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The Diet for Weight Loss. A Study Conducted on Young High School Pupils

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Abstract: *This paper is a brief presentation of the research project called "The diet for weight loss. A study carried out on young high school students". The first part is an argument for choosing the theme, namely the weight loss diet for young people, in the context of the increase in the number of people who manifest nutritional disorders and obesity. This continues with a conceptualization of the terms diet, mass media, family and peer group, internal and external, then with the questions that need answering, following the conduct of the research and the presentation of the relevant literature for the research topic. At the end of the paper, the research methodology and the conclusions that are expected following the application of the sociological study are proposed.*

Keywords: *body, diet, dieting, sociology of body.*

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1. Introduction

One of the biggest challenges of the society of the current century, which is characterized by the food abundance and an easy circulation of food products across the globe, is represented by the obesity and the eating disorders, namely anorexia and bulimia. In 2017, a study was carried out by the World Health Organization, the analysis of which revealed a constant increase in the prevalence of obesity in adults; if in 1975, the obesity in adults of both genders, in Romania, was represented by a percentage of 8.3%, in 1990 there was an increase of up to 13%, in 2016, the percentage reached up to 22.5, a fact that can be explained by the social and economic changes that took place in Romania from 1990 onwards. (https://insp.gov.ro/sites/cnepss/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/02-Analiza-de-situatie-ZEIO-2019-FINAL-APR.pdf)

A phenomenon that is increasingly debated, studied in depth worldwide and less studied in Romania although it is also present in our country, is represented by the eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia and EDNOS (Eating Disorder not Otherwise Specified); according to APTTA (Association for the Prevention and Treatment of Eating Disorders), it is estimated that in Romania, over 400,000 thousand people suffer from a visible eating disorder. In the United States of America, where studies in this regard are widespread and analyzed in depth, it was discovered that this phenomenon was present in young people between twelve and twenty years old, namely the fact that 95% of those who have an eating disorder are between 12 and 25 years of age and that 80% of the teenagers aged 13 tried to diet to lose weight. (https://aptta.ro/statistici.html) We can conclude that the implementation of such a weight loss program can lead to the development of an eating disorder and the young people are the most vulnerable to this phenomenon.

All this information led to the decision to bring to the fore, through this research paper, the subject of the diet for weight loss, in relation to the various sociological theories, where the unit of analysis is represented by young high school pupils, those from rural areas compared to those in the urban environment by noticing if there is any difference from which constructive conclusions can emerge and which can be applied as policies to combat obesity and eating disorders.

2. The objectives of the research project

The objective of the paper is to discover if young people from rural areas are dieting to lose weight and to study the practices and social representations of dieting in general, their psycho-social motivations and the possible bio-psychic consequences of dieting.

3. The significance of the study

The trend regarding the diet for weight loss, especially among young people, who are most prone to such habits and, implicitly, to obesity and eating disorders, is the result of the desire to face the demands of fashion and aesthetics, present in today's society and which involves serious mental and physical challenges.

To be informed, however, and to be aware of the danger to which a person is exposed when following a weight loss diet, unsupervised by a specialist, just at the suggestion of a popular magazine or a website and the consequences on the physical conditions to which the person is subjected, can be extremely useful elements in fighting obesity and other diseases such as anorexia and bulimia, known to have a fairly high mortality rate. (https://aptta.ro/statistici.html)

4. The research questions

The questions to which we are trying to get answers are:

1. Does the access to mass media make rural youth concerned with the diet?

2. How serious is the impact of the imitating peers and the social comparison with peers upon the decision to lose weight?

3. Does the diet, in itself, succeed in substituting its goal of reducing body weight?

4. How serious is the influence of the place of control on the decision to lose weight?

5. Does the social status impact the decision to undergo a diet?

If the presence of the mass media in the daily life of young people from rural areas has managed to induce them to undergo a diet to lose weight, if there are other decision-making elements involved in this regard, how serious is the impact of imitation peers and the social comparison to peers against the desire to undergo a diet to lose weight, if the diet program succeeds in becoming a goal in itself, and substitutes for the goal of losing weight, these are all questions that the proposed research study tries to

answer. In addition to this, we will be able to obtain information that we could not expect at the beginning of the study.

5. The relevant literature

One of the most relevant works for the field of weight loss diet is the book "*Calories & Corsets. A history of dieting over 2000 years*" by Louise Foxcroft, published in 2011, which traces dieting from its beginnings when the Greeks began to be concerned with the health of their bodies to when the Italians began to hire doctors to help them regain their self-control over food; this is the period of wearing the waist shaping corset; in the seventeenth century the importance of sports for a graceful body is brought to the fore, the nineteenth century follows with the emphasis on the quality of food but also the publication, in America, of cookbooks with thousands of recipes; then the fat body becomes interesting but also ridiculous, and the diets for weight loss become common there and the diet approach becomes more scientific.

In the same book there is talk of "endorsement", the endorsement of weight-loss diets by public figures, such as Sisi, who was very concerned about her figure, but who apparently suffered from anorexia, and about the growing concern about celebrity, fashion and unhealthy diets such as "half a grapefruit and two olives". In the fifties, the appetite for diets increases, as it was "encouraged" by the mass media, and all kinds of diet-related businesses develop, such as the bodybuilding business, who promised to increase muscle mass for a fee and the sales of diet books and slimming drugs. (Foxcroft, 2011)

Another important work in this direction is that of the doctor Ion Mincu, *"The universality of food. The history and peculiarities of the Romanian diet"* in the year 2000, which studies the diet depending on the geographical area and the socio-historical and religious conditions.

Various peoples and their culinary habits are presented, such as *the Egyptians* who do not eat pork, which is a "filthy animal", except once a month, compared to the cow and the ram; *the Indians*, for whom meat was a luxury as they were eating more rice and vegetables, and *the Chinese* ate millet and rice, pork, dog and salt fish, but no milk. (Mincu, 2000 p.66, 67).

In *Ancient Rome* there is already talk about overeating, therefore a frugal diet was proposed, which was based on vegetables, olives, milk, grapes, fish, foods that they produced easily, and the main meal, for them, was the dinner, where wine was consumed and the beer was despised by them. (Mincu, 2000)

Religion is an essential factor that involves certain rituals. Some examples are given in the book, such as that of *the Hebrew* religion, where the human head has to be covered while eating, on the Sabbath one ate wearing the best clothing, and *the Judaism* forbade gambling and wine, while fasting was the recommendation of *the Christians*, to impose a dietary discipline. (Mincu, 2000).

Lipovetsky, in his book "Paradoxical Happiness" ("Le bonheur paradoxal"), published in 2006, brings to the fore the discussion of the hyper-consumption, which influences the actions of individuals, the hyper-consumption in which the self-care, the fun part and one's own motivation are key. It is a time when people emphasize diet, fasting, eating organic, not having sweets and fats in the diet, and a circulation of scientific information on nutrition and food content (Lipovetsky, 2006). Eating is no longer a physiological neccessity but it involves emotion and sensitivity, it involves entertainment and that can also involve a show. (Lipovetsky, 2006, p. 206)

David Le Breton, in his book "Anthropology of the body and modernity" ("Anthropologie du corps et modernité"), talks about the diet, invoking the "imperatives of form" that determine its implementation, therefore the fashion, which launches the challenge of a certain ideal of beauty and of body shape. (Le Breton, 2002, p. 157)

Another phenomenon brought into discussion in the writings regarding the weight loss diet, the body and the nutrition, is that of consumerism that leads to consuming up to the "limits of the economic potential" as a result of triggering the impulse to purchase a product, an impulse towards which it is led the buyer through advertisements. (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 32)

Therefore, throughout time, there have been various dietary habits that people have been directed towards, depending on the historical period, the geographical settlement and religion, the habits people have been pushed, persuaded to move towards.

6. Scientific research on the diet for weight loss

The diversity of specialized literature regarding the weight loss diet and the scientific research carried out in this direction lead to a report of the same phenomenon of the diet, to several factors which influence it.

An interesting study called "*A Prospective Study of Familial and Social Influence on Girls` Body Image and Dieting*", carried out in 1999 by researchers from Columbia University on teenage girls with an average age of 12.3 years in relation to the behavior of dieting and the mother's concern with her

body image, reveals the pressure it exerts on the decision to undergo diet, on the prediction of girls' dieting behavior. (Byely et al., 1999)

Regarding the study of the diet in relation to the social and cultural level, from the research "*Body Weight and Dieting in Adolescence: Impact of Socioeconomic Status*" published in 1993, it can be stated that the habit of dieting is common among young women with a higher social status, a fact that is not true for young people of the same age who study at the same university. (Drewnowski et al., 1994)

In the study "*Exposure to Unrealistic Promises about Dieting: Are Unrealistic Expectations about Dieting Inspirational?*" concerning unrealistic expectations about dieting, which are set by the exposure to advertisements, which uses the experiment method among 20-year-old female students, the girls were served cookies, and when they were exposed to unrealistic diet ads, they ate fewer cookies than when they were exposed to realistic ads. (Trottier et al., 2005)

7. The research methodology

In the investigation about the diet for weight loss diet we will use *a deductive model* using the research to answer the above questions during the research it is possible to develop other (*inductive*) theories from the analysis of the research data.

In order to study the diet for weight loss among young high school pupils from the rural environment, we will use the quantitative method by using *the questionnaire* as a tool to collect data about the diet for weight loss, to see if the young people from the rural environment are dieting or not, what is the perception on their own weight and on their own body, what are their eating habits and to test hypotheses.

The conceptualization:

The present paper studies dieting as a practice that aims to change the shape of the body, in the direction of weight loss, all this for non-medical purposes.

The mass media is represented by the means of mass communication that is the television, the internet and online social networks, such as Facebook, Instagram, Tweeter and so on. (Giddens, 2001, p. 396)

Ferris believes **the family** it is "the most important socializing environment in all societies." (Ferris, 2008, p. 126)

The peers group is represented by people who have the same age and "similar social characteristics", i.e. school mates, sports team mates. (Ferris, 2008, 127)

The internalist is a person who believes in the internal control and **the externalist** is a person who believes in the external control. (Chelcea, 1994)

The social status is the rank occupied by a person in a given social system.

The measurement

We make the following statements on the subject of diets and dieting:

- The exposure to mass media influences the decision to diet.
- The individuals who have a dieter in their family or in their peer group are more likely to diet themselves.
- The internalist individuals are more inclined to diet.
- The dieters tend to substitute the goal of losing weight with the diet program itself.
- The individuals with a high social status tend to be more oriented towards practicing a diet for weight loss.

We propose, initially, **the** following **concept representation sketch**:

The dependent variables:

- The diet for weight loss;

- the following of various weight loss plans over certain periods of time (they observe weight loss regimes);

- the measurement of the weight regularly;

- the various eating habits (for instance not eating bread, sweets, fried foods, not eating in the evening).

- the numerous discussions about weight loss diets with friends, family, new acquaintances, and so on.

- the regular watching of shows, they read blogs, the membership of groups on social networks concerned with diets.

The independent variables are:

- *The influence of the peer group (entourage);*
  - the discussions about diet;
  - dieting together with a friend;
  - the observations regarding the weight of the individual;
- *The family influence*
  - the notes and references regarding weight;
  - the comparisons with other people in terms of weight;
  - the mother/father/sister/brother are on a diet to lose weight;

- *The mass media influence*
  - the TV watching;
  - the intense use of the internet;
  - being a fan of a famous media personality;
  - the reading of magazines.
- *The individual's social status*
  - the education;
  - one's number of brothers and sisters.
- *The residence environment*
  - the individual lives in the countryside;
  - the individual lives in the urban environment.
- *The individual's gender;*
- *The place of control;*
  - the individual believes that everything lies in one's own powers to achieve a given goal, that is in the destiny or the fate;
  - the individual ignores genetics when assessing his or her weight;
  - the individual blames the genetics ("I look like my mother, father, grandmother") when he or she assesses his or her body weight.
- *The purpose substitution:*
  - the individual often talks about diets;
  - the individual often tries various diets.

The expected results:

We expect that the influence of the mass media impacts the dieting decision of the rural youth, but we have reservations about this decision considering the family's lack of concern for dieting. We hope that this research will lead to an awareness of the reasons behind the tendency to diet, i.e. fashion, media influence, habits of parents or friends/siblings and the food consumption, but also a better understanding of the dangers we are exposed to when we start a diet to lose weight, namely the eating disorders.

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