Eating disorders and the media

The purpose of doing this research project is to provide a different perspective on the role of the media in this modern era. This research project examines the impacts of media influence on eating attitudes and it contains relevant studies and statistics regarding this particular topic. The findings of this research are confined to the United States of America and United Kingdom due to the high prevalence of eating disorders as compared to other countries. In essence, the report covers the effects of media portraying unhealthy body images, weight loss advertisements and reality shows as well as the power of Internet in promoting eating disorders. Based on the evidence, it is clear that the media is responsible for the development of eating disorders in the society. Hence, it is important to take corrective measures and look into this matter seriously before further damage is done.

1. 0 Introduction

Eating disorders are serious psychological illnesses that result in people having dangerous eating habits. People with eating disorders usually have a negative perception of their body image and will attempt to control their weight through excessive dieting, exercising or purging. In fact, eating disorders cannot be separated from the culture in which they arise. In western countries where thinness is emphasized as an important social value, millions of women are suffering from eating disorders like anorexia, bulimia and binge eating.

According to National Eating Disorders Association (2005), approximately 10 million females and 1 million males in the United States are suffering from anorexia and bulimia while 25 million more are struggling with binge eating

disorder. Other than psychological and genetic factors, research shows that the media also has a profound impact on eating disorders. The media has grown rapidly over the years with the advancement in technology and now it has the persuasive power that can manipulate the whole society by shaping people's attitudes and beliefs. This " mind-bending" power of the media has brought about many debates from different institutions especially on the issue concerning the harmful effects of media exposure on eating disorders. Therefore, immediate actions need to be taken before this issue becomes more and more controversial.

Even though the media has the power to shape people's behaviors and attitudes, do you agree that the media encourages people to develop eating disorders?

Looking further into the issue, we will see that the media is indeed guilty of encouraging eating disorders in the society. It portrays an unattainable standard of body image, gives leeway for pro-anorexia groups to spread on Internet and promotes dieting and weight loss.

This report will show compelling evidence on how media encourages people to develop eating disorders. They are many negative effects than positive one. The research findings are confined to the United States of America and United Kingdom due to their high prevalence of eating disorders in comparison to other countries.

2. 0 Media Promotes " Ideal Body Image"

Body image refers to people's perception and imagination of their physical appearance. It is not inborn, but learned (Ojeda, 2003, p. 8). A study conducted by Anne Becker in Fiji, where television was introduced as late as the mid-1990s, found that 83% of the people felt television had influenced their perceptions and thoughts about body image and size (Friedman, 2007, p. 31). Therefore, the role of the media in promoting an ideal body image should not be taken lightly as it can cause harmful effects on one's self-image and self-esteem.

2. 1 Portrayal of Ultra-Thinness

" Twenty years ago, the average model weighed 8 per cent less than the average woman, but today's models weigh 23 per cent less" (Media Awareness Network, 2010). As time goes by, models and celebrities are becoming thinner and thinner to match the unrealistic cultural standard of beauty. Research shows that unrealistic portrayal of women stereotype in the media can have detrimental effect on one's health. According to Healthy Within (n. d.), an average American woman is 5 feet 4 inches tall and weighs 140 pounds while an average American model is 5 feet 11 inches tall and weighs 117 pounds. These super-thin models portrayed by television and magazines make women feel unhappy and dissatisfied with their physical appearance. As a result, millions of women who fail to reach this standard of beauty feel embarrassed and guilty and the desire to be thin drives them to develop eating disorders.

2. 2 Wrong message is conveyed to the Society

Television has always been viewed as a source for entertainment and information, but nowadays it begins to influence people's thinking and attitudes by emphasizing thinness as a way to measure women's worth. For example, heavier actresses often receive negative comments about their bodies and 80% of these negative comments are followed by canned audience laughter (Media Awareness Network, 2010).

Besides that, fashion magazines, television and movies are constantly delivering the wrong message that women must be thin in order to be loved, accepted and successful (Schlundt & Johnson, 1990, p. 59). The portrayal of happy and successful women being extremely thin has a huge impact on women's perception of beauty. It has forced women to adopt the mindset that " thin is beautiful" and " beauty is success". When women begin to equate thinness with beauty, they will strive hard to become thin so that they are attractive enough to be accepted in the society. Therefore, in order to achieve the ideal body image standard, women violently manipulate their weight and appearance by dieting, purging and even self-starvation.

Family Influence

Studies show that family influence is also one of the factors that trigger eating disorders. Parents especially mothers have significant influence over teenagers' body image problems. In this society where ' thin is still in', most mothers would want their children to look beautiful and slim. Therefore, parents sometimes inadvertently encourage their children to lose weight even though most of them are not overweight. Parents usually encourage their children to diet with good intentions but teenagers may misunderstood

their meaning as being fat is not good and they should lose weight to become thinner and more beautiful. Besides that, parents with weight problems tend to be over-concerned about their children's weight and body images. This may cause teenagers to feel the pressure to be thin and start developing unhealthy eating habits to control their weight. Since teenagers take their parents' words seriously, negative comments on their weight and eating habits may diminish their self-esteem (Ojeda, 2003, pp. 21-25).

In conclusion, media promotes " ideal body image" that can cause women to feel dissatisfied with their body size and shape. The portrayal of ultra-thinness through television commercials, fashion magazines and movies will deliver the wrong message to the society. As a result, women develop dangerous eating patterns to stay thin so that they can reach the standard of beauty portrayed by the media.

3. 0 Power of Internet

Internet is a powerful agent of socialization and it allows easy access to different kinds of information. The online world of " pro-ED" (pro-eating disorders) consists of hundreds of websites and discussion groups created by people who claimed that they have the disorders (Healthy Place, 2010). Every time we come across a pro-anorexia site, a warning sign will appear on the opening page clearly specifying that the contents of the site is pro-anorexic and should not be viewed by those who are in recovery or those who do not suffer from an eating disorder. However, many people ignore the warning and enter these sites due to curiosity.

3. 1 Impact of Pro-Anorexia Websites

Pro-ana websites are online communities for people with anorexia nervosa (Suite101, n. d.). These websites have proliferated rapidly due to the rise of Internet usage in the last decade. They promote anorexia as a lifestyle choice rather than a life-threatening disease (Friedman, 2007, p. 60). Most of the contents in these sites glorify eating disorders and provide tips on how to lose weight more effectively. Therefore, those people without eating disorders but actively seeking for ways to lose weight and those with eating disorders seeking for advice to conceal their disorders become the victims of pro-ana websites. Besides that, these sites also contain inspiring quotations and poetry that encourage eating disorders. The impact of pro-ana websites is so immense that there is no way back after their first visit on these sites.

Most of the pro-ana websites display " thinspiration" pictures of waif-thin models and famous celebrities with eating disorders like Mary-Kate Olsen and Karen Carpenter to get the attention of impressionable young women (Healthy Place, 2010). After viewing these pro-ana websites, teenagers are more likely to be unhappy with their physical appearance and have a negative body image. Study shows that individuals subjected to a single viewing of a pro-ana site are more likely to have low self-esteem and become preoccupied with exercise and weight loss, as compared to the control group (Wikipedia, 2010).

3. 2 Online Social Networks

Nowadays, there are many social network groups available online such as MySpace, Xanga and Facebook. These online social networks have gained

popularity among young people in the recent years and eventually become a tool to promote eating disorders among the members.

After connecting with each other for years on unknown and secret websites, pro-anorexia groups are now moving to more public forums like Facebook to attract more people to join their groups (Newsweek, 2008). Many socially isolated anorexics join and become members of these sites because that is the only means of support available to them. Some said that the sites can help them to combat the feelings of loneliness and isolation as well as to get attention from others (Healthy Place, 2010). Moreover, they can find a circle of friends with the similar disease who understand and accept them as who they are. This makes them feel that they are not alone and thus motivated to carry on with their disorders. In short, pro-ana online networking website is a place for anorexics to establish friendship, gain support and seek solace by sharing their sorrows, joys and accomplishments with each other.

Social Pressure

People in professions where there is a particular social pressure to be thin such as athletes, models, dancers and actors are more likely to develop eating disorders during the course of their career. Studies found that around 15% to 25% of athletes have eating disorders, especially those involved in sports that emphasize on appearance such as figure skating, cheer leading and gymnastics (Schulherr, 2008, p. 244). Besides that, celebrities and models also suffer from eating disorders because they are placed under social pressure to " look perfect in front of the camera". In order to look super skinny and sexy, they adopt excessive dieting and self-starvation

which can lead to fatal health consequences in the future. For example, Ana Caroline Reston, a rising star in the modeling industry died of anorexia in 2006. Due to social pressure, she starved herself by just surviving on fruit juices, apples and tomatoes for many years. Finally, when she achieved the desired image of a supermodel, the fatal eating disorders took her life at the age of 21.

In conclusion, the power of Internet in developing eating disorders among teenagers should not be underestimated. The slippery nature of the web makes the pro-ED world almost impossible to control (Healthy Place, 2010). Therefore, pro-ana websites and social networks should be monitored so that less people would be misled by the harmful information inside these sites.

4. 0 Media Promotes Dieting

Dieting can be defined as the attempt to lose weight by restricting food intake. Excessive dieting behavior may eventually lead to the development of eating disorders because severe weight loss is the primary symptom of anorexia nervosa. When the power of the media is misused by the advertisers to promote dieting and their diet products, the media can become a formidable force that leads millions of people worldwide to the possibility of eating disorders.

4. 1 Exposure to Magazines and Advertisements

Advertisements in magazines and television are featuring extremely thin models and celebrities to make women think that they are fat. When women start to fear of gaining weight, they will pursuit dieting as a way to lose

weight. As a result, Americans spend over $50 billion on dieting and diet-related products each year (Healthy Within, n. d.). Since the standard of beauty portrayed by the media is unattainable to most people, consumers will never feel satisfied, and therefore creating an endless demand for beauty and weight loss products. Hence, it is certain that these industries are actually earning profit from encouraging a life-threatening disease in millions of women (Friedman, 2007, pp. 27-31).

Furthermore, studies also show that adolescent girls who are frequent readers of fashion magazines record higher prevalence of dieting and exercising behaviors to lose weight as compared to those infrequent readers. Many people start to take up dieting because they are motivated by the pictures in the magazines. Dieting books are usually the best-seller because most people are attracted by the diet tips provided inside these books (Schlundt & Johnson, 1990, p. 59). Thus, it is evident that the fear of being fat has dominated many young women and adolescent girls and this eventually leads them to engage in excessive dieting and unhealthy eating habits.

4. 2 Weight Loss Reality Shows

An increasing number of weight loss reality shows are appearing on television screens and all of them demonstrate major results that can be achieved through dieting and exercising (DietWords, 2010). For example, " The Biggest Loser" is one of NBC's most-watched prime-time programs and it has attracted approximately 10 million viewers each week (The New York Times, 2009). The program's target is to obtain a weight loss of more than

15 pounds per week through severe caloric restriction and many hours of strenuous exercise. However, health care professionals disagree with such extreme routine as it is not advisable to lose more than two pounds a week.

These weight loss reality shows can have detrimental effects on the health of the contestants as well as the viewers. In order to win the money reward, some contestants may develop harmful practices to lose more weight within a shorter time. On the other hand, viewers are made to believe that rapid weight loss can be obtained from dieting. Consequently, they may try to emulate the contestants by developing unhealthy eating behaviors to lose weight, which eventually leads to long term fatal effects on their health.

Peer Pressure

Peer pressure refers to the influence exerted by a peer group in encouraging a person to change his or her attitudes, values, or behavior in order to conform to group norms (Wikipedia, 2010). This is common among teenagers because most of them spend more time with their groups of friends rather than staying at home. However, when teenagers encounter with negative peer pressure relating to their eating habits, it is very dangerous because they may lack the maturity to handle this kind of pressure. When teenagers are teased by their friends about their body size and shape, they will feel the urge to control their weight by dieting, which may lead to the development of eating disorders. Therefore, peer pressure is a factor that triggers dieting and eating disorders among young people.

In conclusion, the media has brought about a dieting obsession in the society. Hence, it is clear that frequent exposure to weight loss reality shows,

magazines and advertisements can contribute to the development of eating disorders.

5. 0 Conclusion

In summary, the media is the driving force behind the development of life-threatening eating disorders in millions of people worldwide. It reinforces the intense fear of weight gain among women by portraying pictures of super-thin models, encourages the development of eating disorders through the expanding online world of " pro-ED" and promotes dieting through weight loss reality shows and advertisements. All three arguments mentioned are clear cut showing that the media is guilty of promoting eating disorders in the society.

In time to come, more people will be suffering from eating disorders because of the influence of the media. As the impacts of media influence cannot be seen in the short run, many people do not realize that it can actually lead to serious health consequences in the future. By the time they suffer from an eating disorder, nothing much can be done except to seek treatment and counseling for recovery. Prevention is better than cure. Thus, before it is too late, we should find ways to harness media power for good instead of evil.

" When there is no enemy within, the enemies outside cannot hurt you" (Quotes Daddy, 2010). Therefore, love yourself more and enjoy life to achieve happiness within yourself, only then you will not be conquered by the fear of weight. Stay away from eating disorders and you will never regret.

6. 0 Recommendation

The following recommendations have been made to rectify the role of media in promoting eating disorders.

Avoid using underweight models in the fashion industry as they portray thinness as the standard of beauty. In addition, this report recommends further work to:

Set a minimum entry for modeling industry where all models should have a Body Mass Index (BMI) of between 18. 5 to 25

Ban models who have a BMI of less than 18

Organize fashion shows that promote healthy body image

Ban pro-ana websites that promote eating disorders as a lifestyle. In addition, this report recommends further work to:

Introduce laws to impose punishments or fine on any means of mass communication that promotes eating disorders

Establish pro-recovery websites and support groups to encourage those people who wish to seek recovery from an eating disorder

Research the claim that government control over the media (e. g. censorship) can help to reduce the harmful contents in advertisements and reality TV shows. In addition, this report recommends further work to:

Monitor and filter the harmful contents available on any means of mass media including movies, television and Internet

Organize Eating Disorders Awareness Week and video competition to raise

awareness on eating disorders