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Influence of mass media on emergence of eating disorders amongst young people

Abstract

Introduction. Anorexia is an eating disorder, which is becoming more common among young people (especially women). This problem was explored at the medical level and cultural and personal causes of denying food were analyzed.

Aim. The main aim of this article is to answer the question of whether the differences in self-perception are influenced by mass media and to what extent self-perception is influenced by cultural factors.

Material and methods. The research was conducted in 2011 in the form of an on-line author-made questionnaire on a group of 100 respondents. The questionnaires were later put under analysis.

Results. The examined group exhibited characteristic risk factors for anorexia. Seventy six percent of the respondents believe that external appearance decides about life successes and for them, their look is a very important value. Majority of the respondents is significantly discontent with the look and shape of their body, as almost all believe that they should lose weight.

Conclusions. Appearance constitutes essential value for the respondents. They aim at achieving 'ideal beauty' created by the mass media, regardless of health consequences. The image of ones' own body is determined by information received from peers and through comparison with models promoted by the media.

Keywords: anorexia, eating disorders, media.

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INTRODUCTION

The term 'anorexia' is of Greek origin and means lack of desire to eat (ἀν- prefix denoting negation and orexis meaning appetite). It has had been introduced to the subject literature almost simultaneously although completely independently by C.E Lasegue in 1873 and by W.W Gull one year later [1]. According to the literal meaning, false conclusion had been drawn that this disorder is accompanied by lack of appetite. In fact people afflicted with anorexia do feel hunger, however, in fear of gaining weight they are reducing food intake almost to minimum and are fighting with hunger symptoms [2]. Thus, the essence of the problem is not losing appetite but an outstanding ability of controlling it. Despite the fact that it is possible to lose appetite it happens only in the later phases of the illness [3]. That is why Bilikiewicz considers the term "self-starvation" as more appropriate in defining the basis of this disorder [4].

In medical and psychological literature, anorexia is defined as a disorder with a psychological background characterized by drastic weight loss caused by limitation of food intake, intense physical workout or administering purgation drugs. This disorder is accompanied by a deadly fear of putting on weight. The sick person is excessively concentrating on his or her own look due to a distorted self-perception [5].

WHO placed anorexia in International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-10) in 1992 and the American Psychiatric Association placed anorexia in mental disorders classification system (DSM-IV-TR) created in 2000 [6]. American mental disorders classification system distinguishes two types of anorexia:

- Restricting type – characterized by limiting food to minimum and using intense workout.
- Binge eating/purging type – characterized by occurrence of regular episodes of uncontrolled overeating and behaviors related to getting rid of the already eaten food by provoking vomits and applying purgation and/or diuretic pills [7].

Anorexia was a rare phenomenon among children under 13, however, recently more reports appear describing children between 8 and 13 diagnosed with this disease. Analysis of research conducted on children up to 13 years of age indicates that the number of boys afflicted with anorexia at this age is considerably higher than the number of boys afflicted in adolescence. This percentage varies between 19 and 30% [8].

Analysis of the prevalence of anorexia indicates that the highest morbidity rate concerns adolescence and it is estimated at 0.5% to 1% [9]. Apogee incidence occurs between 15 and 19 years of age [1]. In vast majority of the cases (90-95%) anorexia concerns females, which indicates a typically feminine nature of this disorder.

AIM

Research purpose includes:

1. An attempt to determine the influence of mass media on the perception of ones' own body by young people.
2. Determining the respondents' satisfaction with current appearance, body shape and weight.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Research was conducted in 2011 using an on-line personal inquiry form. Research tool was an author-made questionnaire composed of two parts:

- first – demographic – including data regarding sex, age, body weight, height, place of residence and values;
- second – comprising questions regarding external appearance, slimming, anorexia issue and influence of mass media on creating the image of an ideal figure.

The questionnaire included open and closed questions (of one or multiple choice). It was posted on message boards dedicated to people with eating disorders and sent to people who had 'pro-ana' blog type. Before answering the questionnaire, respondents were informed about its purpose, and that taking part in research was voluntary and anonymous. Research material consisted of 100 correctly filled questionnaires.

RESULTS

Research was conducted on 100 people, 6 men (6%) and 94 women (94%). The age of the respondents ranged from 10 to 23 and above. The largest group of respondents included people between 16 and 17 (25%). Another equally large group included respondents aged from 18 to 20 (23%), from 21 to 23 (22%) and 18% above 23. The remaining respondents aged from 13 to 15 (8%) and from 10 to 12 (4%). Weight disparity between respondents was high and ranged from 30 to 85 kg. The weight of majority of the respondents ranged between 50 and 59 kg and 40 to 49 kg, 35% and 26% respectively. The body weight of other respondents was within the following ranges; from 60 to 69 kg (18%); from 70 to 79 kg (10%); from 30 to 39 kg (7%) and from 80 to 85 kg (4%). The height of the respondents varied from 150 to 190 cm. The largest group consisted of respondents whose height varied from 161 to 165 cm (28%), from 166 to 170 cm (23%), and from 156 to 160 cm (21%). The height of the rest of respondents ranged from 171 to 175 cm (16%), from 150 to 155 cm (6%), from 176 to 180 cm (2%), from 181 to 185 cm (2%) and from 186 to 190 cm (2%). Majority of the respondents live in cities (90%), merely ten percent in villages. Among the most meaningful values, the respondents pointed to love (61 respondents – 20.47%), friendship (11.41%), freedom (10.4%) and security (9.4%) (mentioned by every third person). Health was on seventh place being pointed to by only seventeen respondents (5.7%).

DISCUSSION

Research conducted by CBOS (Public Opinion Research Center) proves that the way people present themselves is significant both in private and professional life [10]. This

research also confirms this thesis, because as much as 91% of the respondents believe that external appearance decides about being successful. What is more, not only physical attractiveness but also the extent to which people take care of themselves influences the conclusions that others draw on the subject of each individual. That is why people take care of themselves and about their attractiveness. For 99% of the respondents, personal appearance is very important or important, 54% and 45% respectively. Similar conclusions were also reached by Owsiejczyk [11].

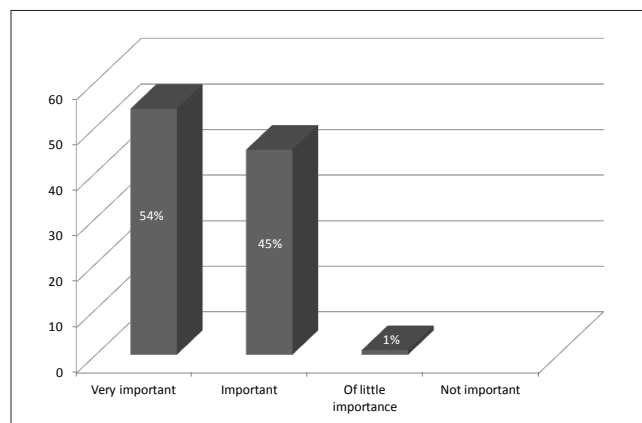


FIGURE 1. The extent to which physical appearance is important in the life of the respondents.

The way people perceive their body is formed in early childhood and the biggest influence on this perception is attributed to parents. In the following years, information coming from the society, especially from peers and models promoted by the media, become more influential [11]. Every human mind creates an image of ones' own body and an "ideal body". Emphasizing a slim figure, which became almost a guarantee of professional and personal success, makes people consider their own body as different from commonly approved standards and in conclusion as worse [12]. It is important not to allow the pursuit for an ideal body and striving for the society's acceptance lead to an unhealthy obsession, which may destroy not only the health or psyche of an individual but also his or her life. As many as 92% of the respondents were dissatisfied with their appearance, 54% believed that they could lose a little weight, and 38% stated that there was a lot of work ahead of them before they would reach the desired figure.

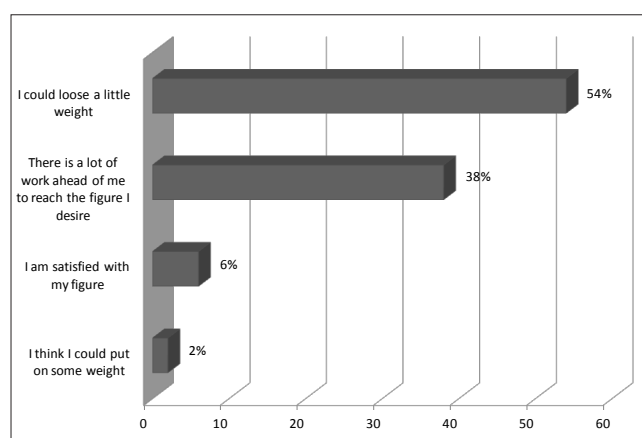


FIGURE 2. The respondents' level of satisfaction with their figure.

Nowadays getting slim is almost an obsession for the majority of young girls and women [13]. According to the CBOS research, this social group is most prone to getting slim and as much as 70% of the female respondents admitted to trying to lose weight. Contemporarily, in the omnipresent cult of being slim, almost everybody at some point in their lives tried going on a diet. Almost 98% of the research respondents tried dieting. More than half of the respondents (55%) tried to lose weight as a result of lack of self-acceptance, and nearly one in five of the respondents (19%) felt peer pressure. Adolescence is a time when self-acceptance and peer opinions are most important [11], and that is why, being different from others may cause rejection. Additionally, being overweight or obese may become the cause for jokes and unpleasant comments from peers. Among other factors inducing dieting, which accounted for 10% of those most frequently mentioned, was a combination of several options, such as lack of self-acceptance and suggestions from friends and family members as well as, which is not a surprise, the increasing popularity of “losing weight”.

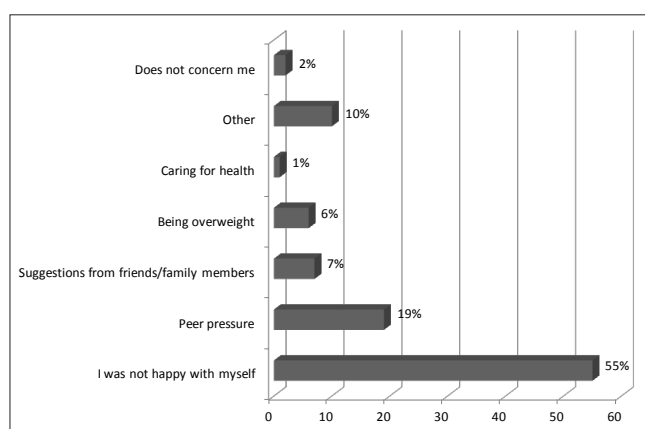


FIGURE 3. Causes for choosing to lose weight.

Idealized image promoted by the media makes people perceive themselves as less attractive than they really are, always too fat and not pretty enough [14]. The ‘distorted mirror’ effect causes 88% of the respondents to feel fat, although they are perceived as slim by others. Young people do everything to achieve their own ideal shape including extensive trainings or draconian diets. As the research shows, almost all of the respondents (98%) used diet in order to reduce body mass, and of those respondents, majority (63%) is constantly trying new “miracle diets”. Vast majority of respondents (90%) feels happy after losing some weight.

Almost all of the respondents (90%) are aware of the amount of calories a particular product has. According to Ziółkowska, although some people are not diagnosed with a full-blown anorexia they may exhibit an Anorexia Readiness Syndrome, characterized by persistent counting of calories and knowledge of caloric values of particular food products [15].

Based on the research it is possible to state that respondents’ knowledge on their appropriate body mass is outstanding. Almost half of them (48%) want to achieve weight in the range between 40 and 49 kg, most often pointing to 45 kg (21 times). Twenty-two percent of the respondents are aiming at values ranging between 30 and 39 kg and nearly

the same number of respondents (21%) from 50 to 55 kg. Thinking of an ‘ideal’ body mass it is essential to take into consideration body composition, height, age and lifestyle.

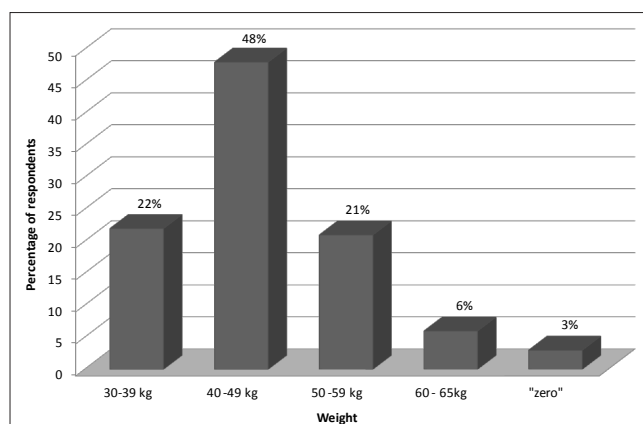


FIGURE 4. Ideal body mass in the opinion of the respondents.

Eating disorders may go into the direction of overeating, which in consequence may lead to obesity as well as to reducing consumed products, which in the beginning leads to body weight loss and in result may cause nourishment disorders such as anorexia or bulimia. As the research shows, 79% of the respondents think that they have a problem with appropriate nutrition. As it turns out, this problem does not concern themselves. More than half (53%) of the respondents state that they know people afflicted with eating disorders in their nearest surrounding.

Among many of the women stricken with anorexia, the illness begins in puberty when the body changes and becomes more feminine, at the same time increasing the feeling of uncertainty about oneself. Women are not agreeing to their sexuality and that is why they are deciding on slimming – to keep a childish figure, which they had before puberty [16]. As the research indicates, for 68% of the respondents a feminine shape became the reason for complexes. They do not accept their bodies and in result try to achieve an ideally slim and in consequence a boyish figure.

The fact that anorexia is an illness is obvious, at least for the healthy people. Usually it begins from innocent trials of slimming, thus those afflicted treat it as means of losing weight (as according to 5% of the respondents), or as a way of achieving an ideal figure, (according to 8%). With time and with the intensification of unpleasant outcomes, people with anorexia begin to treat it as a disease, as it is pointed to by 76% of the respondents. Among “other” answers stating what is anorexia for the respondents, answers such as ‘life’ or ‘happiness’ also appeared.

Among most frequently enumerated word associations with ‘anorexia’ the respondents chose: thinness (16.87%), bones (13.01%) and illness (11.48%). Other equally frequently mentioned words were: perfection (9.33%), beauty (9.05%), control (7.43%) and success (6.59%). Anorexia is a fickle disorder, full of contraries and with a number of unknowns, that is why associations which may appear are so divergent and often contrary, just like the illness itself (Figure 5).

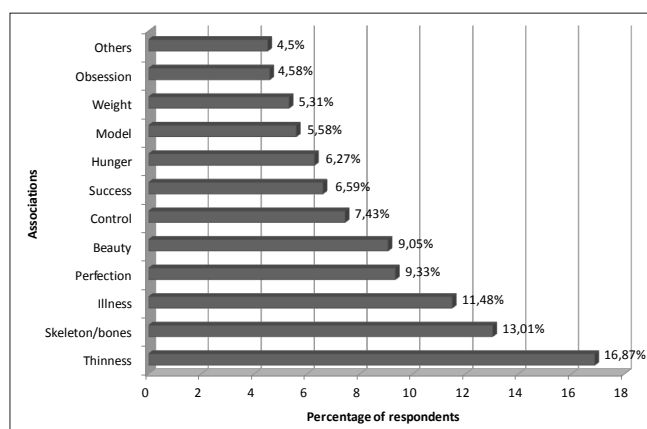


FIGURE 5. Three first associations with "anorexia".

More than a half of the respondent (66%) visit blogs written by people with eating disorders, 42% run their own blog and 57% of the respondents take active parts in forums assembling people with eating disorders. Majority (58%) thinks that sites like Pro-Ana have a positive influence on them because there they find support and understanding, which they lack in their environment and the motivation to continue their struggle.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Respondents believe that external appearance to a significant degree decides about success in life and for them, their look it is a very important value.
2. Respondents are characterized by dissatisfaction with their current image and body mass which is caused by the image of an 'ideal body'.
3. Information from the environment, especially from peers and the image promoted by the media have an influence on the way respondents perceive their own bodies.
4. Differences between self-perception and the 'ideal body image' created by the media cause excessive body mass control.
5. Continuous disappointment with the shape and weight of the body makes the respondents undertake challenges of meeting the current requirements of fashion, using restrictive diets, increasing physical effort and complying with the 'pro-ana' ideology, irrespective of health consequences.

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