

## With constant social media reminders about our bodies – and what we put into them – how do we resist pressure to conform to an ‘ideal’ vision of health and beauty?

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Not long ago, on Instagram, a small ad appeared that suggested that users download Photable, an app that allows people to discreetly add abs or a bronzed glow to a person in any photograph. The app arrived just in time for summer. Those who use it can show off their virtual body in seconds and, by doing so, look more like influencers on social media – most of whom have had plastic surgery. Capable of reaching a large number of social media users thanks to companies' use of more efficient algorithms, Photable is just another tool that is furthering society's obsession with the perfect body.

### 'Ideal' body is just clicks away

The app Pump Up goes even further. This app is a social network that is oriented toward those obsessed with having a sculpted body, and it invites thousands of users to post photographs of their sporting prowess and their strong muscles. Users publish the distance they have run or pedaled each day, along with the number of calories they have burned.

While using the app, you can also admire an abundance of photos posted by users that feature scantily dressed people who are proud to prove that, over the months, they have strengthened their thighs, toned their backs or redefined their arms.

Added to this is an endless number of inspiring, even prophetic, phrases shared by members of the community: "Have you trained today?" "Your mind is the cement that will help you build your dream body!" and "Nothing is easier, you just got stronger!"

Faced with images of the prowess of these perfect strangers, we find ourselves scrolling from one account to another. Hypnotized, we wonder what we could accomplish with our own bodies if we

wanted to.

For Montreal nutritionist Lisa Rutledge, the addictive nature of this type of media is explained by the human inclination to compare our performance to that of others. She believes that by looking at these images, we calculate the gap between these models and our own bodies. It's a way of tormenting the ego, which, she believes pushes us to always seek more ways of being perfect, even if perfection is only a social construct.

If Rutledge disapproves of these apps, it's because she knows the effect that they can have on those she helps in her line of work.

"These are very toxic messages," she said. "I always encourage my patients to ask themselves how they feel. If spending time on these networks causes stress, you have to stop."

### What is 'healthy' eating?

In the race to have an ideal body, the food we eat has become a key factor. On apps such as Pump Up and Instagram, photos of "healthy" dishes have become a huge success among users. These include images of raw foods, such as exotic fruit salads, colorful bowls loaded with food and green smoothies. Apps with thousands of subscribers now specialize in staging these images of "healthy" meals.

Often, these illustrations are accompanied by the hashtag #eatclean. The clean-eating philosophy consists of eating only "whole" or "unprocessed" foods. These words have only a rather vague definition, which is based on the radical idea that most of the food products at our disposal are impure in nature.

In addition, according to this doctrine, to regain control of one's body entails avoiding these unhealthy foods by all means.

"The problem with this philosophy, which has no solid scientific basis, is that it is very difficult to define what is healthy and what is not," Rutledge said. "It's normal to want to find solutions to improve your well-being. But health is subtle, and today we see clean-eating gurus dictating what is good or bad for health, as if it were black or white."

Blogger Jordan Younger, who is known online as "The Balanced Blonde," has helped to popularize the movement. With no qualifications as a nutritionist, she advised her community to follow a vegan, raw, sugar-free, cereal-free and legume-free diet. In 2013, she sold more than 40,000 copies of her "detox" program in five days, which was a vegetable formula based on green juice.

"For some time now, there has been this idea that if we eat junk food, then we must eat detox products to compensate for this," said Marie Watiez, a food psycho-sociologist and lecturer at the University of Quebec in Montreal, who is exasperated by current eating trends.

### A moral injunction

How do we explain this contemporary craze for controlling our bodies in ever more extreme ways? According to the philosopher Isabelle Quéval, author of the 2008 essay "The Body Today," we have gone from living in a world in which the body was subjected to the vagaries of

life to the possibility of having a malleable body that is transformable according to the food we eat, the sports we play and our medical choices. As a result, our bodies have become the tool with which "I will be able to build a destiny for myself," she explained in *Télérama* magazine. It would constitute, more than ever, a reason to "protect, heal, grow ... and, especially, make it last."

However, for Quéval, it is difficult to escape from a phenomenon that, over time, has become a real moral injunction.

Nowadays, many believe "you have to be thin, young, beautiful and fit to succeed in your relationships and professional life; there is strong pressure for everyone to meet these standards," she wrote in the *French* magazine.

So, do you have to be fit to be loved now? Well, this is what Rutledge assumes. "Today, there is this idea that to be accepted, you have to have a very thin body. This is what is considered 'normal.'"

The problem is that we are living in a society that will often

admire and compliment the result of unhealthy food choices, such as those that lead to extreme thinness, for example.

Rutledge is also concerned about the confining nature of this phenomenon.

"I had a client who, at the office, refrained from eating products considered bad for her health (such as chocolate cake, for example)," she said. "Over time, she had acquired the reputation of being the 'healthy girl' and did not want to ruin this."

Worse still, Rutledge said, those who resist the social pressure to be thin or to "eat clean," such as those who say they don't want to build muscle or lose weight, often face some sort of accusatory judgment in their daily lives.

"I think a lot of people see this as a frustrating choice," she said. "We say to ourselves, 'I suffer to tame my body, so why don't you?'"

### Cashing in on the craze

For Rutledge, there is no doubt that the big winners in this dictatorship are first and foremost the brands involved.

"The definition of beauty is increasingly difficult to achieve," she said. "The more complicated it is, the more tempted we will be to spend money to achieve our goals."

Thanks to expensive super foods, gym memberships and slimming creams, the body market has never done so well. In 2015, the global well-being industry was worth \$3.72 trillion and grew by 10.6 percent between 2013 and 2015.

"Media and culture have influenced this a lot," Rutledge said. "It is a market based on a problem/solution logic. If you make cellulite a problem that you have to fight, then it is easier to sell a solution in the form of books or various products and services."

"What I find unfortunate," said Marilène Dion, a sexologist, psychotherapist and coordinator at Anorexia and Bulimia

Quebec, is that this industry can encourage the emergence of eating disorders and diseases by playing on people's guilt."

### New troubles

In 2014, 23-year-old blogger Younger, a clean-eating influencer, was convinced that she was eating in the healthiest way possible. Then her hair started falling out. The "clean" diet, which the young woman sold as the way to health, had made her sick. Her diet had made her periods stop, and it gave her skin an orange hue, which resulted from her eating sweet potatoes and carrots – the only carbohydrates that she allowed herself to consume.

Despite these problems, she found it impossible to expand the repertoire of food she consumed. Following a medical consultation, she managed to find a word for her inability to leave her rigid and restrictive diet behind.

"I knew I had a problem," she told the *Refinery 29* blog, "but it didn't fall into the traditional categories of anorexia, bulimia or binge eating. Mine was an obsession with healthy, pure, clean food from the earth, and a fear of anything that could potentially harm my body. It turned out that this disorder had a name: orthorexia."

Orthorexia is not yet recognized by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders*, a tool that catalogs mental disorders. However, orthorexia is defined as being a neurotic behavior, characterized by an obsession with a healthy diet. This behavior has been observed with increasing regularity by specialists over the past five to 10 years.

"Of course, not everyone who wants to eat well is orthorexic," Dion said, "but when this desire for control becomes obsessive – when you spend 95 percent of your time thinking or planning your meals and this relationship with food affects your social relationships and your health – then there may be a disorder present."

Among the other pathological behaviors recently identified, Dion also mentions bigorexia, which is an addiction to physical exercise that mostly affects men.

"This disorder, also called reverse anorexia, pushes those who suffer from it to want to increase their muscle mass even more at the expense of fat mass," she said. Like orthorexia, bigorexia can have harmful physical and mental consequences in the long term.

"Initially, social media may be a factor that will influence patients," Dion said. "When people constantly see images that are presented as ideals to be achieved, this can create a certain concern. However, it's not what helps maintain and increase

the illness."

### Healthy food, holy food

When Younger decided to speak out about her pathological relationship with food and her choice to return to a more moderate diet, the backlash was immediate. Within a few weeks, she had lost thousands of online followers and had received numerous hate messages, including death threats. She was reproached for being only a "big piece of bacon" who lacked the discipline necessary to be truly pure.

The harassment that she has suffered can be seen as being a sort of excommunication of modern times. This, combined with the fanatical relationship with purity that her eating philosophy espoused, does much to evoke the field of the sacred.

"Every diet has a religious dimension," Rutledge said. "We invest a lot of energy in a belief that does not really have a scientific basis, and we do not wonder any more than that about the consequences that our behavior (not only with food, but also toward others) can have."

In a 1993 article, sociologist Claude Fischler had already drawn a parallel between our contemporary eating habits and Christianity. Like Christianity, our relationship with food can push us to discern between good and evil, to adopt value behaviors that resist the "temptation to take the easy route" and to respect a "duty of control and restriction (portion control)."

### Leave our bodies alone!

Faced with these practices that, when taken to the extreme, torture our bodies more than they save them, a growing number of nutritionists and food professionals advocate accepting the body as it is in order to put an end to diets, restrictions and anxieties related to food.

"We've been told for a long time that we can't trust ourselves and that we shouldn't listen to our appetite," Rutledge said. "As a result, we no longer trust each other. Yet I think our bodies know what's good for them, and they push us in the direction of health all the time. That's why I encourage intuitive eating. I teach my patients to listen to their bodies."

Marie Watiez, a food psycho-sociologist and lecturer at the University of Quebec in Montreal, is fighting to remind us that eating is a source of multiple pleasures.

"We eat for different reasons. First and foremost, to survive, but also for the sensory experience it gives us and for the comfort that food provides. There is also a social dimension, as well as a particular relationship to nature and to the land," she said. "I believe that by integrating all these dimensions and stopping considering certain foods as enemies that we will be able to recreate a truly healthy relationship with food."

Translated by Louise Wilson.

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