

Media and weight perception

In the last half century, media have exerted a greater and greater power, above all on young people. Many researchers have studied the negative influence of the media on the development of adolescents' self-perception, body image, weight concerns and weight control practices. Today, indeed, we are witnesses to an increase of eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia.

To solve this problem, psychologists suggest considering a number of different initiatives, such as health communication campaigns and media training.

Such actions need to be evaluated with respect to the media's portrayal of the idealized and unattainable images of beauty that young people are exposed to, and its negative impact on disordered behaviours and eating disorders.

If it is true that media might contribute to the development of weight concerns and body dissatisfaction in children and adolescents, on the other hand they could also be used as an important tool for health promotion and related prevention strategies.

For many years the mass media, such as TV, cinema and magazines, have proposed perfect beauty models; particularly, at the beginning of the 90's, media have persisted in proposing top models as thin as a rake, in some cases even anorexic; as a matter of fact, that period is sorrowfully remembered as the "years of anorexia". Just then, adolescents began to think of such top models as a goal to reach, and the easiest way to get that result was by giving up food.

For a long time, anorexia has been considered only a whim of spoiled adolescents; as a consequence, this eating disease has been underestimated by young people, by institutions and by families.

Luckily, in the last few years, the problem came to light: nowadays people manage to talk about eating diseases. We are witnesses to a progressive sensitization to the problem coming from society and the media themselves. Very often we happen to turn over the pages of a fashion

magazine and to read an article where well-known experts discuss the problem and suggest correct eating behaviour.

By the same token, frequently, “soubrettes” and top models, interviewed by journalists or anchormen, declare they would not easily give up a dish of spaghetti. This positive and care-free attitude cheers young people up to such a point that they can face life serenely and feel at ease with their body.

Notwithstanding these short steps towards health promotion, eating diseases are still a present issue.

We should make use of media potentiality with greater cleverness to promote prevention campaigns.

To begin with, we should take into consideration the replacement of commonly shared beauty canons with more realistic ones: no longer “nothing but skin and bone” statuary beauties, but plump, hence charming women.

By the way, the advertising campaign launched by the XL sizes stylist Elena Mirò seems to be indicative. The spot turns a weak point, “overweight”, into a strong point, “sensuality”. This strategy is remarkably pointed out by the nice and ironic slogan “Ciao Magre !!!”, played by four beautiful and “buxom” women.

Internet too could be exploited to this purpose, building Web sites oriented towards eating education and run by expert dieticians and psychologists. In addition, such Web sites should contain some Web Forum and chat rooms for interaction and exchange of opinions among young people.

As it has been noted, it is clear that media have considerable communicative strength; but it is even more clear that such strength could be a strategic opportunity for the health promotion campaigns as long as these opportunities are used in a clever and careful way.

References:

http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/special_initiatives/media_pulse/pdfs/media_impact_eat_disorders.pdf
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