

# VIOLENT FOOD: ANTHROPOLOGY OF EATING DISORDERS IN THE TECHNICAL AGE

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## Summary

The relationship with food, primordial expression of man’s way of existing, can be completely distorted because of the high symbolic value eating acquires from birth throughout all life, food as an identity criterion, social exchange, tradition and, above all, a primary element in the structuring of personological attitudes. In the modern ‘consumer society’ based on efficiency and production, where it is more important to display the body than experience it, advertising plays a major role by deeply influencing the attitudes of young consumers – an easy target due to their receptivity -, steering their choices and causing, in turn, significant alterations in their eating habits. In particular, scientific literature suggests a strong correlation between the exposure to mass media and overweight/obesity in children and adolescents, as well as the ability of these communication means to influence body image perception processes in young people, which contribute to the development of eating disorders.

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Keywords: food, young people, consumption, media, nutritional behaviour

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## INTRODUCTION

As is known, eating and food refer to a range of meanings, a mixture of biological codes and cultural expressions, anthropological glances, symbolic references, social dynamics and biographical and community narrations. Most of our identity, our way of ‘being in the world’ and opening to relationships is rooted in food (1). In other words, food becomes a space identifier, living radicalism (2) able, in some way, to stem that social factionalism that ceaselessly nurtures community discontinuity. In the con-fusion of identities, i.e. in their reciprocal merger, the possibility of community living arises, not just made of a shared physical space but strong symbolism that ranges from the collective rituality of play to the historic-existential traces stored by the memory, from a truly social industry to cultural design which, before informing are able to form an us which emerges as a qualitatively different reality.

Finding an identifying symbolic resource in food is no small thing at a time when money seems to be the only dispenser of sense in the face of a structural inability to mediate intimacy shown all round and, therefore, made public, without shame, and private life. This is concealed to the point that our houses have become im pregnable

strongholds and our flats internal cells where tensions, the ambivalences of life, continuous biographical oscillations, do not find a way to slacken and dissolve in the awareness of their structural, contingent repetitions, due to the fertile comparison – and the regenerating sharing – with the existential experience of the other (3).

Unfortunately, in the technological society which, moreover, has made a significant contribution to democratising and purifying it, food itself has become an object, goods, a shapeless life and not a sheaf of relationships, a symbolic and social medium (4), an element that is not secondary in the structuring of personological attitudes (5-8). In particular, food has become an advertising icon, the privileged topos of homologation and anaesthetisation of consciences - from a biological and anthropological element, food has ended up becoming a pathological, relational and social discriminant in the technical society. From exaggerated thinness, in line with the cult of technological efficiency and production, to obesity as an inauthentic response to media pressure, food has become a difficult node, an anthropological and existential place to question, under the aegis of an undue amplification of eating disorders.

## MEDIA EXPOSURE AND EATING DISORDERS

Two main critical points are outlined in the literature in the analysis of the role of advertising in the nutritional behaviour of children and adolescents. Firstly, for some time, research has stressed the strong correlation between exposure to the media and the development of overweight and obesity during development (9-12). Prevention and the identification of effective strategies with reference to juvenile obesity, a true epidemic of the third millennium with a percentage of overweight and obese children and adolescents that ranges from 20 to 30% in European countries, becomes extremely important, if it's considered that 70-80% of obese adolescents are destined to become obese adults, and that the so-called non-communicable diseases linked to obesity now cause about 3 million deaths a year in the European Union alone (13).

The daily bombardment of advertising messages, radio and television communications and persuasive packaging (14, 15) are among the main causes of infantile obesity (with sedentary lifestyles, incorrect nutritional patterns, genetic factors, social-economic status and physical environment) (16). In particular, the incessant media action promoting unhealthy food seems to influence the nutritional preferences of the young and thus their request for food and their diet (10). Research data shows that "children learn to recognise brands and products before they learn to read" (17). In particular, obese children are more aware of and involved in adverts on food than thin children, and their consumption of food after exposure to adverts, in particular snack foods, cakes and desserts and especially salty foods, is higher (18).

In the sphere of the many nutritional surveillance projects that there have been in recent years in various countries, studies have concentrated on the time children and adolescents spend in front of the television (two or more hours a day for many young Italians according to the report on the 2010 data in the HBSC Italia study) (19) and the contents of the adverts. First and foremost, with specific reference to the TV, one of the most powerful advertising media (16), it seems more likely that it influences the rates of infantile obesity through the promotion of specific food consumption more than the reduction of the time spent on physical activity (12, 18). As far as the contents of the adverts are concerned, however, according to a survey in 2011, more than 90% of the foods promoted by TV adverts aimed at children (16) consisted of products with a high fat, salt and sugar content. 'Junk' food is promoted through opportune communication strategies particularly effective and attractive for young people (17, 20, 21) rather than their parents.

The dispute on the effectiveness of the reduction of exposure of children and adolescents to the television advertising of food products is lively and continues uninterrupted between food companies, governments and the academic world, although the forecasting models show a certain benefit from this reduction (or even

elimination) in terms of decrease in overweight and obesity (22) (a reduction of 16-40% has been calculated in the United States, 10-28% in Australia and Italy, 4-18% in Sweden, The Netherlands and Great Britain) (23). As a result, various countries have tried to regulate the broadcasting of television food adverts targeting children (including Norway, Sweden, Great Britain, Australia and the USA (22)), in quantity and quality terms.

However, despite the general alert and the measures taken, the problem persists in a consistent manner because of the parallel campaign exercised by the complementary communication strategies – radio, magazines, packaging and gadgets but, above all, internet. An analysis of the food advertising messages (476 in total) in magazines targeting parents made by a study in 2013 revealed that such messages form 32% of all the adverts in the magazines. The examination of the most frequently used words highlighted the attempt of promotional campaigns to lever the population through the concepts of 'taste' and 'health' but also the 'economic saving', 'delight' and 'pleasure' arising from the consumption of the products advertised (with the possibility of using them without feelings of 'guilt') and alluding, above all, to the symbolic value of the food, meaning a tool gathering the family (21). In addition, the use of testimonials - sports personalities in particular, on the packaging of unhealthy foods, targeting children, is widespread, because of the effectiveness of the identification and emulation process referring to media models on the changes in the attitudes of consumers (24). As far as the web is concerned, the age of use of this network by children is falling and the sites designed for children are highly enjoyable and engaging - the rapid spread of advertising which confuses play and propaganda generated a true form of marketing called 'advergame' at the start of the third millennium (25, 26).

The analysis of the effect of the media on the attitudes of young children certainly cannot ignore, however, the change that the media can induce in the relationship with food in terms of psycho-pathological conflict, with an explicit reference to eating disorders (ED) in the strict sense. If we consider nutritional behaviour as a symbolic expression of the need for control over the body and identity, many studies stress the power of the media in the genesis of distortions of body image, in particular in adolescents. The perception of one's body is formed through a complex process, strongly influenced by the external environment, and so mediated by the relations with the family and peers but also, and above all, by the messages of mass communication.

The evidence in the literature on the emphasis that advertising places on thinness, especially female thinness, abounds; this condition is often identified by young people as an ideal and target to achieve at any cost, and the studies show the existence of a link between exposure to the media and the probability of developing symp-

toms linked to ED because of the negative body image that is established with the exposure (27, 28). In particular, a very recent study showed an important association between the use of Facebook and the development of ED, making explicit reference to the state of anxiety that the many ideals of beauty disseminated generate in young people who, today, are increasingly exposed to judgements and comments and so competitions in this meaning through the social networks (29).

This is, therefore, why the need for effective opposition to the spread of these ideals of thinness is becoming more and more important. At the same time, there should also be operations promoting healthy lifestyles and a good level of awareness in the face of the mighty marketing machine. □

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