

Eating disorders in the media
The changing nature of UK newspaper reports and a comparison with US media

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1. Comparison with US media.
2. Changes in UK media over a 17-year period
3. Differences between newspapers targeted at different social groups

Causes of EDs

- inner psychological factors (low self-esteem, high expectations of self and a stress response)
- social factors (cultural 'norms' of thinness as an ideal, media, advertising)
- family factors (abuse, neglect and pressure from parents to achieve)
- other environmental influence, such as peer group norms
- genetic and biological factors

Correlates of EDs

- other psychological manifestations such as anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder and depression

Medical complications of EDs

- amenorrhoea, heart problems, osteoporosis and psychological dysfunction

Treatments for EDs

- medical therapy (antidepressants),
- psychological interventions
- specialist inpatient care

Public perceptions of EDs

- stigmatising perceptions: ED as a moral failing
- severity underestimated; prospects of recovery overestimated
- EDs a disease of younger white women

Experiences of EDs

- associated with high levels of shame

Studies of media representations

Mondini, Favaro and Santonataso (1996): Italian newspapers and magazines

- EDs caused by socio-cultural factors and family dynamics
- medical complications rarely reported
- psychological treatments stressed

O'Hara and Clegg-Smith (2007): US newspaper articles 2004-5

- EDs caused by family dynamics and parental influence in particular
- EDs a disease of younger white women and celebrities
- medical complications rarely mentioned
- recovery the result of willpower or chance events
- recovery rates unrealistically high
- titillating / voyeuristic
- more clinical information is needed in newspapers

Investigation 1: comparison with US newspapers

205 newspaper articles; October 13 2004 to October 13 2005

'anore!' OR 'bulim!' OR 'eating disorder'

Times, Telegraph, Independent, Guardian (all 'serious')

Sun and Mirror (popular)

Daily Mail,

73 full personal profiles; 68 brief mentions of someone with an ED

Coding scheme: kappa = 0.779

Table 1. Comparison between U.S. and U.K. national newspapers: personal profiles of people with EDs.

	U.S.[1]	U.K. Full Profiles	U.K. Brief Profiles	All U.K. Profiles	P value ^a
Female	95/100 (95%)	66/72 (92%)	60/69 (87%)	126/141 (89%)	P= 0.118
Age at onset					
Pre-teen, teen or college student	57/100 (57%)	46/66 (70%)	27/63 (43%)	73/129 (57%)	p= 0.1225
Young adult (20s)	25/100 (25%)	14/66 (21%)	24/63 (38%)	38/129 (29%)	
Over 30	18/100 (18%)	3/66 (5%)	8/63 (13%)	11/129 (9%)	
White	48/51 (94%)	41/42 (98%)	53/58 (91%)	94/100 (94%)	P= 0.642
Celebrity	-	31/72 (43%)	50/69 (75%)	81/141 (58%)	-
Aetiology					
Mentioned at all ^b	33/100 (33%)	34/72 (47%)	20/69 (29%)	54/141 (38%)	p= 0.399 ^b
Family dynamics	16/100 (16%)	17/72 (24%)	12/69 (17%)	29/141 (21%)	p= 0.37
Psychological	-	27/72 (38%)	16/69 (23%)	43/141 (30%)	-
Genetic/biological	0/100 (0%)	2/72 (3%)	6/69 (9%)	8/141 (6%)	p= 0.013 ^c
Other	-	36/72 (50%)	8/69 (12%)	44/141 (31%)	-
Clinical complications					
Physical	11/100 (11%)	47/72 (65%)	21/69 (30%)	68/141 (48%)	p< 0.0001
Psychological	-	39/72 (54%)	15/69 (22%)	54/141 (38%)	-
Treatment mentioned at all					
Medical	21/100 (21%)	40/72 (56%)	22/69 (32%)	62/141 (44%)	p= 0.0002
Psychological	-	11/72 (15%)	11/69 (16%)	22/141 (16%)	-
Medical or psychological	-	22/72 (31%)	11/69 (16%)	3/141 (23%)	-
Hospitalisation	8/100 (8%)	24/72 (33%)	12/69 (18%)	36/141 (26%)	p= 0.0005
	0/100 (0%)	24/72 (33%)	10/69 (14%)	34/141 (24%)	p<0.0001 ^c
Had recovered	78/100 (78%)	20/72 ^d (28%)	26/69 ^d (38%)	46/141 ^d (33%)	p< 0.0001
N	100	72	69	141	

a - For comparison of U.S. and all UK profiles based on χ^2 test.

b - Comparison of only family dynamics and genetic/biological aetiology.

c - Based on Fisher's exact test.

d - UK figures exclude Princess Diana because her recovery status at the time of her death is unclear.

Examples of UK newspaper discussion of eating disorders in 2004-2005

a) Celebrity stories:

“Prolonged starvation can lead to infertility and osteoporosis. In some cases, people with the disease die from the effects. Singers Karen Carpenter - the first 'celebrity' anorexic - and Lena Zavaroni both fought long battles with anorexia and died young; Karen aged 32 and Lena aged 35.” Daily Mail, September 2005.

b) Genetic and biological factors:

“People with anorexia and bulimia share core traits that are genetically based, claim studies in the online edition of The American Journal of Medical Genetics Part B”. Times, September 2005.

c) Complications and treatment:

“With that kind of weight loss they have bone marrow and hormone suppression. Due to their starvation, their metabolism shuts down (and) they can just drop dead from a heart attack.” Mirror, May 2005.

“Experts hope the new results will help to accelerate the search for potential treatments. Traditionally they have centred on psychotherapy, nutrition and, in some cases, medication such as antidepressants.” Daily Mail, September 2005.

d) Recovery

“Around four in ten patients fully recover, and many more live with the disease in a less acute form. The more we know about this disease, the more likely it is that we will one day find a cure.” Daily Mail, September 2005.

Investigation 2: time trends

2355 articles 1992-2008

'anore!' OR 'bulim!' OR 'eating disorder'

Times, Independent, Guardian (all 'serious')
Daily Mail Sun, Mirror, Telegraph excluded
because not uploaded by 1992)

Four time periods compared: 1992–1996, 1997–
2000, 2001–2004 and 2005–2008.

Wordsmith Tools: keyword analysis

Table 2 Keyword comparison over time of UK newspapers[†]

92–96	97–00	01–04	05–08
1. Fashion None	Model/s; fashion	None	Model/s; fashion week/industry/council; British Fashion Council (BFC); (size) zero; Madrid; Milan; Spanish; catwalk; designers; Donatella (Versace); Reston/Ramos (models)
2. Medical terminology Slimming (disease/pact); bulimia	Eating (disorders); operation	Eating disorder; ED; healthy; CR (calorie restrictor); diabetes; levels – hormone/blood sugar; bone; study	Eating disorder; body mass index (BMI); healthy; CBT; experts; orthorexia; pregnancy; diabetes; risk
3. Internet	www	www; org; com; websites; pro (ana); internet	www; org; com; websites; pro ana; online; internet; (miss) bimbo
4. Official concern and regulation [‡] Conference; (Mrs)Penney	Summit; BMA; (Tessa) Jowell; (Peggy) Claude-Pierre	None	Ban/ned; (model health) inquiry; chief (executive); (Lady) Kingsmill; Jowell; Eating Disorder Association
5. Celebrity sufferers Diana; Karen Carpenter; Audrey Hepburn; Britt Ekland; Elton John; Isabella (Hervey)	Lena Zavaroni; Spice (Girls); Posh; (Victoria) Beckham; Geri (Halliwell); Tracy (Shaw); Monica (Seles); Calista Flockhart; Ally (McBeal); Sophie (Dahl); Sophie (Anderton)	Geri Halliwell; Spice (Girls); Sandra (Dee); Celine (Dion); Maxine Carr; (Victoria) Beckham; Tracy (Shaw); Tara (Palmer-Tomkinson); (Daniela) Hantuchova; Rory (Bremner); Lara (Flynn-Boyle)	(John) Prescott; (Victoria) Beckham; Geri (Halliwell); Posh Spice; Spice Girls; Keira Knightley; Nicole Richie; Gail (Porter); (Jo) Brand; Allegra (Versace); Maxine (Carr); Edie Sedgwick; Debs (Deborah Barham); Billie (Piper); Sandra (Dee); Cheeky (Girls); (Teri) Hatcher
6. Royal words 92–96 Princess Diana; Prince Charles; William; MB (Martin Bashir); HRH; Queen; monarchy; royal; palace; Wales; Windsor; Countess; Earl Spencer; Camilla Bowles; Johnnie Raine; (Andrew) Morton; (Susie) Orbach	97–00 Chantal Collopy; Gauntlett; (Lawyer); Cape (Town) [‡]	01–04 (Paul) Burrell	05–08 NONE

[†] Times, Independent, Guardian and Daily Mail. [‡] Mrs Penney was president of the Girls' School Association; Tessa Jowell was the Minister for Women, Peggy Claude-Pierre founded the Montreux Clinic in Canada; Lady Kingsmill was the chairman of the Model Health Inquiry. [§] Chantal Collopy was Earl Spencer's mistress; Gauntlett is the surname of Lady Spencer's lawyer; Cape Town is where Diana's brother lived.

Three themes that have changed over time in U.K. newspaper reporting of EDs

a) Royal reporting

“The Princess of Wales is to visit a conference on life-threatening eating disorders. It will be the first time that Diana, who is widely believed to have suffered from the bingeing disorder bulimia nervosa, has publicly shown her concern about the problem.”
Daily Mail, January 1993.

b) The internet

“The mental health charity Sane is currently conducting research into pro-anorexia websites and preliminary findings show that almost three-quarters of those visiting them had experienced suicidal thoughts or feelings, while almost half said they self-harmed.”
Guardian, July 2006.

c) The fashion industry, official concern and regulation

“Of course, we have all been here before. In June 2000, I co-chaired a Body Summit with Tessa Jowell, then minister for women, at which we asked representatives from the fashion industry if they would not at least be sensible and introduce a BMI cut-off point.” Daily Mail, February 2007.

Medical terminology in U.K. newspaper reports of EDs

a) CBT

“One approach she has tried over the past few years, and continues to be treated with regularly, is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), a "talking" therapy which was largely ignored until 10 years ago but which, as well as being used as treatment for bulimics, is suddenly being touted as the best "evidence-based" (i.e. rigorously scientifically tested) cure for just about everything, from depression and phobias to schizophrenia, ME, obsessive compulsive disorder and obesity.” Guardian, June 2006.

b) BMI

“12.5 (the) BMI of Ana Carolina Reston, the Brazilian model who died of anorexia in 2006. She was two and a half stone below the recommended minimum weight for her height.” The Times, April 2008.

c) Orthorexia

“regimens can vary wildly from person to person, with many orthorexics being, for instance, raw foodists, vegans, fruitarians or, in one notable case...committed to eating only yellow foods.” Mail, April 2007

Investigation 3: popular and serious newspapers

Articles 2001-2008

'anore!' OR 'bulim!' OR 'eating disorder'

- a. ***Serious*** (Times, Telegraph and Guardian, Independent (524 articles).
- b. ***Popular*** (Sun and Mirror; 519 articles).

Wordsmith Tools to track terms related to:

- Aetiology
- Clinical complications
- Treatment
- Other terms

Frequency* of common words, by type of newspaper: 2001-2008.

Words	Popular press	Serious press	Significance (Based on log-likelihood)
Aetiology ('abuse'; 'parental'; 'pressure'; 'expectations'; 'self-esteem'; [media / celebrity] 'influen!')	2.3	1.7	n.s.
'gene!'	0.2	0.9	p<0.0001
'research'	2.9	7.5	p<0.0001
Clinical complications ('periods'; 'menstru!' 'thyroid/xine'; 'hair'; 'anaemia/c'; 'heart'; 'osteoporosis/tic'; 'bone/s'; 'brittle'; 'kidney/s')	21.2	11.8	p<0.0001
Treatment ('Cognitive behavioural therapy' or 'CBT'; 'psych!'; 'rehab'; 'clinic')	2.9	3.5	n.s.
hospital' (ised/s)	10.9	5.8	p<0.0001
Fashion industry and regulation ('fashion'; (fashion/ modelling) 'industry'; 'catwalk!'; 'model!' 'ban/ned')	13.6	42.6	p<0.0001
Internet words ('Pro-ana/mia'; 'web/site')	1.6	3.1	p<0.0001
Celebrity 'Diana'	2.2	1.0	p<0.0001
Total words	357,537	496,694	

*per 10,000 words.

Personal profiles occur more in popular papers, and provide opportunities to portray clinical complications and hospital treatment episodes

'hospital'

Popular coverage: usually in personal stories: 'rushed into hospital', '[went] in and out of hospital'

Serious coverage: 37% of mentions are names of institutions such as 'St George's Hospital', 'The Priory Hospital', 'Great Ormond St Hospital' and 'The Maudsley Hospital' (only 7% in popular coverage)

Popular: 61% of articles in investigation 1 contained personal profiles

Serious: 47%

Medical information in popular and serious newspapers

Aetiology

POPULAR: "Healthier-looking girls will be a better image for the many young women who develop eating disorders, influenced by images of skeletal models." Sun, July 2007.

POPULAR: "Dear Deidre, I'm a 21-year-old girl...I force food into my mouth even when I feel I can eat no more. I live with my parents and they stop me eating outside meal times but I find excuses to go out and buy food. DEIDRE SAYS: ... Though you are an adult, your parents seem to be running your life –or trying to. The emotional battle is really for your independence." Sun, November 2003

Genetics

SERIOUS: "Both sets of results point to a strong genetic component to anorexia and bulimia and an underlying biological reason why some girls are more prone to developing eating disorders than others." Independent, March 2001.

Research

SERIOUS: "More than 500 teenagers took part in the study, carried out by the Centre of Appearance Research at the University of the West of England. The study assessed pressure from parents, siblings, friends and the media to be thin." Independent, May 2006

Clinical complications

POPULAR: "Looking in the mirror, I saw a skeletal mess. I had so little body fat it was uncomfortable to sit or even lie down. My periods had stopped and I was so cold, I needed to layer on jumpers, socks and even a hot-water bottle." Mirror, November 2007.

POPULAR: "I was told I had ruined my chances of having children. And I was now too weak to hold down my job. There was nothing going for me...I was sent for psychiatric treatment. I just couldn't seem to conquer this at all. The acid from persistent vomiting rotted my teeth. I stopped socialising. My entire life revolved around food and my revulsion to it." Sun, February 2005

Treatment

SERIOUS: "Ulrike Schmidt, consultant psychiatrist at the Maudsley Hospital and Professor of Eating Disorders at the Institute of Psychiatry at King's College London, said: "In five years we hope to have new treatments for anorexia that make a lasting and positive difference to sufferers and their families." Times, April 2007.

Conclusions

EDs associated with celebrities and younger white women, caused largely by interpersonal / socio-cultural factors, in both US and UK media

UK – more reporting of genetic and biological causation, more reporting of seriousness, clinical complications, less optimistic about recovery

UK tabloids run personal profiles that increase emotional impact with gruesome details of clinical problems, incidentally providing a lot of medical information

UK serious papers run more research stories, genetic causation, regulation of fashion industry, dangers of internet, less celebrity stories

Over time: Royal story declines, increased coverage of awareness raising organisations (eg: Eating Disorders Association), more on regulation of fashion industry. More medical terminology. Increasingly a public health / science story.

Newspapers aren't academic journals. They teach the public through 'edutainment', involving personalisation, emotional impact, sensation.

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