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COMC 4348

Final Research Paper

7 May 2019

The Influence of Religious Fasting in a Media-Dominant Society

We have heard the stories before. Saints of the past, abstaining from food in an effort to elevate their spirituality. At a societal level we are taught to admire such acts and associate them with strength and dignity. Now take this same concept of restricting food intake and place it in modern times, in a landscape dominated by media exposure and use. Instead of holy acts of selflessness, we have eating disorders.

History has written the narrative of asceticism as one of heroism. Defined by Google as, "severe self-discipline and avoidance of all forms of indulgence, typically for religious reasons", asceticism may feel foreign and dated to the modern ear. When framed in a religious context, it becomes easy to overlook similar behaviors in a present-day setting. While today's eating disorder culture may not be explicitly driven by a religious mission, the underlying values and far-reaching desires that fuel their practice closely resemble ascetic behavior. We have not lost asceticism with time; it has only taken on a new form. Present day young women are not striving to be saints, but instead are turning to religious fasting rituals as an excuse to engage in self-harming behavior. More often than not, those with eating disorders will justify their disordered behavior with a commitment to their religion, which is arguably similar to asceticism. This paper aims to explore the relationship between religion and spiritual beliefs and eating disorders in the present day, while taking media influence into account.

Fasting for religious purposes is not an unfamiliar concept. Many major religions implement a degree of restricted behavior into their respective canons. These range anywhere from Christianity and the period of Lent to Islam and the observance Ramadan. In Judaism, fasting is required on the holiday of Yom Kippur. The practice of restricting from food and water in a spiritual pursuit can potentially cause more harm than good. These traditions have withstood time, but they do not live in a vacuum. Changes in social behavior influence new outcomes for old practices. In a society where media portrayals of a "thin ideal" are prominent there is heightened attention on one's physical body, and therefore the means by which they can control it. This is a relatively new societal landscape that heavily influences how fasting practices are approached. How does religious fasting play out in a day and age where media focus on diet, weight, and appearance are everywhere we turn? Specifically, what influence do these practices have when eating disorders are taken into account?

In Western media, the beauty standard communicated to audiences is typically along the lines of thin being the equivalent of beautiful. Western consumers are taught that a lean, thin frame for females is most appealing. Subsequently, those who fall short of such a bodily composition could be valued as less. This explanation defines the term "thin ideal" (Kendal et al., 2017). Origins of this concept are often associated with Western media. However, the prominence of such media are ubiquitous with presences across the globe. As countries rapidly begin to modernize they acquire Western media and therefore the beliefs and values that these media convey. It can be argued that very few communities lack total media exposure. Similarly, the same can be said of religion. Both media and religion are overarching concepts that live at a

societal level, yet influence individual thought and behavior in ways that are beyond conscious control.

In the 21st century, media use is part of daily life. It is simple; the more we consume, the more we are exposed to. Whether it be film and television, advertisements, or social media, a shift toward a visually dominant culture comes with a price. There is an increased focus on physical appearances because as consumers, we are most impacted by what we can see in images. It can be argued that the rise of eating disorders in modern times is closely related to what has become nearly inescapable media exposure. Media serves as the primary vehicle for projecting social commentary on body ideals and expectations, and consumers compare themselves to these examples. This has a technical name, known as "social comparison theory", which explains that people look to external models to form their own understandings of the self (Vitelli, "Media Exposure…"). The advertisements and social media accounts we are infiltrated with in our daily lives are usually edited to a degree of unattainable perfection, yet we subconsciously hold ourselves to desiring the same appearance for ourselves. The result? A deeply ingrained influence on our beliefs and behaviors, especially in relation to our appearance.

While there are many factors that contribute to disordered eating patterns, media exposure appears to have a strong influence. Media dominance has become such a banal aspect of society that its impact tends to go unnoticed. Given how deeply imbedded it is in our lives, it is able to shape our outlook, desires, and beliefs. According to a study conducted by Lee and Lee, media exposure teaches women that a slim figure is, "the sociocultural beauty standard of the female body. The internalization of such an unrealistic and unattainable ideal can lead to various negative consequences…", noting the development of eating disorders to be one such

outcome (Lee & Lee, 2019). In the realm of health, the models that we use in our own social comparison models can potentially be dangerous. The National Eating Disorders Association even has a "5 Tips for Media Self Care" section on their website, noting specifically that, "Researchers studying body concern issues have found that the more time we spend in the media world, the more we are exposed to body perfect images, and the more vulnerable we are to compare our appearance to unrealistic body standards" (NEDA). Comparison may be the thief of joy, but it is also targeting our health and wellness at an increasingly growing level.

What we are left with is a visually dominant society which triggers pressure surrounding physical appearance and, as an extension, the means by which we can manipulate the external. The most direct way to accomplish this desire is to restrict food intake. Religious rituals that call for fasting or abstaining in the present day can accomplish more than just one's religious goals, but also those related to weight and appearance. For the purposes of this paper we will be focusing on the major Western religions Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, however any religion that calls for abstaining practices is relevant to this discussion. It is hard to pinpoint exactly when fasting rituals began, but it is safe to say that they have withstood the test of time.

While the task is relatively similar across religions, the purposes that fuel a fasting practice vary on belief and canon. For example, Christianity does not explicitly demand its followers to fast at any point. However, a majority of practicing Christians will engage with fasting or abstaining by some means. If it is not a requirement by the Bible, why is this the case? In an interview with Pastor John Piper on Christian fasting, he expresses that, "Fasting is a way of saying with our stomach and our whole body how much we need and want and trust Jesus…[of saying] I love you, God. I need you more than I need food, more than I need life"

(Piper, *Desiring God*). Nowhere is this view imposed on followers, yet there is a common understanding that fasting is expressive of one's devotion, mortality, and gratitude. It is ingrained in our subconscious, alongside the expectations media have communicated to us about our appearances.

The period of Lent is important to analyze here. According to the BBC, Lent is, "...a season of reflection...marked by fasting, both from food and festivities". The entry goes on to note that, "It is more common these days for believers to surrender a particular vice such as favorite foods…" ("Religions…", BBC). Such an observation takes into account how time has impacted the way this historical practice is utilized. The visual dominance of our media-dependent society has led marketing teams to take advantage of our vulnerability. They convince us that following specific diets and eating behaviors will help us to lose weight, a goal we have been conditioned to seek as a result of exposure to a thin ideal. We have become brainwashed that weight loss is a healthy pursuit. Religious periods of fasting provide followers with an excuse to restrict their food intake, complicating whether or not their intentions are religiously pure. Restriction is understood to be a righteous pursuit if it is done in the name of religion. What happens when the appeal to serve selfish interests comes into play?

Fasting is not exclusive to Christianity alone. The Jewish tradition of Yom Kippur is a twenty-four hour fast that is practiced, "...in order to devote ourselves with all of our hearts and minds to our relationship with the divine" (MJL, "Yom Kippur…"). In Islam, Ramadan is a month-long period of daily fasts, which are, "...intended to bring the faithful closer to God and to remind them of the suffering of those less fortunate" (Batrawy, AP News). A similar trend is apparent; fasting makes us better versions of ourselves. In the media, weight loss and restriction

are marketed as means of improving the whole self in a fulfilling way. This is eerily similar to the goals associated with religious fasting. A quick Google search of, “using lent to lose weight” brings up 10,000,000 results in seconds, a clear indication that religious fasting has modern day ulterior motives.

Taking all of this into consideration, I grew curious as to how this conversation played out in eating disorder cases. Since media pressure, the omnipresence of the thin ideal, and constant comparison to unrealistic models are modern aspects of daily life, the rise of eating disorders is not unprecedented. For those suffering from a toxic relationship with food and body image, I had to ask; do periods of religious fasting uphold their promise of improving oneself and their wellbeing? Are they simply excuses for unhealthy behaviors? Is is counterintuitive to participate in fasting if you are ill, or does religion canon reign supreme?

In order to explore these questions, I decided to ask the relevant audience directly. One’s eating behaviors, internalized beliefs about the self, and religious practices are all deeply personal aspects of one’s being. That being said, I would argue that qualitative data speaks volumes to my questions of interest. Before conducting my research I approached the study with the hypothesis that if someone has a history of, or currently suffers from, an eating disorder, then periods of religious fasting would provoke distress and further development of health-related issues. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that this was not always the case.

Method

Participants

For my research, I utilized my Instagram followers. Currently I run a health and wellness blog with a niche focus on eating disorder recovery. A large majority of my following has a past of

disordered eating or currently struggles with it, making them the ideal audience for this research. The participants in the study were 3,300 mostly female Instagram users. 75% were from the United States and 25% were from outside of the United States. In terms of age, 24% reported to be younger than 18 years old and 76% reported being 18 years old or older.

Materials

The materials used in this study were a series of Instagram stories utilizing both the polling feature (yes and no questions) and the question submission feature (a space for users to submit personalized responses to an open-ended question). The survey itself was 11 questions long, with 8 yes/no questions and 3 open-ended questions. Data was collected through the app and analyzed internally using Instagram analytics.

Procedure

The participants were informed the day before that there would be a series of research questions being posted the following day. I asked that if they chose to participate, that they follow through on all 11 questions to keep the data consistent. When the series went live, users interacted directly with the questions to select and submit answers. Some yes/no questions were followed up by an open-ended question in case the user wanted to expand on their previous response. For example, the question, “Do you ever practice religion through an online/virtual space?” was followed up by, “If so, which ones?”.

Results

My survey included questions about religious practices, media use, and eating history. I found that there was a significant relationship between engaging in disordered eating and participation in religious fasting practices. 78% of participants reported to have engaged in disordered eating.

The question that followed asked about participation in periods of fasting/restriction for religious reasons. Here 82% of participants noted they did not. Similarly, 64% of participants indicated that they spend 3 or more hours a day on social media, watching TV, reading magazines, or looking at advertisements. The follow-up question to this asked if users find themselves comparing their eating habits to those on social media/other media. 88% indicated yes.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore how religious fasting rituals play out in a society that is visually dominant, and therefore influencing a growing number of eating disorders. Initially I had formed a hypothesis that for those with a history of disordered eating, times of religious fasting would trigger negative effects such as anxiety, poor health choices, and unbearable pressure to conform. A second hypothesis I sought to explore through this survey was that the more exposure one had to media, the more likely they were to struggle with issues related to eating and physical appearances.

Being that the second hypothesis feeds into the main hypothesis, it is important to analyze the responses gathered in regard to media exposure. At the end of the survey, the following prompt was presented: “If you have any other insights, commentary, or opinions to share regarding religious fasting, media exposure, and eating disorders, please share here!”. Participants who contributed responses expressed the pressure media have had in their lives. Examples of responses include, “I feel that my ed [eating disorder] started 100% because of social media”, and “I had severe anorexia through high school that was influenced by media”. Another participant noted that they found themselves comparing directly to media images,

sharing, “I have been limiting my social media and don’t watch reality tv anymore to stop comparing”. These comments reflect media exposure as a driving factor in disordered eating.

One participant went into detail about fad diet praising via social media accounts, reflecting, “My disordered eating came from practicing intermittent fasting praised on social media”. Being that social media platforms, such as Instagram, allow users to be both producers and consumers, any user can post their thoughts on a topic without having to be properly educated in that subject area. The publishing of information is not regulated. As a result, regardless of a user’s credentials, they have the ability to push content about serious health-related topics. One of the most popular? Diet culture. Using social media as a source of medical information is a relatively new concept made possible by a media-dependent society.

Moving on to the religious aspect of this study, many participants expressed how personal experience with disordered eating has influenced their perception of the ritual. It appears that in cases of eating disorders, sufferers have found that actually eating, not fasting, allows them to accomplish the spiritual and restorative goals of the practice. They are able to find alternative outlets for filling the spiritual void that religious fasting calls for. As an example, instead of fasting, some users reported that actually eating and nourishing their bodies was a spiritual act because it required them to put their personal desires second. Historically speaking, this is virtually unheard of. Asceticism has always been closely associated with food and water restriction in the name of religious dedication. At the time, fasting from these two human needs appeared to be the only way to prove this devotion. Today there is more flexibility in terms of how religious followers choose to express their dedication through challenging themselves in subjective ways. Depending on the individual, it may be more powerful to face a food fear and

feed the body rather than deprive it. Most reflective of this analysis was the response, “My faith reminds me that my body is a temple and encourages me to take care of it”. In the case of eating disorders, this care translates to eating and nourishment. Sometimes, the act of eating (or lack thereof) was replaced entirely by another act. For example, “I don’t really fast anymore because its too triggering. So instead, I fast social media etc”. The choice to abstain from a self-indulging practice is still present, yet the means of doing so are altered to accommodate one’s health.

In some cases, fasting rituals are directly avoided because the participant would not be gaining from the practice, only hurting themselves instead. One respondent shared, “I choose not to fast bc w my history I know it’s not good for me. It would defy the point”. If the point of fasting rituals is to better oneself, then this course of action is justified. Another participant explains, “So I’m catholic and you’re supposed to fast on certain days but I don’t participate bc it doesn’t align w my beliefs on how I treat my body and I don’t want to be fasting for the wrong reasons”. Related is the response, “I feel as though God would not want me to participate in activity that would be self-harm”. For those dealing with an eating disorder, periods of fasting can trigger thoughts of prolonged starvation and bodily harm. This last quote shows how perceptions of fasting vary based on one’s personal experiences. For the average person, fasting is likely not an act of self-harm, but for this individual, it could play end poorly.

In more serious cases, the decision to not fast is made by religious leaders. I found stories along these lines particularly fascinating. Initially I had anticipated that religious authorities would consistently side with their respective cannons upon providing guidance through fasting rituals. However, I was pleasantly surprised to learn of leaders who believed that the way in which one achieves the intentions of a fast is subjective. Users reported interactions

with progressive leaders and professionals who took mental and physical health into account. Stories that support this conclusion include, “I am currently in an Ed (anorexia) and have been excused from lent fasting”, and “...most if not all of my rabbis have said I’m exempt from fasting…”. One woman of Hindu background detailed how her specific situation called for alternative means of expressing discipline, a highly respected aspect in the Hinduism. “...I had to work with my therapist on, for me, eating ‘normally’ 3 meals is the real way to show God I am actually disciplined because it is so much harder to actually eat 3 meals a day mindfully than it is to either fast/restrict…”.

Others confessed similar thoughts regarding motivation for fasting, including, “My faith is something that helps me take care of my body, but I used it as an excuse to lose weight”. Along these lines, participants noted, “Sooo many people use lent as an excuse to fad diet (whole 30, sugar-free, etc)”, and “I know a ton of people who give up a food they love for Lent with an intent to lose weight”. Again we see a blurring of motivations, the line between what is being done for religious sake and what is being done out of media pressure as growing more narrow.

While it was reassuring to learn of sufferers who took charge of their situation and opted out of the fast, the majority of responses detailed a heightened discomfort surrounding these rituals. Speaking to the purposes of Lent, one respondent revealed, “I know some people do it [Lent] as religious penance but I know I was secretly (and shamefully) doing it as an excuse for my disordered eating”. More explicitly, another expresses, “...my eating disorder actually began with lent, because I used ‘giving up something for lent’ as a gateway for giving up certain foods with the inner motive of losing weight/being healthier which spiraled into eventually orthorexia, and later, anorexia…”. As an extension, more responses elaborate, “I’d always give up all junk

food or all unhealthy food and loved having Lent as a reason…", and "it gives an 'excuse' to restrict when it's not good for my health". Clearly there is a complicated, and potentially toxic, relationship at play between modern day media, eating behaviors, and religious fasting rituals. It is becoming increasingly complicated to wholly separate disordered eating from religious fasting practices, as the latter provides an excuse for the former.

While this research is not conclusive, it provides first-hand insight into the complicated landscape of the topics central to this discussion. Media consumption, internalized beliefs of the self, eating behaviors, and religious endeavors are deeply subjective experiences that are best understood through qualitative data. I am fortunate to have access to a large population that fall in line with the media consumption and eating behavior elements of this research. I believe that providing participants with a safe, comfortable means of expressing their experiences resulted in eye-opening data and analysis.

Religious fasting rituals are an ancient ritual that once communicated values of selflessness, heroism, and salvation. While the practices have stayed consistent, the ways in which they play out are contingent on the society that employs them. Modern day media has triggered an unfortunate rise in disordered eating. When this observation is paired with religious fasting rituals, motivations for participation become unclear, and in some cases, harmful. From this research we have learned of this reality, but we have also learned that there are alternative means of attaining the spirituality that these practices strive to accomplish. It appears that there is a growing progressive move toward subjective religion, meaning that the way in which a follower exemplifies their religious devotion through self-sacrifice is dependent on their own

personal journey. In conclusion, more research is needed in order to develop resources for those struggling with the issues discussed in this paper.

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