Glorification of Destruction: The Media’s Representation of Eating Disorders

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Contemporary American society has become so accustomed to and familiarized with hearing about eating disorders through the media that the disease has transformed into a topic of humor, glorifying and insulting those who have suffered. Making the problems of the social discourse of eating disorders worse, artist Millie Brown glamorizes the topic with her unhealthy performances. Is the controversially humorous portrayal of eating disorders by the Disney Channel, Fox, and Cartoon Network merely offensive, or can and should popular media offer positive and thoughtful treatment of a serious cultural malady?

Our society idealizes unattainable body image standards. Fouts and Burggraf describe how “both male and female characters on television are generally better looking than the average person, but this is especially true for females, who are typically young, thin, and physically attractive” (“Television Situational Comedies”). The media conveys the message that appearance is of primary importance, and eating disorders have become a popular way to meet this unrealistic standard. The media not only perpetuates this impractical maxim, but also exploits and glorifies the victims.

In the infamous scene from the now-pulled episode of Shake It Up! (titled “Party It Up!”), a famous supermodel exclaims to CeCe, “I could eat you up . . . you know, if I ate,” followed by raucous laughter from the model and her entourage. Demi Lovato, an actress who personally recovered from an eating disorder, took notice after the episode premiered on national TV and used her Twitter account to criticize the Disney Channel for making light of eating disorders after losing one of their own stars to a related disease (“Demi Lovato Lashes Out”). A Disney channel representative apologized wholeheartedly shortly thereafter, stating that the network never intended to make light of eating disorders. According to People magazine, the episodes of Shake It Up!, along with an episode of So Random! that also scrutinized and satirized eating disorder issues, were promptly removed (Marcus).
To incorporate the daily struggles with an eating disorder into a television show is one thing, but to joke about the disease in an attempt to idealize or make fun of the matter is intolerable. The Disney Channel, a network viewed by mostly pre-teens and teens, sent an immoral message through their eating disorder reference in the now-pulled episode of *Shake it Up!* If Demi Lovato had not taken offense and confronted the network, would the episode have been taken off the air? Having struggled from an eating disorder myself, I fully support Lovato’s action and had the same offended reaction when I saw the scene. People who struggle or have struggled with an eating disorder should not be subjected to such humor.

Cynthia Hoffner and Martha Buchanan claim, “Young children’s responses to characters are influenced by appearance stereotypes, and this effect is stronger for female characters.” It is disturbing that a teen network such as the Disney Channel would be so insensitive and portray something so negatively towards the children that idolize the characters on their favorite shows. What kind of example is this setting for future generations? Instead, how can the media represent such heavy and disquieting subject matter in a way that educates its audience? If the topic of an eating disorder appears on a television show, its depiction should focus on the struggles that result from the illness so that the topic is taken more seriously, rather than casually or humorously.

Eating disorders are not only satirized and encouraged through the media; they are supported by particular groups on the Internet, as well. According to S. Boyles, there are new, popular websites that promote or reinforce a pro-eating disorder position and encourage the public to engage in eating disorder behavior, offering community support for destructive practices. The information “available on these sites include guidelines on how to minimize calorie intake, avoid detection, and cope with the isolation that often accompanies eating disorders” (Balter-Reitz and Keller). This might disable the recovery of the victim by encouraging the continuation of eating disorder practices. Moreover, peer support offered online allows the patient to conceal the disorder in the physical world. This makes treatment difficult because of the immediate, constant, and open access to virtual support.

*Family Guy*, a show created by Seth MacFarlane and aired on FOX and Cartoon Network, jokes about eating disorders and in
more than one episode seems to encourage them. Within the comedy genre, nothing seems to be off-limits because if one thing is off-limits, then everything is. Although this might be valid in terms of creative freedom, encouraging eating disorders is immoral. There are multiple episodes of *Family Guy* that persuasively hint that these disorders are a good way to lose weight and look better; this promotes a destructive attitude. Insensitive humor exploits those who suffer from these illnesses. An eating disorder is a mental illness with serious physical effects; it’s not something to joke about and advocate in the process.

In contrast with mainstream representations of eating disorders, controversial London artist Millie Brown, also known as the Vomit Painter, regurgitates brightly colored soymilk onto a blank canvas while opera singers Patricia Hammond and Zita Syme perform in the background; this occurs in her most famous work called “Nexus Vomitus” (Edelist). In order to ensure a successful performance with no interferences, Brown does not eat for two days prior. She states that “in no way [does she] want to promote bulimia,” yet she glamorizes eating disorders through her work by indulging in unhealthy practices. It is hard to believe that she is blind to the idea that starving herself and forcing herself to regurgitate could be sending the wrong message to the public. Her “art” glamorizes a potentially fatal disease. Will younger generations be able to distinguish healthy from unhealthy practices for the creation of art? This type of performance art is detrimental to the body both physically and mentally; therefore, her performances should come with a “do not try this at home” label attached.

Although there is no food in Millie Brown’s stomach when she regurgitates her soymilk and paint concoction onto blank canvas, there is still stomach acid and the continuation of this action can cause deterioration of the esophagus and other various health problems. While Brown does not purge on a daily basis, it is still harmful to force the body to do so, and should be done only in extreme cases (Freedman). Fasting for days and vomiting are unnatural behaviors to demonstrate, and her ignorance towards this controversial subject matter idealizes the acts themselves. It is difficult to accept Brown’s title as an artist because in reality, anyone can do what she does. Her performance is in fact a glorified version of what so many people struggle with in their own bathrooms at home.

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Brown has created her own “tasteful” way of looking at eating disorders. Relating art with eating disordered behavior is harmful and degrades the struggle of those with bulimia. Millie Brown’s portrayal does not acknowledge the serious nature of illness. Rather, she endorses our irresponsible attitude towards eating disorders into a pop-cultural quirk.

In 2007, Oliver Toscani photographed 24-year-old Isabelle Caro for a controversial Italian fashion house ad campaign, Nolita: “Under the headline ‘No Anorexia,’ images across newspapers and billboards showed Caro naked, vertebrae and facial bones protruding” (“French Model in Anti-anorexia Campaign Dies”). Her photographs soon appeared on pro-ana websites and some began to argue that the campaign was nothing but a disservice to those suffering with the illness. Caro was discovered by Toscani through a Paris booking agent, Sylvie Fabregon, who had turned the aspiring model away, telling her she looked too sick (Turner). The campaign was created to raise awareness about the disease, for shock value, and to evoke an emotional response among the public with the model’s emaciated look, but it became a topic struck by controversy. Toscani claims “fashion girls are getting skinnier and skinnier. This word ‘shocking’ is used when people find things difficult to discuss, difficult to look at. It is a documentation of the reality around us—in this case, that anorexia is real.” His statement supports that the intention was not to stir up debate or idealize eating disorders; rather it was to confront the reality that is usually masked by acceptance.

When Caro lost her battle to anorexia at the age of 28, she became known as the poster girl for anorexia. Some argue that the spotlight on her gave her the incentive to keep going and not recover from her illness. It must have been hard for Caro to give up the withered look that had provided her with so much attention, yet the intention of the photographs were meant to spread awareness, not to encourage or exploit the subject. The irony in this case is that the purpose of the campaign was to evoke a sense of shock to the public, potentially inducing change among the model population; meanwhile, the campaign is often argued to have fueled Caro’s fatal plunge into her eating disorder. These photographs were meant to depict the disturbing nature of the illness, which our beauty ideals often lead to, in order to educate and evoke change.
The media glorifies and insults those who have suffered with eating disorders by transforming the illness into a topic of humor and exploitation. Society has become accustomed and, therefore, desensitized to the matter because of an overexposure to inappropriate attitudes toward eating disorders. Popular media insults the victims of such illnesses by satirizing them. Millie Brown glamorizes the topic with her unhealthy performances, thus worsening harmful social discourse surrounding eating disorders. The Nolita campaign exposed the public to the reality that the media masks with humor. Making light of eating disorders, as in shows like *Shake it Up!* and *Family Guy*, ignores the social violence of encouraging a pro-ana culture. We need more artists such as Toscani who maturely address that violence by exposing negative body-image perceptions our society has created and enforced.

Works Cited


