



SAVING CALORIES TO DRINK

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Eating Disorders, Gender, and Performance in College

A FRIEND ONCE SAID that eating disorders are easier for women because they just have to starve themselves, while men have to starve themselves and go to the gym. “Friend” is an overstatement, but the truth is that eating disorders and gender are undeniably connected.

Eating disorders are everywhere: lurking on plates still brimming with food at the end of the meal or scribbled shopping lists at the grocery store. They’re wrapping themselves around the cords of a bikini, the placement of a belt loop, the size of jeans. They pour out of your roommate’s drawers as you ask to borrow clothes you know will not fit. “When I struggle with food, it’s all I think about. It feels like an obsession and

it feels like an addiction once you start restricting,” said Ellen O’Connell Whittet, a continuing lecturer in the Writing Department and the College of Creative Studies, who had an eating disorder in her teens and early twenties.

Many college students are in charge of what they eat for the first time, and turning to food can feel like a way to control their chaotic lives. College-aged students are the highest risk age group for the onset of eating disorders, with numbers on the rise. In a survey conducted by Dr. Mary Pritchard, 100% of Boise State University students were unhappy with their physical appearance. The National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated

Disorders estimates 28.8 million Americans will have an eating disorder at some point in their lives, and between 2013 and 2021, eating disorders nearly doubled. Rates jumped by almost 20% for both men and women between 2018 and 2021.

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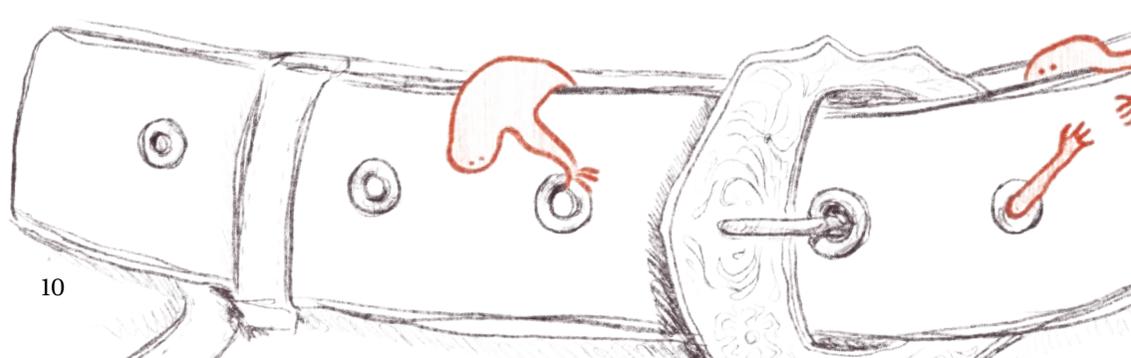
Getting dolled up for nights out on the town, we slip into miniskirts and bikini tops while men drag white tank tops or numbered jerseys over their heads. At night, when the social currency of gender becomes all the more valuable, we are encouraged to be exposed, reinforcing a binary division. “You’re exposed physically, which I mean both in the sense that you’re not wearing a lot of clothing, but also you’re exposed to everybody around you all the time,” Whittet said. Clothing decorates the body, and when the aesthetics of style are important, so is the canvas for it.

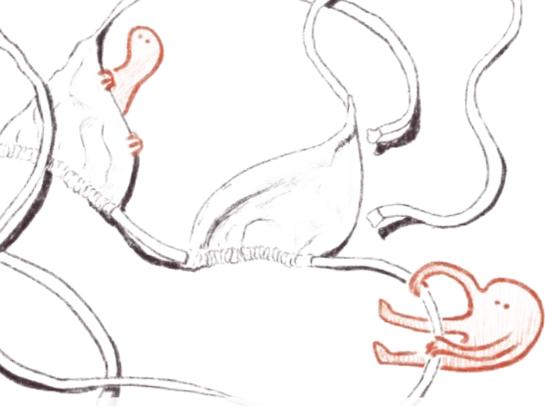
“A nourished body is not a feminine body, we often think,” Whittet said. While starvation is encouraged in feminine bodies, gym addictions and orthorexia (a type of eating disorder characterized by an obsession with healthy eating) are becoming the new norm, especially among men. “Men do not want to talk about body image,” said Health Educator Joanna Hill. “Men are less likely to be diagnosed. They are less likely to be asked about it, they are less likely to have any conversation about it,” she said.

Olivia Gravette, a second-year Psychological and Brain Sciences major and peer leader with UCSB’s The Body Project, sees her own eating disorder as inextricably attached to gender. “My relationship to gender has always been a little complicated. I identify as a lesbian, sometimes I say my gender is also a lesbian because they’re pretty interconnected,” she said. “At the time of my most recent eating disorder relapse, I think a big contributor to that was gender dysphoria, some kind of disconnect between my identity and gender presentation, how my body was appearing.”

In college, we try to communicate transitory versions of ourselves through flamboyant hair color, impulsive tattoos, the music we listen to, the clothes we wear, and, you guessed it, our body shape and size. Eating disorders embed themselves into our forming sense of identity. “It does get so tied into who you are, especially if you develop it in your teen years because you’re kind of growing up alongside your eating disorder,” Gravette said.

Eating disorders have a lot to do with image, making it nearly impossible to cultivate a real sense of self. “When my brain is stuck on food...I can’t write an essay. I can’t be a very good parent or friend or spouse,” Whittet said. But most of us are not trying to be good parents or spouses. We are trying to be the idealized college student: someone who slurps up instant ramen for dinner before hitting the town, or passes exams—just barely—while fighting a wicked hangover.





“You’re kind of growing up alongside your eating disorder.”



We become a character who relies on external validation and outward perceptions. The calories we save for drinking become a big part of our social image, and for those struggling with food and appearance, we care more about how we look than studying for our English midterm.

First-year Art major Delphi Davalos said that although she has mostly healed her relationship with food, the infamous hookup culture at UCSB can be a trigger. “It’s hard not to think about that, especially in college, having casual sex, you’re thinking about, what does my body look like on this day or that day?” Davalos said. Sex, love, and romance in the context of young adulthood can make disordered eating feel necessary.

Furthermore, eating disorders do not always look a certain way. “A lot of people go completely undiagnosed,” Gravette said. “People with bigger bodies are discredited even if they’re dealing with the same symptoms as someone smaller, people of color are less likely to get diagnosed even if they are exhibiting extreme symptoms.”

Systems of power perpetuate all eating disorders. Femininity is expected to make space for masculine dominance, praising the shrinking mindset of a restrictive eating disorder. Simultaneously, attempting to embody muscular power is a reason for the rising orthorexia

numbers in masculine bodies. “When we’re going out, I kind of think I need this male validation even though that is not something I value in my day-to-day life,” said Gravette. Even though she does not seek male validation romantically, something about the going-out culture in IV makes her crave it. “It’s almost like a compulsion to present a certain way when going out,” she said.

The addiction mentality of eating disorders is key to their persistence. “With eating disorders, you have to redefine a relationship in real time every day,” Hill said. But healing is an option even if it doesn’t feel like it at the moment. Recovery is an active, everyday choice for most of those on the other side of their eating disorder. “I don’t know that I’ll ever have food freedom. I kind of don’t know what that means,” Whittet said. But every day, she works to see food as a means of connection, as complicated and beautiful.

Food has the capacity to be so many things; family recipes can remind us of those no longer here, and a first-date restaurant can become an anniversary tradition. We just have to dig all that up from underneath calorie counters and protein powder scoops. Unbraiding the systems that try to shape us emotionally and physically is an everyday practice. Eating disorders in this area are a prevalent issue, and if you are reading this and need some support, look into The Body Project, make an appointment with CAPS, or reach out to a friend. Recovery is always an option, even when it feels like it is not. 

