

## DEMOGRAPHY

# SOCIAL FACTORS IN THE FORMATION OF EATING DISORDERS: EXPERIENCE OF SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

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### ABSTRACT

**Background.** The increasingly complex structure of modern society and systemic changes associated with the processes of digitalization and mediatization are raising the issue of preserving the health of the younger generation, which is the most receptive and vulnerable group to external impact.

**The aim of the study.** Based on survey data, to carry out an analysis of social factors influencing the development of eating disorders in girls.

**Materials and methods.** The method of collecting information was an online survey of girls aged 18 to 25 years old, conducted in Yekaterinburg in the spring of 2023 ( $n = 205$ ). Using in-depth interviews, 8 girls were interviewed to clarify the social factors in the formation of eating disorders.

**Results.** In girls' assessments, distorted body image, fear of weight gain, and orthorexia are the signs of eating disorders. Social factors influencing the formation of an ideal body image and eating disorders are social media, circle of contacts, as well as the external environment, which causes psychological and physical stress. Despite the negative perception of the content of communities promoting anorexic bodies, girls are well aware of the published materials. The main tool for achieving the standard model of a girl's physicality is dietary practices, food restrictions and calorie counting, despite the recognition of the negative consequences of their use.

**Conclusion.** Eating behavior for girls is one of the leading tools for achieving an ideal body, ideas about which are formed today by social media, as well as the immediate social environment, including the opposite sex. Communities on social networks can serve as a source for development of deviant eating attitudes, on the one hand, and a real driving force in providing assistance and support to young people with signs of eating disorders, on the other hand. We believe that online consultations with specialists and the development of a parental culture of health protection can have a significant impact on the development of harmonious, health-protecting eating habits.

**Key words:** eating behavior, eating disorders, social factors, social media, circle of contacts, ideal female body, youth

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## СОЦИАЛЬНЫЕ ФАКТОРЫ ФОРМИРОВАНИЯ ПИЩЕВЫХ РАССТРОЙСТВ: ОПЫТ СОЦИОЛОГИЧЕСКОГО ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

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### РЕЗЮМЕ

**Обоснование.** Усложняющаяся структура современного общества и системные изменения, связанные с процессами цифровизации и медиатизации, актуализируют вопрос о здоровьесбережении молодого поколения, которое является наиболее восприимчивой и уязвимой к воздействиям внешней среды группой.

**Цель исследования.** На основе опросных данных осуществить анализ социальных факторов, влияющих на формирование у девушек расстройств пищевого поведения.

**Материалы и методы.** Методом сбора информации стал онлайн-опрос девушек от 18 до 25 лет, проведённый в Екатеринбурге весной 2023 г. (n = 205). С использованием глубинных интервью было опрошено 8 девушек для уточнения социальных факторов формирования отклонений в пищевом поведении.

**Результаты.** В оценках девушек искажённое восприятие тела, страх набора веса, а также орторексия являются признаками пищевых расстройств. Социальными факторами, влияющими на формирование идеального образа тела и расстройств пищевого поведения, выступают социальные медиа, контактный круг, а также внешняя среда, которая вызывает психологическое и физическое напряжение. Несмотря на негативное восприятие контента сообществ, пропагандирующих анорексичное тело, девушки прекрасно осведомлены о публикуемых материалах. Основным инструментом достижения эталонного образца телесности девушки выступают диетарные практики, ограничения в еде и подсчёт калорий, несмотря на признание негативных последствий их использования.

**Заключение.** Пищевое поведение для девушек выступает одним из ведущих инструментов достижения идеального тела, представления о котором формируют сегодня социальные медиа, а также ближайшее социальное окружение, в том числе противоположного пола. Сообщества в социальных сетях могут служить источником становления девиантных пищевых установок, с одной стороны, и реальной движущей силой в оказании помощи и поддержки молодёжи с признаками расстройства пищевого поведения – с другой. Полагаем, что онлайн-консультации специалистов и развитие родительской культуры здоровьесбережения могут оказать значительное влияние на становление гармоничных здоровьес развивающих пищевых привычек.

**Ключевые слова:** пищевое поведение, расстройства пищевого поведения, социальные факторы, социальные медиа, контактный круг, идеальное женское тело, молодёжь

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## INTRODUCTION

Eating disorders are a serious and intractable problem in modern health care systems. According to J.F. López-Gil et al. the overall proportion of children and adolescents with eating disorders is 22.36 %, with girls significantly more likely to report eating disorders than boys [1].

Eating disorders (EDs) refers to a disorder of eating, expressed as a lack of ability to control timely and correct intake [2]. The main types of eating disorders include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and compulsive overeating [3], which often lead to secondary comorbidities. The main factors in the formation of anorexia nervosa are distorted perception of one's body and false interpretation of others' attitudes – dysmorphophobia [4], which develops in adolescence, and most often in girls [5]. Patients with anorexia and bulimia have depressive episodes [6], and the course of the diseases is long-standing/chronic with possible remissions [7]. Regarding compulsive overeating, excessive food intake is associated with the desire to reduce emotional stress [8].

Acting as one of the complex biopsychosocial phenomena of human life, the formation of routinised everyday practices of eating behaviour originates from an early age and is influenced by a wide range of institutions and agents. In particular, parents – agents of primary socialisation – have a great influence in forming children's food habits both through their own food attitudes and through control over the child's diet, which is implemented from the position of restricting "unhealthy food" in general and forcing to use exclusively healthy foods [9]. This can form the attitude of eating "in reserve" in the absence of feeling hungry. Peers included in the contact circle also exert pressure: ridicule from peers causes dissatisfaction with the body and the desire to change it by restricting food intake [10].

In the process of socialisation, eating behaviour becomes a tool for implementing a variety of functions, acquiring sign-symbolic properties. In essence, eating behaviour marks the social position of an individual and becomes a reflection of his or her style and lifestyle, in which orientation to standardised beauty standards is not the least important. German researcher T. Fuchs states that a person who tries to get in shape to meet modern standards has a disturbed body image, experiences increased anxiety and shame [11].

Modern media actively broadcast ideal body images. Researchers have revealed that an increase in eating disorders is associated with women's weight loss in movies and magazines [12]: women in TV shows and movies between the ages of 21 and 39 are more likely to be portrayed as thin and wearing revealing clothing than women of other ages, and female characters with larger and heavier bodies are virtually absent from the screen in family films on prime-time television [13]. Digital Influencers [14], which establish models of the ideal body

(using special tools (retouching, filters, etc.)), creating standards and proposing mechanisms for its construction, including through dietary practices, are becoming increasingly important for the young generation.

## THE AIM OF THE STUDY

To reveal social factors influencing the formation of eating disorders in girls on the basis of survey materials.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The sociological study was conducted in the spring of 2023 in the city of Yekaterinburg. Using an online survey, a questionnaire was conducted with 205 girls aged 18 to 25: 49.8 % of the respondents had higher education; 2/3 of the girls said that at the time of the survey they were in a romantic relationship with the opposite sex, and 8 % had already married. We emphasize that 39 respondents with a confirmed diagnosis from the eating disorder spectrum participated in the survey. The remaining girls confirmed some difficulties in the practices of implementing healthy/harmonious/adequate eating behaviors to the screening question of the questionnaire. The author's questionnaire contained 45 questions (closed, open, semi-closed). The obtained materials were processed using the Vortex program (Shkurin D.V.). To deepen the data obtained, we also conducted 8 in-depth interviews with girls (Table 1), the materials of which were transcribed and summarized in accordance with the research objectives.

The study was of a pilot nature and its results cannot be extended to the entire population of Russian girls, but they demonstrate problem areas in the development of young women's eating behaviour and reveal the social factors that influence the formation of deviations in eating behaviour. The authors aim to draw the attention of practitioners and managers to current issues in the field of health care for the younger generation in general and reproductive health of the female community in particular.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study reveal that the signs of eating disorders, as assessed by the girls, are, first of all, distorted perception of their bodies, fear of gaining weight and orthorexia, i.e. division of foods into "healthy" and "harmful" (table 2).

The ideal body model is interpreted by the respondents in a very wide range: from "hourglass" (25.7 percent) to anorexic physique (24.9 per cent), with 68.3 per cent of the surveyed girls striving to meet the latter standard. The results of in-depth interviews also testify to the expansion of the boundaries of body standards: «*In fact, now, as I think, the standards are becoming more*

**TABLE 1****TRANSCRIBED AND SUMMARIZED DATA FROM IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH GIRLS**

The informant's code	Age	Category
I1	23	Employed
I2	22	Student
I3	22	Student
I4	23	Employed
I5	23	Employed
I6	24	Employed, on maternity leave
I7	24	Employed
I8	23	Employed

and more "blurred" [I2]; «Now skinnies, heroin chic, thinness is coming back into fashion again» [I5]; «There are always a lot of complaints about girls. Something that will probably never go out of style is thinness. A skinny body always looks more aesthetic» [I7]; «Well, skinny girls are always in fashion. An athletic body, too. What will always be in fashion is a slim waist, long legs, those golden 90-60-90» [I8].

According to studies, impaired body perceptions increase the risk of developing eating disorders [15]. Among the main daily practices aimed at matching one's own body to ideal standards, eating behaviour takes the lead. Specifically, 29.2 per cent of those surveyed plan to limit their food intake, and 40.7 per cent of them have used diets and calorie counting. M. Foucault believed that in any society the human body is subjected to the discipline of obedience and certain manipulations [16]. Concurrently, according to the girls questioned, food restrictive disciplinary practices aimed at developing an ideal body image lead to negative consequences for both physical and mental health (84.1 per cent). The most common are breakdowns after diets, fear of weight gain, obsessive thoughts about food, and deterioration in mental health (Figure 1).

In our questionnaire, we asked female respondents to assess the factors that influence perceptions of the ideal body and patterns of eating behaviour as a tool for achieving conformity to reference body image patterns. According to the respondents, the sources of stereotypes about the ideal female body are primarily social media: accounts of media personalities in social networks (24.3 %), as well as visual materials (photos/videos) posted in communities (19.8 %). According to the data obtained during the interviews, various body images circulate in the Internet space, which for young people become standards: «It's definitely social networks in the first place» [I1]; «...groups in VK (VKontakte)...» [I5]; «...the Internet, ... fitness bunnies, models, bloggers» [I7]. Social media today is the most powerful conveyor belt

of production and reproduction of appearance culture, including the tyranny of slenderness (in the rhetoric of I.V. Sokhan [17]), the perception of the body as a project and gender stereotypical body ideals. According to informants' estimates, «overweight girls are not considered acceptable, let alone girls and women, for example, with a size 50+» [I4], since «there is an ideal available in the Internet, and if you do not correspond to it, you are something «not like that», i.e. immediately there is judgement, and you have to "adjust" yourself to the standards» [I3], as «there is a feeling of unworthiness, we become dissatisfied with our body and face, which causes ED» [I5].

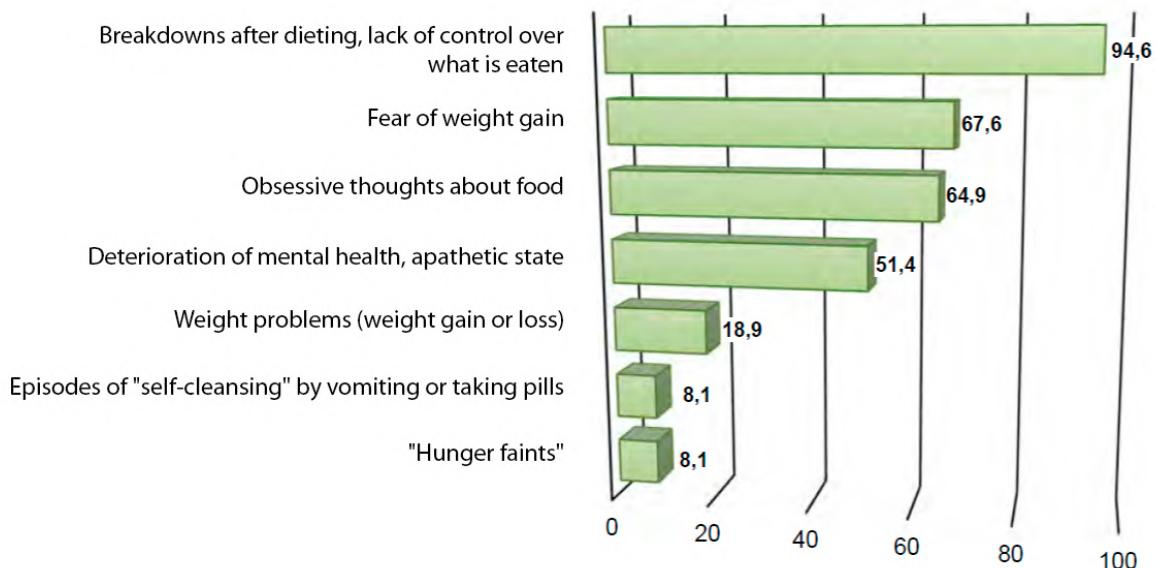
The specificity of modern media is that individuals not only act as consumers of content, but also produce social reality by participating in discussions, reposts, and copywriting. Girls (89.8 %) surveyed confirmed that they are/were subscribed to communities in the social network VK (VKontakte), the main topics of which are unhealthy weight loss («40 kg», «Typical anorexic», «Fat logic», «Psychology of anorexia», «Fat anorexic»). At the same time, 78.8 % of respondents answered that they have a negative attitude towards them.

The interview texts also include recognition of the content offered by community members and negative attitudes towards them: «I am familiar with the 40 kg community, all my friends used to subscribe to it. I sometimes went there, just to look, but I was not subscribed» [I2]; «I have never been a member myself, but I have a lot of girls I know who have «stayed» there and from whom I have heard stories about these groups. Well, maybe a couple of times I went there just for the sake of interest» [I6]; «I have a negative attitude towards such communities, because they promote unhealthy thinness, which can be very harmful to the body. ...Especially now ED is very popular among teenagers» [I4]; «they form the wrong type of figure..., ...ambassadors of thinness..., ...of course, this is in the mind of a child or teenager. And if you don't look like that, then you spend the rest of your life thinking that something is wrong with you» [I5]; «it seems to me

**TABLE 2****SIGNS OF EATING DISORDERS EXPERIENCED BY FEMALE RESPONDENTS (% OF RESPONDENTS) \***

Indicators	%
Distorted body perception (e.g. you feel/feel some part of your body is too fat, you think/think that losing weight will get rid of your problems).	92.7
Fear of weight gain	81.0
Dividing foods into «healthy» and «unhealthy» (orthorexia)	80.5
Stress-induced snacking episodes	52.2
Resorting to diets, starvation, exercise to burn calories	47.3
Obsessive thoughts about food, diets, calories, exercise	42.4
Calorie counting, strict food restrictions	41.5
Guilt over what you ate, punishing yourself.	41.5
Continuous weighing	28.8
Lack of control (eating large amounts of food in a short period of time)	27.3
Resorting to cleansing the stomach after eating with vomit or pills	25.4
The shame of eating in public	24.4
Following certain eating rituals (eating/ate when standing up, planning/planned your breakdown or overeating, sorting/sorted food by colour, not eating/didn't eat a certain food if you don't know/didn't know how many calories it has)	17.6
Constant cravings for certain foods, such as chocolate, fast food, etc.	17.1
Weight problems (your weight fluctuates/was fluctuating due to dieting; weight is lower than normal, but you continue/continued to lose weight)	15.1
Fear or refusal of meetings as there may be «unhealthy» food, etc.	13.2
No sense of satiety or hunger	7.8

**Note.** \* – the sum of answers exceeds 100 %, because the respondents were given an opportunity to choose several answer options.

**FIG. 1.**

Consequences of restricting eating behaviour in order to achieve an ideal body model (% of respondents): the sum of responses exceeds 100 % because respondents were given the opportunity to choose more than one answer option

that it only makes things worse and provokes the disease even more; especially since it is as if they romanticise it all, present it as something good, although there is total propaganda of ED» [18]; «terrible communities, which should be banned, cause enormous harm to adolescent girls and young girls» [13]; «such communities only exacerbate the problem..... like the crab in a bucket effect, when one wants to get out, others climb on top of him, and in the end no one gets out. ...In general, such groups should be banned, because it is very addictive» [16].

Such communities often publish photos of girls who are emaciated, extremely thin, with imbalanced proportions. Every third girl noted that she saw such photos quite often, and 30.2 % answered that they observed these photos every time they visited the community page.

We turned to the emotions that emerge in respondents when viewing such photos (Table 3). J. Berger and K.L. Milkman found that people are more likely to convey emotionally charged information that elicited either a very positive response or a very negative response [18]. The most common emotions experienced when viewing such content are sadness, outrage, aggression and nervousness.

Turning to the content published in communities about ED, the girls interviewed noted that they most often encountered photos of girls asking for feedback on their figure, encouraging weight loss and avoidance of food, and suggesting diet plans (Figure 2).

The influence of materials published in the communities was also confirmed by the interviewees: «diseases are romanticised there: everyone who "sits" there only adds oil to the fire. You see these dead girls with thin legs and arms every day, it makes you feel bad because you want the same thing, but you can't do it. And it makes you hate

yourself even more» [11]; «full romanticisation of diseases, some jokes about ED, although not a funny topic at all. They post pictures of anorexic women and take it as an ideal figure, it's horrible» [13]; «broadcasting a deliberately false image of the "correctness" of the figure or nutrition, it can destroy the psyche of a person in general» [17]; «people decide for themselves whether to "sit" there or not. But personally, I don't understand it. I think it just makes it worse

TABLE 3

EMOTIONS EXPERIENCED WHEN SEEING PICTURES OF GIRLS WITH UNHEALTHY THINNESS\*

Emotions	Index	Rank
Sadness	2.9945	I
Exasperation	2.6593	II
Aggression	2.2418	III
Nervousness	2.1703	IV
Disgust	1.8791	V
Inspiration	1.5549	VI
Superiority complex	1.5495	VII
Envy	1.4121	VIII
Delight	1.3297	IX

**Note.** \* – respondents' evaluations were made on a 5-point scale, where 1 – never experienced an emotion; 5 – always experienced an emotion. The index is calculated in the range from 1 to 5. The higher the index value, the more often the girl experienced the emotion.

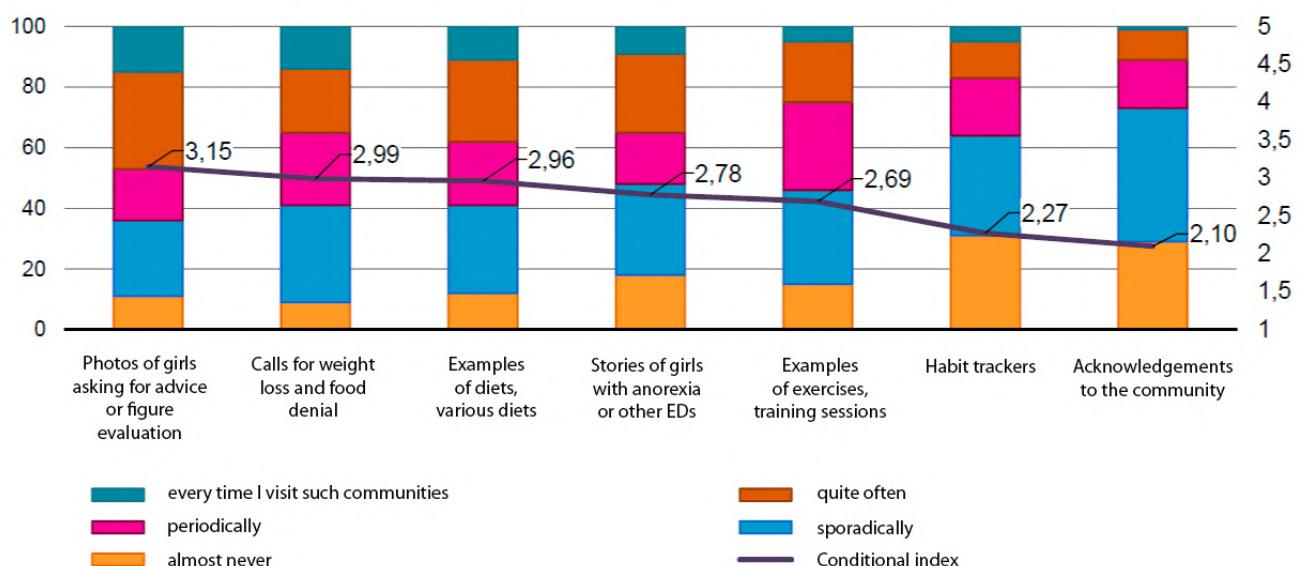


FIG. 2.

Frequency and focus of content viewed in communities with unhealthy weight loss topics: the index was calculated in the range from 1 to 5; the higher the index value, the more often the girl encountered relevant content in the community

*and provokes the disease even more.» [I8]. We consider it important to emphasise that despite the negative attitude in general towards communities promoting unhealthy thinness, the interviewed girls are, nevertheless, well aware of the materials posted, which form an attitude towards the anorexic body as an ideal model and the practice of dietary restriction/refusal to eat as an effective tool for achieving the standard.*

Another factor that has a significant influence as to the formation of girls' perceptions of their ideal body image and their eating behaviour is their immediate environment: classmates/groupmates (29.6 %), girlfriends/friends (12.7 %) and parental family (12.5 %). The interview participants confirmed the significant role of contact groups in the process of formation of ideas about the standard of corporeality: «...not imposed, but as if it is unconsciously being digested by the brain. From some conversations in the environment, that is, nobody directly says that a woman should be so-and-so, although they constantly discuss full girls» [I4]. Informants attributed a special influence to boys/youth/men's assessment of ideal female bodies: «At school they laughed at overweight girls, friends, especially boys...» [I4], «...bullying at school, society's stereotypes, the opinion of some left-wing guys who say that "a woman should be this and that"» [I1]; «...some men think it is their duty to write some girl a bad word about her figure» [I3]; «people can bully for being overweight, especially men, because a woman should always be perfect, and a man is a little prettier than a monkey» [I7]. Male chauvinism becomes a significant factor in the formation of deviant eating behaviors. According to our online survey, 18.5 % of girls believe that a stereotype circulates in public opinion that when eating out, girls' portions should be small («a girl should eat little»), and each third shares the stereotype that it is necessary to give up eating out in favour of weight loss («to lose weight, all you have to do is stop eating»).

The parental family also acts as an important agent in shaping the eating habits of the younger generation. In the gastronomic culture of some families, for example, one can observe the fascination of female mothers with dietary practices that are carried out without medical supervision. By forcing a child to finish a meal, parents encourage them to be guided not by how they feel, but by factors such as approval or permission to finish eating/leave the table. In our study, we invited girls to identify food attitudes formed in childhood that have a negative impact on overall health. Materials of the online survey reveal that the most widespread are such attitudes as rewarding with a sweet dessert after a full meal («you will get a chocolate bar only after you have eaten porridge») (65.9 %); watching TV or content on a laptop/tablet/phone during a meal (51.7 %); delaying a meal if one of the family members is late (20 %); finishing a meal only after all family members have eaten (18.5 %).

The materials of in-depth interviews also testify to the significant role of the parental family: «personally, my mother and grandmother had a great influence on me: they made me always finish eating, even if I had already

*had enough, now it is as if I have no sense of satiety, I can eat endlessly» [I4]; «...family attitudes: when, for example, they forbid sweets, I want to eat them even more...» [I3]; «and «Sovietesque» [«Sovietesque» – related to, correlated with Soviet (in the sense of «Soviet man», «Soviet power», «Soviet system»)] attitudes that parents can instil: «you will not leave the table until you eat everything», «I will give you a candy only after soup», and so on. And my grandmother always said: «why are you so thin, eat up!» [I7].*

In the course of in-depth interviews, girls paid attention to the fact that external influences can cause psychological and physical tension (stress/anxiety), the way out of which becomes an eating disorder: «... constant stress, against the background of which eating of emotions appears... Because of school, some academic failures, because of failed relationships, because of family quarrels... Food for ED women is like a cure for all diseases» [I1]; «food is perceived as a sedative» [I3]; «it may be associated to chronic stress, when a person cannot cope with it, and ED may develop. After all, food is dopamine, and a person tries to drown out stress with this dopamine» [I4]; «... stress in various situations, which induces to eat emotions, or on the contrary - to refuse to eat» [I6]; «I think this disease (ED) "comes out" against the background of stress. I've heard this theory that when a person can't control something in his life, he starts to control himself, his food, his body... the focus shifts» [I8]. The questionnaire also revealed that 46.8 % of girls "escape" from stress by eating more food, and 44.4 %, on the contrary, eat less, up to complete refusal to eat. In addition, the findings revealed that girls who experience stress almost every day have a confirmed diagnosis from the eating disorder spectrum (31 %). The data demonstrate that the external environment influences the mental and physical state of the body, shaping deviations in food intake practices and creating conditions for risky eating behavior.

## CONCLUSION

The results of the conducted study led to the following conclusions. Distorted body perception, fear of gaining weight, and orthorexia are the most common signs of eating disorders, according to girls. At the same time, the key social factors influencing their formation are stereotypes about the ideal model of the female body, as well as the close contact circle, including relatives and friends/acquaintances. In the era of digitalisation, social media, including social networks, have a special influence upon perceptions of beauty standards and ways of achieving it. The study results reveal that girls have a negative attitude towards them, but are nevertheless involved in interacting and production of content. To meet the standard, the interviewed girls use dieting practices, food restriction and calorie counting, with a significant proportion of respondents recognising their negative consequences (breakdowns after diets, fear of gaining weight again, obsessive thoughts about food, deterioration of mental health).

The body today becomes a construct embedded in the socio-cultural space [19], which leads to the emergence of a certain discourse: ideal body – eating behavior. Social media has the potential to be a significant resource in representing a healthy body and demonstrating healthy eating behaviours. We assume that positive effects may be observed with the widespread replication of eating disorder recovery communities and social media groups, where real people share their stories of «battles» with eating disorders. The expert opinion of specialists in the field of treatment of this kind of disorders is also important, who will provide advice and support in a dialogue mode using social media. Special attention should be paid to the family institution, which also needs professional counselling aimed at establishing and developing a culture of eating behaviour in both the adult members of the family and the younger generation.

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### Conflict of interest

The authors declare the absence of apparent and potential conflicts of interest related to the publication of this article.

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