



Research Brief

with Luke Reaper

# DARK SIDE OF HEALTH

LUKE REAPER ON ORTHOREXIA - THE GROWING FIXATION WITH EATING HEALTHILY

We in Ireland are a nation that is becoming obsessed with health. Orthorexia nervosa or orthorexia is an unhealthy fixation on eating healthily. The term was coined by a US doctor, Steven Bratman, following his own obsessive illness. So by Googling 'orthorexia', one can learn all about Dr Bratman. While 'orthorexia' is not an official term yet – watch this space.

The recent B&A Health & Diet study identified that 59 per cent of Irish people are now interested in information about diet and health, while 82 per cent of us now feel confident about which foods are healthy and unhealthy. A deluge of programmes, blogs and social media are bombarding us with the latest 'advice' for healthy eating.

We are constantly being told to cut out carbs, drop sugar, go gluten-free, dairy-free, wheat-free, eat paleo or only raw foods. But taking the rules too far could lead to an unhealthy fixation with healthy eating. Not only does this fixation impact us physically due to restrictive diets impacting our nutritional intake, but it also impacts people's mental health.

Of course, we have health issues in Ireland. One is obesity, which is well documented, with 37 per cent of Irish adults overweight, and 24 per cent obese (Sources: NANS, 2011; GUI Study, 2011), with forecasts indicating increasing obesity levels likely. But we must be conscious of the possible damage of the narrative driving young people in the other direction.

It is clear that females, the middle classes, millennials and Dubliners have a fascination or obsession with information about their health and diets. For two out of three people, getting healthy and staying healthy is one the top priorities. Indeed 54 per cent of us agree that we try and keep up with the latest thinking on diet and nutrition (62 per cent females). However, three in four of us recognise that there is an industry built around our obsession with health.

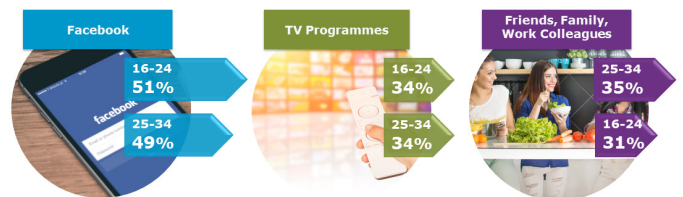
One third of us feel a lot of pressure to look our best, it rises to half of 16-24s, and is most prevalent among women. The visualisation of the perfect body – often on social media – serves to inspire. But is it healthy to be focused on 'before and after pictures' (52 per cent of females)? The visual obsession in a digitalised world is a worry. Almost twice as many women (54 per cent) as men, love reading about people's body transformation journeys.

To address this diet and health obsession, we need to address the source of information which is feeding this frenzy. While TV shows dominate as a source of information for diet

## However, Facebook dominates for 16-34s as a source of information on diet and health

Base: All Adults aged 16+: 821

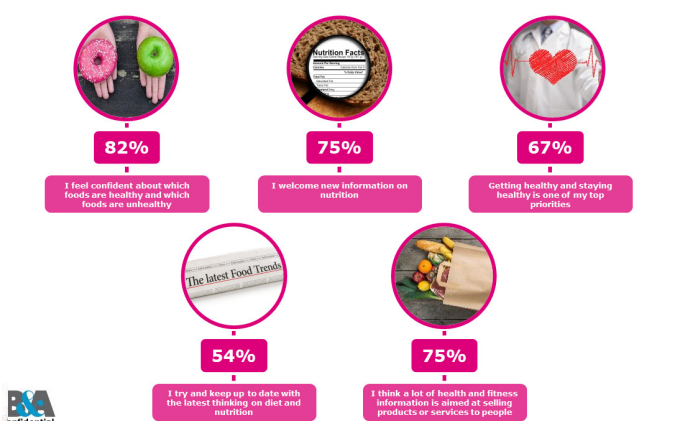
i.e. Millennials and Generation Z



Q.3 Where did you come across this information last?  
Q.4 Where have you come across this information at all?

## Attitudes towards Food, Health & Diet

Base: All ever come across any info on diet health/nutrition: 767



and health, Facebook is number two among the total population aged 16 or over. But for millennials and Generation Z (basically 16-34s) Facebook dominates as the main source.

Despite Facebook's prominence, TV shows are trusted three times more than Facebook as a source of information on diet and health. Social media (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) come bottom on trust, with the medical profession and nutritionists emerging as the most trusted. Even for Gen Z and millennials there is more distrust than trust of social media.

Regardless of this, almost 40 per cent of 16-34 year olds admit they are strongly influenced by what today's celebrities like Roz Purcell and Pippa O'Connor Ormond they follow say about their diet and health. Thus, while we might distrust social media on this area, we acknowledge that it is a key source of our information and is worryingly inspiring.

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