Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty: Social Sciences
ISSN: 2284-5747 | e-ISSN: 2458-1054
Covered in: ERIH PLUS, CEEOL, J- GATE, CrossRef, CrossCheck, Google Scholar, Ideas RePeC, Econpapers, Socionet, KVK, WorldCat, ICI Journals Master List - Index Copernicus.

2023, Volume 12, Issue 2 pages: 81-89 | doi: https://doi.org/10.18662/lumenss/12.2/94

Theoretical Perspectives on Dieting for Weight Loss

Oana BEZNEA [1]

[1] National School of Political and Administrative Studies, Bucharest, Romania. oanacolt@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract: *Dieting to lose weight is a frequent phenomenon, both among adults and young people, who start practicing it from a young age. This article develops some theories that are related to diet, the theory of social learning in relation to the mass media, which promotes such habits, the theory of imitation, which refers to copying the dieting behavior of those close to you, especially the family members, the theory of consumption and hyper-consumption, current in the contemporary society, as a result of the abundance of food, but also the consumption of related elements, such as electronic devices, going to a nutritionist and the locus of control theory, when an individual attributes the lack of results of a diet to genetics, or the culinary abundance. The study of these theories is based upon sociological research that analyzes the weight loss diet, with the aim of preventing obesity and related diseases.*

Keywords: *diet, locus of control, body, consumption theory.*

How to cite: Beznea, O. (2023). Theoretical perspectives on dieting for weight loss. *Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty: Social Sciences, 12*(2), 81-89. https://doi.org/10.18662/lumenss/12.2/94

©2023 Published by LUMEN Publishing. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

The mass – media and the diets. The social learning theory

The ideal of beauty is established by the means of mass communication, by the mass media, namely the television, the magazines, the newspapers, and the ideal transmitted nowadays is that of being thin or muscular, for the male population; to achieve this ideal, several ways are suggested, namely going to the gym, wearing devices that monitor the individual's movement, going to a nutritionist for various personalized diets, or simply the standard weight loss program, present in all the magazines, diet groups and on the internet, in general.

Their emphasis by the celebrities who have gone through similar experiences, as the term utilized is "endorsement", the celebrities who talk about what their eating habits are and how they think it is appropriate to eat, the shows which promote obese people who have lost weight and who narrate the method they experienced to lose weight that was based on extreme solutions such as fresh drinks and plain water, people who for a long time drank only water and other examples that determine the decision of individuals who are not satisfied with their body shape, to undergo a diet.

The studies carried out with the aim of demonstrating the impact that accessing the mass media has on the decision of dieting are diverse; an example would be the study carried out in an island in the South Pacific Ocean, the island of Fiji, where there was no television in 1995. Immediately after the introduction thereof, in 1995, a sociological study was carried out, the results of which were compared with the results obtained during three years after its introduction to demonstrate the effects of television on the eating habits and how it impacts one's own body perception. (Ferris and Stein, 2008, p. 127) The comparative study confirmed the influence of the mass media on the self-image, on the body image in young women who were around sixteen years old at that time. It was found that the incidence of eating disorders increased from 12% to 29% and the presence of anorexia was identified with a presence from 0, when the television did not exist to 11 percent after its introduction, with dieting in the foreground and the dissatisfaction with one's own body and, automatically, with one's weight. (Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2018)

In 1958, Bandura issued the *Social Learning Theory*, a theory referring to the fact that, following the observation of the manifestations of other people in a certain direction, a person internalizes them and acts accordingly; there are four factors influencing the social learning, namely "the impulse, the signal, the response and the reward" (Chelcea, 2010, p.63). From this perspective, if we analyze the diet we can state that information is obtained

from the mass media, either the television or from other means of mass communication, as the Internet is becoming increasingly popular, as a result of the spread and accessibility of Internet-connected phones. The information originating in the media is organized in mind, after which it is processed and internalized by the subject and they are later used and applied.

Richard M. Perloff talks about the difference between the classic media, represented by magazines, television and other mass communication media that are called "conventional", classic, and the modern, contemporary media, such as blogs, websites, social networks (Facebook and Tweeter) which allow the intervention, the sending of messages in the shortest possible time among people who have common interests. The users are both sources of information and receivers of information as these forms of communication have a maximum persuasive impact upon the users' lives. (Perloff, 2014)

The social relationships and the diet. The social comparison theory and the imitation theory

The group of peers, represented by the family members and the people close to the individual has a great influence on the decision to diet, as the individual has a tendency to follow what his peers are doing. (Marshall, 2003)

Coomber and King (2008) talk about the impact that the one's sister has on the decision to diet, arguing that, along with one's mother, they determine the "shaping" of behavior in the same way that the peer group manages to influence through the social comparison. Therefore, as a family model, the pressure exerted by the family, consisting of one's mother, father and sister contribute to the application of the restrictions imposed by a weight loss diet.

Coomber and King (2008) also emphasize the importance of the individual's sister in the decision of dieting behavior; "one's mother and sister are sociocultural modeling agents", as the sister's behavior is the equivalent of the peer group that allows for the social comparison. They introduce the phrase "*Tripartite Influence Model*", as it refers to the family model and the pressure of the "social and cultural agents", that is one' mother, father and sister, on the dietary restrictions.

In the book published as a result of Louise Foxcroft's doctoral study, from 2011, "*Calories & Corsets. A history of dieting over 2000 years*", the author states that the girls "mimic" the diet that the mother keeps as well as her eating habits and the culinary course that she follows is also followed by the daughter. The author gives the example of the diet of the Duchess of

Cambridge, the well-known Kate, the wife of Prince Williams, also followed the field of fashion, who confesses that she wears two sizes less, after following one of the fashionable diets that promises spectacular results, namely the Dukan diet, which is criticized by nutritionists. (Foxcroft, 2000, p. 8)

The peer group represents all the individuals who show certain common characteristics such as the age and their hobbies. They represent a collective seen by others as different, having their own symbols, their own customs, their own rules, who do not obey rules and fail to follow the rules, thus being marginalized. (Marshall, 2003, p.263).

The social comparison is much more accessible, with the quick possibility to access the Internet, to create your own web pages where you can post your own information from anywhere on social networks such as Facebook and Instagram; the information can be viewed by friends, as these apps call them and thus the "social comparison" occurs. (Perloff, 2014)

The social comparison theory was first presented by Leon Festinger in 1954, which suggests that people evaluate themselves and their own abilities by comparing them to other people and they tend to prefer those who are similar to them. (Chelcea, 2010, p. 60)

On the Internet one can discover (because of the advertisement thereof) groups that have the name of a diet, for example the Dukan Diet Group, a group that encourages its followers to diet through the examples posted there. These are examples of people who, following that particular diet, have had the expected results, i.e. they lost weight and they are happy with their current weight. Such a group not only prompts the action of dieting, but also prompts the social comparison.

The imitation theory is related to dieting. Gabriel Trade originated this theory; he brings to the fore the imitation, which is present in social manifestations. He believes that a person tends to imitate the habits of other people, to take on the social values of others and to manifest, according to the fashion, ideas about clothing that are taken up and internalized and then they are applied. Alina Duduciuc, in the work "Sociology of fashion" talks about two types of imitation; the imitation of tradition, which preserves the connection between the next generations and the imitation regarding the fashion, which ensures a connection between the people of the same generation. (Duduciuc, 2012, p. 77)

In the case of the diet to lose weight, we can talk about the imitation of the mother or of a person from the peer group, of their dietary habits, a fact which was demonstrated by the research undertaken in previous sociological studies.

The social status and diet. The consumption theory

In the consumer society, beauty is an important quality of a person, which, although it is a biological manifestation, can have financial advantages. Various industries such as the cosmetics industry, the fashion industry, alongside the mass media have imposed the ideal of beauty, which is that of a thin figure and a "beautiful artificial mask", states Wilhelmina Wosinska, in the book "*Psychology of Social Life*". (Wosinska, 2005, p. 241)

This book analyzes the fact that those qualities that are rarely found in a certain society are considered to be interesting. An example of this is a society where the poverty is present, which causes individuals to be slim; therefor the individuals who are valued are the plump individuals, because they are rarer, and vice versa, in societies where material abundance is present, being frugal is a virtue, therefore, this is how the ideal of beauty established in contemporary society is explained, where a slender figure is appreciated. (Wosinska, 2005, p. 241)

Louise Foxcroft brings up the Barbie doll, which little girls receive as a gift from an early age and which establish, even then, an ideal of beauty, as they are taught that being fat is bad and it is normal to keep diet to look like a Barbie doll. (Foxcroft, 2011, p. 1)

Baudrillard refers to the physical beauty, which is a necessity, as it complements the qualities of the soul, bringing to the main plan the care of the physical body, of the figure, as it is also necessary to care for the soul; often the body also sends to other people information about the moral qualities of to a person. (Baudrillard, 2005)

The appearance, many times, can also convey information about one's social status, when establishing social interactions; how thin the body is, the way one is dressed, the expression of the face are elements that communicate information in society about the individual. (Duduciuc, 2012, p. 64)

One can state that people who have a high social status are dieting to lose weight, but a new phenomenon occurs, that is an extreme concern with food product labels, with the calories of a product, which implies a leaning towards eco-products, towards drugs to preserve youth and physical health, towards practicing a sport and using devices to measure various body parameters, as well as calling nutrition specialists and undergoing massages to maintain the youth of the skin. The people with high social status, the social categories which are consumers of complementary services for body maintenance manifest these concerns.

David Le Breton values the body in relation to social categories, where the inhabitants of the rural areas and the workers need the strength of their body to withstand the hard work they subject it to, less the preservation of youth and physical beauty, because they need physical strength to perform the necessary work. The other categories have in mind the pleasant physical shape, a beautiful appearance, the practice of a sports activity to replace their physical inactivity during the day, as a result of a job that does not require movement and physical strength. (Le Breton, 2002, p. 165-166)

Jean Baudrillard's "consumer society" considers the body that is reflected in fashion, that is encountered in advertisements, that is subjected to weight loss diets, that must be kept always young, that is always among the concerns of society that represents a "capital" and a "consumption object", as he appreciates. (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 165-166)

Baudrillard's theory of consumption intends to direct the individual's impulse to buy, until the limits of the economic potential are reached, considering that investing in one's body represents the most important "expenditure". (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 32)

This theory talks about the "sign value", namely the purchases by a person that cover not only a precise need, such as a washing machine that does laundry, but also the need for prestige that this purchase covers. (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 96) A tennis racquet will be useful not only for playing tennis, but also places its user in a certain social category. These are examples that help prove that beauty also has the value of a sign, of marking a person's social status. (Baudrillard, 2005, p.171)

Thorstein B. Veblen appreciates the fact that there is an "ostentatious consumption" in a society governed by economic principles, a consumption type that is characteristic of the upper class. (Duduciuc, 2012, p 81) It is related to fashion and the consumption of products that place a person from a social view point, on a given hierarchy position.

The hyper-consumption follows the theory of consumption, relating to the latest two decades, a phenomenon that Gilles Lipovetsky refers to in the book *"The paradoxical happiness - Essay on hyper-consumption society"*; he completes the information presented by Baudrillard in the 60s, 70s; thus, the "status symbols" are now transformed into the "services" that a person provides, as the experiences become more important than the objects, the services and experiences that a person has acquire the sign value, not the purchased goods, all of which lead to a high quality of life. Here we can see a shift in emphasis from fast diets, with a clear-cut program, to raw vegan, vegetarian, eco, bio diets; there is clearly a concern for complementary

services to diets, such as going to a nutritionist to undergo a personalized diet (Lipovetsky, 2007)

While the ideal of beauty is represented by the slim woman, with a slender figure, in the context of the economic growth and the occurrence of supermarkets where products from all corners of the world can be found plentifully, regardless of the season, a feminist movement appears, which is opposed to the consumer society, where the health obtained through physical exercise is promoted and where the individual is important and he must show self-confidence. As Professor Mincu writes in his book, a revolt towards food that uses dyes and hormones for raising animals develops, as a "culture of one's own body" emerges and which achieves health through sports, diet and medicines such as the food supplements. Later on, in the 90s, the food takes over the role of medicine, so that an ideal healthy figure can be achieved, so that the individual can be physically active for as long as possible. (Mincu, 2000, p. 73)

So there is a transition from satisfying the need to eat towards satisfying the pleasure of eating, the act of eating becoming an experience in itself; various foods from international cuisines can be tried out; food also takes on the role of socializing, of going out with friends to dine, to try the newest restaurant in town – a new habit of the contemporary society.

The purpose and the diet. The field theory and the substitution

Kurt Lewin talks about the field theory and the goal substitution. Lewin, through this theory, connects physics, psychology and sociology, and he relates to the intentional or unconscious actions of a person, that determine the behavior of an individual or a group, an increase in the "psychic tension" that tends to balance itself, a fact that determines a behavior, a manifestation. (Holdevici, 1993, p. 27, 28, 29)

Peter Gollwitzer, in his article entitled "When intention Go Public", draws on the field theory and the goal substitution and he explains how when the intention to achieve a goal is shared with other people, this fact takes the place of achieving the goal, everything becomes a social reality, therefore, many times, the goal is no longer achieved, as the psychic tension has balanced, the success was achieved at the moment the project has been shared. (Gollwitzer, 2009)

In the Dictionary of Sociology, the goal substitution relates to "the process by which particular means chose to achieve a goal become ends in themselves" (Marshall, 2003, p. 509-510).

By referring to the diet, we can associate the tension built by the desire to lose weight with a state that is balanced when the goal is reached,

but along the way, the goal of being slim to be healthy can be replaced by the diet, which becomes an end in itself, going beyond the maintenance of physical health.

Also, according to Gollwitzer, when you make the intention publicly, for example, the fact that you want to lose weight, to undergo a diet, you perceive the success you would achieve if you reached the goal, when you share the goal with someone, which becomes a social reality; it entails the giving up of the action to fulfill the objective, that is in the case of the given example, the giving up of the diet.

The personality trait and the diet. The locus of control theory

The locus of control theory issued by E. Jerry Phares relates to the "*perceived source of control over individual behavior.*" (Chelcea, 1994)

There is an "external control", when an individual believes that an event is the result of fate, luck, external factors, which cannot be controlled and which is beyond the individual's control, and an "internal control", which the internalist perceives as concerning only his actions and behavior. (Chelcea, 1994)

Professor Septimiu Chelcea, in his work "The locus of control and the acceptance of social values", formulates a hypothesis, namely that the internalists "accept society's values, openly" against the externalists who have the locus of control located externally. (Chelcea, 1994)

Starting from this hypothesis, we could appreciate that the internalists tend to undergo diet to lose weight, because they can initiate any action, compared to the externalists, who could blame the genetics, the food abundance, the facts which are beyond their control and because of which they cannot achieve their goal.

References

Baudrillard, J. (2005). *Societatea de consum. Mituri şi structure.* Ed. Comunicare.ro, Bucureşti.

Chelcea S. (1994). *Locul controlului şi acceptarea valorilor sociale*. Revista de Psihologie. http://documents.tips/documents/rotter-locul-controlului.html

Chelcea, S. (2010). *Psihosociologie. Teorii, cercetări, aplicaţii.* Polirom, Iaşi.

Coomber, K., & King, R. M. (2008). The role of sisters in body image dissatisfaction and disordered eating. *Sex Roles*, *59*, 81-93. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/225549353_The_Role_of_Sisters_in_Body_Image_Dissatisfaction_and_Disordered_Eating .

Duduciuc, A. (2012). *Sociologia modei. Stil vestimentar şi dezirabilitatea social.* Institutul European, Iaşi.

Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2018). *The real world: An introduction to sociology*. WW Norton & Company, Inc.http://www.sociology.org.uk/sctvpdf/real%20world%202.pdf

Foxcroft, L. (2011). *Calories & Corsets. A history of dieting over 2000 yars*. PROFILE BOOKS LTD, London.

Gollwitzer, P. (2009). *When intention go public.* Association for Psychological Science, New York University. http://www.psych.nyu.edu/gollwitzer/09_Gollwitzer_Sheeran_Seifert_Michalski_When_Intentions_.pdf

Holdevici, I. (1993). *Psihologia succesului.* Ed. Ceres, Bucureşti.

Le Breton, D. (2002). *Antropologia corpului şi modernitatea.* Ed. Amarcord, Timişoara.

Lipovetsky, G. (2007). *Fericirea paradoxală. Eseu asupra societăţii de consum.* Ed. Polirom, Iaşi.

Marshall, G. (2003). *Dictionar de sociologie.* Oxford, Universul Enciclopedic, Bucureşti.

Mincu, I. (2000). *Universalitatea alimentaţiei. Istoria şi particularităţile alimentaţiei la români.* Ed. Enciclopedică, Bucureşti.

Perloff, R. M. (2014). Social media effects on young women's body image concerns: Theoretical perspectives and an agenda for research. *Sex roles*, *71*(11-12), 363-377. https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2014/PSY221P121/um/Perloff2014.SocialMediaEffectsBodyImage.BID.pdf

Wosinska, W. (2005). *Psihologia vieţii sociale*, Ed. Renaissance, Bucureşti.