks, the hips and the abdomen. The thickness of the thighs is estimated particularly critically - a teenager usually perceives them as much thicker and uglier than they really are. Girls aged 13-14 are more likely to compare themselves to slim models than girls aged 9-10, while those in the 10 - 25 age range who have a low self-esteem and a negative image of their own body are particularly interested in searching for and "deriving pleasure" from ads with slim and attractive models (Brytek-Matera, 2008). The research done by Garner (1997) on four thousand readers of "Psychology Today" show that male and female models portrayed in glossy magazines make men and women feel insecure and think about taking action to reduce their weight. In open tests it was revealed that women considered the media and models to be the greatest source of pressure to be slim. People who have a low satisfaction with their appearance are more susceptible to

the negative influence of the mass media on having a slim figure.

## **ANOREXIA AND BULIMIA NERVOSA**

The concept of anorexia nervosa occurred in the medical literature almost a hundred years ago. Anorexia is characterized by loss of appetite or total aversion to all foods. According to B. Ziółkowska this disease develops and manifests itself when food and body weight become an obsessive center of unmet mental needs of a human. People with anorexia deny the felt hunger. This disease is most common in girls during puberty and in young women. It also occurs in boys before puberty and in young men. In psychology, there is a concept known as anorexia readiness syndrome. According to A. Brytek - Matera it is a group of symptoms which entails a suspicion of abnormalities in the implementation of eating needs and attitudes towards one's own body. Anorexia readiness syndrome indicates a propensity of adolescent girls for restrictive behavior (starvation), whose beginning is most frequently caused by abnormal relationships in the family that infuse the need for excessive competition and perfectionism. An important distinguishing feature is the vulnerability of young people to the influence of popular culture, which forms and reinforces the unrealistic image of themselves and their attractiveness (Brytek-Matera, 2009). Significant risk factors for the occurrence of anorexia are probably cultural factors. This refers to the ideal of a slender body promoted by the media as well as the fact that

more and more frequently we are required to represent an immaculate appearance. The phenomenon of the persecution of obese people has become noticeable, and may be observed as early as in the first grades of primary school.

Another type of eating disorder is bulimia nervosa which is characterized by binge seizures, followed by a compensatory behavior. These behaviors include: induced vomiting, fasting, application of laxatives, enemas execution, excessive exercise. Bulimia is a disease most common in the Western society and its occurrence - as previously mentioned – is also significantly affected by the media culture.

### **An image of a human promoted by the media in the eyes of people suffering from eating disorders (own research)**

The inspiration to write this article was constituted by the authors' own research conducted in 2013. It was exploratory in its nature, and the problem it dealt with concerned the role of the media in shaping the ideas of self and the effects of these images distortion. In order to obtain reliable information, the research was carried out by the method of qualitative research employing a free interview, analyzed as a case study. The interview included conversations with five young girls who had eating disorders. This procedure was enriched by observing their behavior while doing the research. Below, we elaborated on the results obtained in the form of a free text

containing the information on both the problem and its possible causes.

**Jola** – now 28 years old, was diagnosed with anorexia at the age of 13. During the interview she said that the media did not affect the occurrence of eating disorders, but they had a significant impact on the disease itself and its current state. In the interview she said that she had set up an account on the forum “Porcelain butterflies”. It is a kind of sect for girls suffering from anorexia and bulimia. Not everyone can get admitted because you have to prove that you are sick. Usually they prove it by sending their photos to the given web address. For the above-mentioned forum there exists a 'Black List'. On the list there are girls who have their Body Mass Index (BMI) above 15.0. They are oppressed in order to motivate them for further weight loss, while the girls who are on the verge of life and death are complemented and given as an example for people just starting their weight loss. The girls also keep food diaries, in which they write down what they ate during the day. Sometimes one of them writes that she has a craving for e.g. a fattening cake, and then the other girls attack her, helping her to drown out the desire to eat that treat. The interviewed person admitted that the media significantly motivated her to lose weight. When she had a moment of weakness she was watching the pictures of or programs with the model Kate Moss. It caused that she was aware of the fact that there was still a long way ahead of her to achieve such a perfect body. However, noteworthy is the fact that the subject's BMI was 15.8. She admitted that sometimes she wanted to

completely disconnect from the media, but she was afraid that then she would weigh much more because it would be harder for her to find motivation. The only time when she was not accompanied by the media during her disease was the time when she was a patient of the psychiatric ward in Sosnowiec which happened twice. The interviewed person admitted that the media significantly motivated her to lose weight. She recognized the media culture as an ally, not a threat.

**Kasia** – now 23, fell ill with the laxative type of anorexia at the age of 13. The interviewed person was characterized by a huge desire to be cured. In the worst moments, she avoided watching TV programs because then appeared the desire to lose weight. She admitted that the media really helped her lose weight. When she lacked willpower she entered the graphics on Google and typed in the term "anorexia", then she went through a variety of pictures of skinny girls. To the question whether the media had a significant impact on the occurrence of her eating disorders she answered negatively, simultaneously remarking that the media did not cause the disease, but they certainly accelerated bringing her body to the brink of exhaustion. She acknowledged that the media significantly shape a negative attitude to one's own appearance. During the conversation she put her thoughts referring to the impact of television and newspapers on her childhood in the following manner: "When me and my friends were little, we wanted to use the wonderful years of childhood to the fullest. Every day, from dusk to dawn

we played with dolls, took a blanket and put it wherever we could. It was always great fun. But when we started learning in elementary school we did not have much time to play together anymore. Then, there was more time to watch TV and it was at this time when television began to play a large role in mine and my girlfriends' life. I watched plenty of commercials with little girls that had great toys. They began to affect my thinking. I thought to myself that if I did not have the original Barbie dolls, I would be lesser, I wanted to be like these girls from TV. Going to the store with my parents, I asked for the most expensive dolls, I did not want the one for 19 zlotys, but I had to have the one priced above 69 zlotys. I was lucky that my parents bought me everything I wanted. Showing my friends the new doll, I felt great, they were delighted with the dolls and above all - they all envied me. At one point I started to feel like those girls on TV, just as I admired them then, I was admired now. I knew that my friends were sad that they did not have such dolls, but then I did not care much. After a while I wanted to be one of those girls on TV. It was no longer enough for me to have the most expensive toys, I wanted to be on TV. I started going to auditions, where they were looking for children who would take part in photo shoots and television commercials. Unfortunately, I was not selected at any casting, each time I cried so much that my parents could not calm me down. I felt like an ugly kid, I watched a variety of young actresses and I was thinking about what else I needed to do in order to do what they do. The biggest change in

my person took place in the sixth grade of primary school. All my friends would meet in the yard, they told one another about a variety of things, played with one another, and I started to live in a more adult world. I started to watch women's programs and read newspapers like my mom. At first, everything was fine, but after some time I wanted to look more feminine. I had to go shopping at least 4 times a month and buy new clothes, I felt bad if after a week I did not buy any new clothes. My behavior was caused by the fact that the stars who I read about in the glossy magazines wore clothes only once, at least it said so in the newspapers. Thus, desiring to be like them, I decided that I would also wear something different every day, and of course it had to be trendy and expensive. Rarely did I put on trousers, I preferred skirts, I loved when girls looked at me and they envied me. The worst period of my life started in junior high school. New people, a completely different world. In my class I made friends with a few girls, we made a very strong group. One of them was Weronika. She was the same as me, when she invited me to her home, there were stacks of colorful papers in her room, and on the wall she had clippings of different clothes. We met every day, we loved to watch programs about fashion, we commented on everything and we talked about what clothes we would put on. One day we saw a movie in which there was a group of girls that every day had a different hairstyle at school, if any of them had the same hairstyle for two days in a row, she was just no longer liked by others. This film, not knowing

why, had a huge impact on us. We both introduced this principle into our lives. One time we wore loose hair, another time we wore curls, and on the third day – a ponytail, etc. It was the same with clothes, we could not wear the same pair of jeans twice a week. For this reason, I went shopping and I bought two other pairs of jeans, to have seven pairs in total. It all started to stress me slowly, but I did not give up. Every month I bought a newspaper to find out what was trendy now. Britney Spears was my and Weronika's idol, we would cut out all her photos from newspapers, we recorded her video clips. We wanted to be like her. After a while I slightly started to lose myself in my own world, I felt ugly, I had never been absolutely perfect, I always lacked something in comparison to those celebrities on television. Weronika began to feel the same way, we did not know how to elevate our mood. In the first year of junior high school Weronika came up with the idea that we could stop eating sweets and drinking Coke. Apparently she read somewhere that it helped some actress to have a perfect figure. I agreed, at the beginning it was hard because every day we saw our friends with chocolate bars, etc., but we were determined. We watched pictures of celebrities in the papers and it motivated us. Another idea of Weronika's was swimming every weekend, I thought it was a great idea. And so it all went on for some time, but after a while it was not enough for me, I stopped eating meat, I read that one of the leading actress's diet included no meat. Of course, then I was not thinking whether I did the right thing or

not, the only thing that mattered was the effect. I did not know when or how, but with the initial weight of 49kg I went down to 47kg. Naturally, I boasted about it to Weronika, she was devastated that I weighed less than she did. I consoled her that soon she would surely weigh the same as me, it would calm her down, at least I thought so. After some time we crossed the boundaries of striving for perfection shown in the newspapers, we began to starve ourselves. However, thanks to the rapid intervention of her parents, Weronika overcame it, and I struggle with this muck still today. The media had a huge impact on me, in retrospect they really destroyed my “healthy childhood”, but in our school, there were many girls like us. In high school, I met twice as many girls like that, instead of listening to teachers during the lessons, they were reading newspapers under the desk. I tried to break free from the toxic effects of the media, but still every single day I thought to myself that I had to look great, I could not even go out to the shop without my makeup and my hair done. My mom was upset because when she asked me for example to go and buy some potatoes, I could spend an hour getting ready to go to the shop that was in front of my house. From my life observations I have noticed that when we give permission to the media to manipulate us, then it is hard break free. My fight continues and I hope that eventually I will win”. The sick person also mentioned in the conversation that owing to the media she had a sense of being nothing worthy. She had the impression that it was necessary to be beautiful, well-groomed and

fashionable, like the stars on the covers, to achieve something. She felt that being an average person makes it impossible to achieve any success.

**Aneta** – now 33, fell ill with anorexia at the age of 14. She admitted that she used to watch programs about beauty, cut out pictures from the newspapers, which she hung on the wall in her room. She actually liked the fact that with all the pictures of models and actresses she was less and less fond of her own body. To the question whether the media message had a significant influence on the occurrence of her eating disorders, she replied that she did not know what had caused the disease. It is important that Aneta was admitted to the psychiatric ward three times, the last time her condition was serious, because she was not able to walk on her own. But even that was not a reason for her to reduce the amount of incentives for losing weight which she exposed herself to.

**Basia** – now 19, fell ill with the laxative type of anorexia at the age of 14. In the interview she admitted that if she had limited contact with the media culture, the motivation to lose weight would not have been so powerful. To the question to what extent the media shaped the negative perception of her own body, she replied that there was a moment when she began to tear all the papers, she screamed and cried in front of the TV, because suddenly she felt hatred for all those women on the covers of the magazines and in movies. She felt worse than them and wanted to destroy them, so that they would no longer arouse in her the disgust at her own body. She had had enough of the

media, but she admitted that it was like an addiction, from which it was still hard to break.

**Ola** – now 21 years old, fell ill with anorexia at the age of 13. She was a member of the community “Porcelain butterflies”. She claimed that while using this forum she felt like she had another family, a family that would not criticize her for the fact that she wanted that there would be less of her, quite to the contrary. She knew that there on the other side of the computer everyone understood her. The interviewed person apart from the Internet also used the photos of models placed in magazines. Her main inspirers were Anja Rubik and Kate Moss. Ola was another example of a girl who used the media to exacerbate the negative perception of her own body. The media were for her like a family, so she was not able to, but she did not want it either, assess whether the media message had a significant impact on the occurrence of her eating disorders.

**Patrycja** – now 27, fell ill with anorexia at the age of 11. As the only one, she thought that it was the media that caused a wave of eating disorders among children and adolescents. However, she made no secret about it that despite the negative opinion with reference to them, she used the media if she began to lose her willpower to lose weight. The person examined said that despite anorexia she is capable of rational thinking and realizes that this is the media that form the negative perception of one’s own body the most. She claimed that women are bombarded with diets, exercise and examples of models, actresses and singers, whose appearance is corrected by the

Photoshop technique and it is hard to escape it, because if not on TV, one can come across them in the newspapers.

### **Interpretation of the research findings and conclusions**

The conversations with people suffering from eating disorders indicate that the image of a human being promoted by the modern media has a significant impact on their condition, both physical and mental. A similar result was obtained in a study conducted by A. Brytek-Matera in 2001. According to the author the images presented in the media play a significant role in shaping the feelings that women have in relation to their body. The studies have shown that women feel more guilty, anxious and depressed after seeing slim models (Brytek-Matera, 2008). Other studies, which included 12,000 children in the 9 – 14 age range, imply that the media are a source of concern for excessive weight. Field et al. (2001) found that both boys and girls, who made a great effort to look like the people created by the media were more likely than their peers to worry about their weight for a period of one year. For girls, these efforts were the announcement of compensatory behaviors (purging), while boys more frequently thought about having a more muscular body. The media by themselves are not able to cause eating disorders, but if the individual has a certain predisposition, they can probably be an important factor contributing to the deterioration of well-being because of the comparison to the people created by

TV and in the press by means of modern digital techniques in the created world of fantasy and illusion.

Our research findings reveal that people with eating disorders frequently use the Internet because there they may be supported on the Internet forums and find all the information they need. In addition, they watch various programs on beauty, read articles on this subject in the newspapers. The media world is, as can be concluded from our research, an effective tool to motivate oneself to go on a diet, or often to extreme weight loss.

From the analyzed texts one can also indirectly conclude about the role of the girls' parents in the development of eating disorders. Certainly, it is difficult to protect a child from all the media content which contains a message that "being thin" means being beautiful, intelligent and rich. Teens quickly assimilate information from the media about a perfect figure, the best clothes, a fashionable makeup, they remember well the pictures of the celebrities who always look perfect and just then comes the moment when Barbie dolls are thrown into the garbage and on the shelves in the room there are piles of cosmetics, women's magazines and clothes of the best brands in the closet. At some point, a greater impact on those girls has TV and newspapers rather than their family. After some time, these young girls are beginning to compete with each other about which of them will have more expensive clothes, a better make-up – it is a struggle for popularity. They begin to take care obsessively of their beauty, some cross the borders striving for perfection

and their frustration, anger and sadness is noticeable. At a certain point they may begin to starve themselves just to look e.g. as their favorite "star".

There is no way, having a correct contact with the child, not to notice that something is wrong, that the child suddenly loses weight and his/her interests are so focused on the media fashion reports. It is also difficult to justify parents who unquestioningly buy everything the child asks for. Therefore, the conclusion drawn from the analyzed texts is primarily a suggestion that relations in the families of the surveyed girls are not correct, that the girls were not provided with proper conditions for a healthy, comprehensive development, leaving the issue to the media and friends.

The most disturbing phenomenon is that children in primary schools attach a great importance to their appearance and figure. Most often the disease can occur after the 13 years of age, but there are cases of a much earlier onset of eating disorders, hence one should introduce already at this stage of education an educational path allowing children to get immunized against the suggestiveness of the media because too many parents are not aware of such threats.

## REFERENCES

- Abraham S. (2001) *Bulimia i anoreksja*. Wydawnictwo Prószyński i Spółka, Warszawa.
- Brytek-Matera A. (2008) *Obraz ciała – obraz siebie*. Wizerunek własnego



ciała w ujęciu psychospołecznym.  
Wyd. Difin, Warszawa 2008.

Brytek-Matera A. (2009) Wizerunek ciała  
w anoreksji i bulimii psychicznej.  
Wydaw. Difin, Warszawa.

Dziadzia B. (2007) Wpływ mediów.  
Wydaw. Impuls, Kraków.

Ejsmont M., Kosmalska B. (2005)  
Media, wartości, wychowanie.  
Wydaw. Impuls, Kraków.

Jakubowski W., Jaskulska S. (2011)  
Kultura mediów, ciało I tożsamość.  
Wydaw. Impuls, Kraków.

Wąsik M. (2009) Anoreksja, bulimia...  
Jak rozpoznać zaburzenia  
odżywiania u nastolatków.  
Wydawnictwo AA, Kraków.

Ziółkowska B. (2005) Anoreksja od A  
do Z.. Wydawnictwo Naukowe  
SCHOLAR, Warszawa.

## **CONTACT**

Dr. hab. Beata Pitula, PhD.  
Universita Śląski, Katowice,  
Poland

e-mail: [bpitula@o2.pl](mailto:bpitula@o2.pl)