

MEDIA, FAMILY, AND PEER INFLUENCE ON CHILDREN'S BODY IMAGE

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## CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

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Research indicates that sociocultural factors such as media, family and peer influence children in developing body dissatisfaction (Davidson et al., 2000; Smolak, 2004). Some research suggests the girls as young as 5 years old begin to express dissatisfaction with their bodies. As for boys they express body dissatisfaction not until their teenage years, where masculinity and peer pressure play a large role in their lives (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). Due to the severity of negative consequences on body image it is essential to research and investigate further on media, family, and peers influence on children's obsession with body perfection.

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## Introduction

With the rapid increase rates of body dissatisfaction and unrealistic beauty ideals, today's society has created a negative influence on body image (Anschutz, Engles, Van Leeuwe & Strien, 2009). This negative body image contributes to different psychological and physical consequences such as dieting, obesity, anorexia, bulimia, and other extreme measures of weight and appearance control (Clark & Tiggermann 2006). The issue of body image is mostly acute for adolescents whose pubertal development results in physical changes. Further, at this age, adolescents start experiencing romantic relationships that promote precise attention to their body image and weight status. As a result, a large percentage of girls (up to 90%) and boys (up to 75%) experience body dissatisfaction (Markey, & Markey, 2010, p.311-312).

In this article, the influence of the media, family relationships, and peers on the socialization of children will be discussed in detail. Children are bombarded by constant exposure to the media, through television, magazines, movies and the internet (Banet-Weiser 2004). Television, cinema, radio, the internet, and print media affect young people's understanding of their own bodies and the standards they should try to achieve in terms of physical beauty. The media portrays some human features to be of value as compared to others, and increased body awareness among children is a contemporary phenomenon that has sparked the interest of many researchers (Anschutz,Engels, Van Leeuwe, Strien 2009).

Additional studies conducted about body image allow us to determine several factors that influence high rates of body dissatisfaction among adolescents (Clark &

Tiggemann 2006). Family relationships play a considerable role in a person's development and perception of body image. From a study conducted by Dohnt and Tiggemann in 2006, it is clear that parents play a key role in influencing their children's body image. Parental encouragement of activities aimed at losing weight and keeping to a diet are likely to provoke body dissatisfaction among their children (McCabe & Ricciardelli 2003b).

In addition, peer communication contributes to shaping adolescents' feelings and perception of their bodies. Regular peer interactions dedicated to the issues of beauty and appearance leads to the development of unwanted human behavior, which may lead to body dissatisfaction (Clark & Tiggemann 2006). Therefore, the present paper will focus on investigating the extent to which various socializing agents including the media, the family, and peers influences children's and adolescents' body image.

## **Chapter One:**

### ***Defining Body Image and Prevalence Rates***

According to Slade (1988, p 21), 'body image' is defined as "one's subjective attitude toward one's own physical appearance. It can include both one's own mental images or perceptions of his or her body as well as the feelings one has toward his or her body." In addition, Northup and colleagues (2012) define body image as, "the way you see your self, what you believe about your appearance and not how others see you."

The high prevalence of body image dissatisfaction warrants research examining its causes. In one recent study, 28.8% of those between fifteen and nineteen years of age, and 28.4% of children from eleven to fourteen years of age, are dissatisfied with their bodies. The same scholarly sources indicate that even higher rates of dissatisfaction are encountered among their peers (Eagles 2011, p.135) Even further, children as young as five years old are concerned about their weight, and many girls by the age of nine display signs of body image dissatisfaction and problematic eating behaviors (Davison, Markey & Birch 2000). Young children seem to be aware of the thin ideal that exists in Western culture, and the influence of the media plays a crucial role in the development of this unrealistic standardization (Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010).

From the above research, it can be observed that due to media influences, children possess inaccurate perceptions of their bodies. For example, Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn 2010's study indicated that three out of four females believe they are overweight, while

only one out of four actually are. Media has promoted the beauty ideal that is hardly achievable for ordinary people (Vonderen & Kinnally 2012). Even further, the media has created several connotations regarding weight and beauty in children. “Good” characters in children’s videos are depicted as being beautiful, thin, kind, and successful, whereas “evil” characters are depicted as obese, cruel, and unattractive (Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010).

### ***Research on Children’s and Youth’s Body Image Dissatisfaction***

A strong relationship has been found between children’s body dissatisfaction, and the images in children’s literature. As mentioned previously, characters possessing positive behavioral traits such as kindness, success, and contentedness are frequently depicted as young, thin, and beautiful human beings. At the same time, the characters reflecting evil are illustrated as ugly, unattractive, and overweight (Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010). This research has been supported by a number of scholars in their examination of children’s animated movies. Thin characters are portrayed as being nice and kind, and they tend to prevail over the overweight characters, who are considered rude and aggressive (Northup & Liebler, 2010). Thus, the contemporary media identifies positive behavioral traits with pretty appearances and slim bodies. As a result, children start associating positive virtues with the possession of a slim, beautiful body based on the examples of characters they like and identify with in literature and movies. (Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010).

Older children also have a number of problems with the adequate assessment of their body image. Champion and Furnham (1999) investigated a number of earlier empirical works dedicated to understanding body dissatisfaction among adolescent girls.

They discovered that a significant amount of girls beginning at the age of nine believe they are overweight. In addition, Paxton, Wertheim, Gibbons, Szmukler, Hillier, and Petrovich (1991) conducted a survey of 221 male and 341 female high school students. Their assessment indicated that two thirds of both boys and girls placed value on body image and were greatly influenced by these concerns in their everyday behavior.

However, although boys believed that slenderness does not contribute to the attractiveness of one's appearance, girls advocated for the opposite idea. Moreover, 13% of girls admitted to engaging in at least one extreme behavior for weight loss per week (Paxton et al., 1991).

However, some scholars have discovered contrary evidence reflecting children's dissatisfaction with their bodies. Some children are dissatisfied with their bodies due to their thinness. In one study, researchers identified that 60% of five-year-old children want their bodies to be fatter and heavier than they perceive them to be (Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010). Most research has discovered that children begin to become dissatisfied with their bodies around age six. Hayes and Tantleff-Dunn (2010) explained this trend by exploring child development. While babies and young children engage in pretend play by adopting a character role, older children focus on social comparisons with characters they idolize. Thus, children over age six are able to recognize the discrepancies between their bodies and popularized standards of physical beauty (Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010). As a result, popular beauty messages arouse body dissatisfaction and other negative manifestations among children and girls in particular.

### ***Girls vs. Boys***



Body dissatisfaction has always been considered more prevalent among females than males. However, recent research indicates that males are increasingly likely to report body dissatisfaction. (Ricciardelli 2003, Cafri et al. 2004, Grogan 1998, Champion & Furnham 1999). Moreover, adoration of the beauty of the female body is a historical trend observed by many authors and researchers, which indicates that both girls and boys are subjected to beauty ideals via the media and popular culture. Popular culture implies that women should be feminine while men should be masculine. Femininity is associated with thin bodies while masculinity is related to a strong build, meaning that men should have strong muscles (Yuan 2007). Thus, male ideals of body image exist and are reinforced by various media. Males have become obsessed with developing a lean muscular figure, which often leads to health-threatening behaviors such as use of steroids, ephedrine, and dangerous diets (Cafri et., 2004)

The size and shape of female bodies has been transformed in the contexts of health and attractiveness over the course of the last few centuries. Thin body types promoted by contemporary fashion magazines and other resources (Grogan, 1998), replaced the ample curves of women that persisted from middle ages until the twentieth century. Today, slimness is associated not only with physical beauty but is a symbol of self-control, youthfulness, elegance, success, and social attractiveness (Lawrie, Sullivan, Davies, & Hill, 2006). The fashion industry has promoted and popularized a vast amount of “the physically impossible, tall, thin, and busty Barbie-doll stereotype” models like Claudia Schiffer and Elle MacPherson (Grogan, 1998, p. 204). Though today’s female body image involves muscle tone as well as slenderness, which reflects gender equality,

slenderness has remained the key feature of the social perception of women's physical beauty (Grogan, 1998).

It is obvious that muscles are observed better on slim bodies with flat stomachs. Though men are typically less obsessed by the media images and are less apt to have dissatisfaction with their bodies, their perceptions regarding their own bodies are also shaped by social factors such as media images, peer pressure, self-identity, and self-esteem (Kirk Kiss, & Burgess-Limerick, 2004). Thus, men are reported to see slenderness and muscularity as the symbols of fitness and believe that this shape of men's bodies is strongly associated with being in control of one's own eating and lifestyle habits (Grogan, 2008). As a result, the contemporary culture and its perception of bodily beauty affect both women and men of all ages, beginning as young as age six (Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010).

### ***Consequences of Body Dissatisfaction***

The issue of body image, its impact on women's life style, and the perception of female beauty has been a popular topic since the second part of the twentieth century. (Markey & Markey, 2010) stated that at the beginning of the twentieth century, "body image research originally focused on self-image or self-concept and usually examined samples of mentally retarded or otherwise psychologically ill or impaired individuals' sense of self (not necessarily their physical body)". Thus, body image research has been connected with self-image and self-concept, even at its origins. Contemporary body image research, which emerged in the 1980s as a result of the growing number of eating disorders, focuses primarily on the causes of body dissatisfaction. Today, the topic of the body issue is not only adopted by medical, social, or psychological journals, but is also

intensely discussed by a variety of adolescent-oriented magazines and other information sources (Markey, & Markey, 2010, p.1).

As it has already been mentioned, one of the substantial negative consequences of girls' obsession with the current body image is low levels of self-esteem (Frost & McKelvie 2004). Unreal standards of body image and beauty that is impossible to achieve is promoted by the media and society, which leads to low levels of self-esteem. Affected by media, family, and peers, most of the contemporary girls take a number of actions to make their bodies slimmer (Krcmar et al. 2008) this psychological dependence on popular culture and beauty norms results in eating disorders.

Thus, the research shows that today 50% of girls under fifteen have dieted (Champion & Furnham, 1999). The United States Center for Disease Control revealed that the majority of American states have obesity prevalence among children over 25% (Bissell, & Hays, 2011). Body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem caused by unreal standards of physical attractiveness has a significant impact on the development of eating disorders among children. Low self-esteem is caused by unreal standards of physical attractiveness, which is promoted by social culture. The behavior provokes two major physical consequences, which are closely connected with children's psychological condition. As a result, many of the modern children suffer from either anorexia or obesity (Engels, Van Leeuwe, Van Strien, & Anschutz, 2009).

Anorexia and bulimia are considered psychological diseases since they are an eating disorder evolved due to emotional desires rather than physical inability to consume food (Anschutz, Kanters, Van Strien, Vermulst, & Engels, 2009). In an attempt to achieve body proportions as promoted by media culture, girls try their best to perform

physical exercises and check on their diet. Those unable to control their eating practices use other dieting methods, which would result in poor health condition. Research reported that 13% of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade students try to emulate some behaviors that would help them develop desired body shapes by using laxatives and diuretics (Anschutz, Kanters, Van Strien, Vermulst, & Engels, 2009). Some use unscrupulous techniques such as those that facilitate vomiting (Champion & Furnham, 1999). The research of Engels, Anschutz, Kanters, Van Strien, Vermulst, (2009) discovered that free access to the contemporary media resources, which encourage slim body beauty, results in both intentional and unintentional restraints of food consumption. Thus, the influence of the media culture on girls' mentality and psyche is evident.

Even further, if children are unable to achieve desired physical proportions, they would forfeit eating in order to become seemingly beautiful and attractive. While fashion models become thinner, females are considered heavier. Being obese, which is contrary to the normal weight of models popularized in the media, is associated with a number of negative social attributes such as lethargy, self-indulgence, and slovenliness (Champion & Furnham, 1999). Children introduced to such weight interpretations and beauty stereotypes experience problems in eating behaviors from early childhood. Due to the severity of the consequences of negative body image satisfaction, it is essential to investigate media, family, and peer influences on children's obsession with body perfection.

## **Chapter Two:**

### ***Media Influence***

Media has become an inseparable part of everyday life; it is present everywhere – at home, at work, in the street, etc. One of the most popular, and thus most powerful, components of media influence is television. Millions of people spend hours in front of their TVs watching shows, observing new fashion trends, and listening to broadcasted ideas and concepts. Television content has a significant psychological impact on its viewers. Children and teenagers learn a considerable amount of information from

television and become more familiar with cultural norms through the media. Female adolescents who begin comparing themselves to the media ideals during a time period when they are developing a sense of self-awareness represent a large amount of the youth audience (Northup & Liebler, 2010).

Additionally, most of children's favorite shows aired on Nickelodeon and the Disney Channel promote thinness as a beauty standard and emphasize the necessity of possessing physical attractiveness. There is a vast amount of publications discussing whether the media influences kids' perception of beauty and society and impacts their behavior or not; however the most prominent accomplishment in this field is the social learning theory of Albert Bandura (1977). Bandura's theory proved that children learn through imitation.

### ***Media Resources Influencing Childrens' Behavior***

There is a wide range of media resources present and available in the modern life. Television, radio, and advertising are probably the major media manifestations present in a rich diversity. The most popular and consumed kind of media among children is television due to its easy access (Kater, Rohwer, & Londre, 2002). Moreover, television does not require additional knowledge or skills like reading. Television content is highly varied and includes a plethora of shows, films, programs, and video games, to name a few. The main impact produced by television is its influence on body image concerns due to its promotion of beauty as a symbol of success and its establishment of a particular set of beauty standards. Fashion shows make their contribution to children, especially girls' obsession with particular body proportions (Clay & Dittmar, 2006) Video games provoke a sense of self-identification with children encouraging imitation of viewed

behaviors (Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer 2009). Thus, it is considerable to discuss these three media types in detail.

It is not justified to declare that the media only has a negative influence on the behavior and perceptions of children and adults. There is a wide range of TV shows and programs dedicated to the clarification of female's roles in contemporary society. Thus, in contrast to earlier trends, modern media illustrates women and girls as self-confident, intelligent, and assertive human beings (Banet-Weiser, 2004). One of the most popular commercial networks, Nickelodeon, provides a vast amount of television, internet, and video production that emphasizes girls' powerful position in civil and consumer worlds. However, this positive accomplishment of modern society in the context of female issues is degraded due to its close connection with beauty promotion (Northup & Liebler, 2010). Preadolescent and adolescent female audiences are taught that successful and powerful women should also be slim and attractive (Banet-Weiser, 2004).

Music shows and programs regarding music celebrities also occupy a considerable sector of broadcasting time. According to Monnot (2010), the role of female pop singers is crucial in the process development in girls between ages nine and eleven years. Female singers are associated with standards of contemporary 'femininity.' In contrast to the radio providing only sound perception of music, television is filled with physical visions of modern singers. As a result, adolescent girls make much effort to move and look like their idols by wearing similar clothes that may be deemed inappropriate for their age ( Monnot 2010, p. 284) On the other end boys that are playing video games identify and shape their everyday life based on their game character (Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer 2009,p.353)

Additionally, they start dieting to achieve the same body proportions as their idols, who tend to be thin, tanned, long-legged, and long-haired. Thus, video media resources provide a significant impact on girls' social life and the development of their sexual identity (Monnot, 2010). The perception that media is portraying object of physical attractiveness and desire provoke sexual stereotypes and have a negative influence on life values.

Moreover, Disney production promotes the concept of the 'thin' beauty ideal (Northup & Liebler, 2010). The findings by Northrup and Liebler reveal that most of the media content is focused on emphasizing physical beauty as a symbol of success. Preschool children spend approximately 3.5 hours in front of their TVs per day. During this time, they are introduced to a vast amount of TV shows, films, and programs that emphasize thinness and physical attractiveness as important female qualities. During commercials, children get another portion of information speculating on physical beauty and sexuality in a majority of advertisements. The main emphasis is paid to physical appearance as a formula for success, recognition, and health (Schutz, Paxton, & Wertheim, 2002)

While the media has a significant impact on the well-being and psyche of females, it also plays a crucial role in the body image of males. Ryan and Morrison (2009) referred to a number of publications revealing recent increased interest in men's body image due to the expansion of media resources. Contemporary television and advertising promote masculine male beauty, using a traditional approach to men's physical appearance. The ideal man should have broad shoulders and a narrow waist, and muscular arms, legs, stomach, and chest. Men of all ages, nationalities, and sexual



orientations desire this ideal masculine physique (Ryan & Morrison, 2009). Though men's muscular build is associated with thinness, some extra fat is not demonstrated as a negative quality. Thus, media production introducing a standard of male physical attractiveness emphasizes muscular development as a symbol of strength and health. Not much attention is paid to the issue of slenderness; thus, men and boys are less vulnerable to the obsession with body image than women and girls (Harrison & Bond, 2007).

The major illustration of the standards of body image is promoted by fashion models. Their perfect body proportions are seen on television, magazines, and advertising. Thin, long-legged models represent the world of fashion and beauty that is considerably intriguing and desirable for girls and women (Lopez-guimera, Levine, Sanchez-Carracedo & Fauquet 2010). In modern media, thin females are used to glamorize different beauty products while average-sized women are employed to promote household products. The research of Prabu, Boyne, and German (2009) discovered that weight differences do not provoke any purchase drop among consumers. However, such weight-based distinction of female roles creates improper perception of body image and the role of physical attractiveness in women's lives. Regular observations of slim models arouse dissatisfaction with body proportions possessed by girls of average/normal size due to their inability to achieve impossible beauty standards broadcasted in the media.

In addition to the beauty standards represented on television and advertising, video games significantly impact children's perception of body image. Characters in video games reflect trends existing in society, and they often contain many violent scenes popular in other media resources (Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer 2009). Male characters are illustrated as strong, muscular warriors, and female characters are also frequently

involved in fight scenes. However, females also wear immodest clothes on their fashion-model-like bodies in video games (Harrison & Bond, 2007).

Research shows that children playing video games identify themselves with game characters through temporal adoption of their properties (Klimmt, Hefner, & Vorderer, 2009). Video games are a kind of entertainment exercised by children on a regular basis. The performance of game characters is based on individual social-psychological models of self-concept and self-perception (Klimmt, Hefner, & Vorderer, 2009). Contingent acting out of game characters' behavioral traits – mostly aggression and obsession with physical attractiveness – arouses untimely or exaggerated development of sexual identity and negative manifestations of conduct. In the modern world filled with technological advancements like computers, game devices, and varied software, it is essential to consider the impact produced by video games on children's behaviors and perception of body image.

### ***Media Message***

The information presented above is sound evidence that the main message of contemporary media is the issue of body image. Most of the media content illustrates females in different sexual roles whose peculiar features are thin bodies, long legs, large breasts, and so on. Northup and Liebler (2010) identified six major beauty ideals proposed and promoted by the contemporary media – classic, trendy, athletic, brainy, next-door girl, and alternative.

Classic beauty is characterized by traditional femininity such as long hair, fashionable clothes with little amount of accessories, and a general soft image. Trendy female beauty is characterized by an obsession with appearance, an obsession with boys'

perception and attention, and clothing. Athletic beauty is emphasizes natural looks and a main interest in sports over boys and fashion (Northup & Liebler, 2010). Brainy beauty is represented by a wide range of intellectual abilities and are perceived as the ones to turn to for academic advice. Brainy beauties are often illustrated in glasses and modest clothes and never an object of romance. The next-door girl beauty ideal is a mixture of traditional femininity and athletics. Although naturally pretty and concerned with fashion trends, the next-door beauty seems to be unaware of her beauty while drawing the attention of males (Northup & Liebler, 2010). A girl in black clothes usually too large represents alternative or Goth. It is hard to identify her natural beauty since her face is frequently covered with much distracting make-up accomplished by aggressive or detached conduct (Northup & Liebler, 2010).

These beauty categories reveal that contemporary media illustrates different kinds of female characters – beautiful kittens, smart career-builders, or those protesting societal norms. However, the typical “beautiful” characters are illustrated as objects of love, attraction, or sexual desire while smart or alternative girls are deprived of it. Since most women strive to be liked from an early age in life, depictions of being undesirable may influence one’s values. Even further, boys who watch a lot of television are taught that physically attractive girls are nicer and friendlier than their brainy peers (Northup & Liebler, 2010).

### ***Results of Media Influence***

Media content has a significant influence on children’s behaviors and perceptions of body image. As a result, children, especially girls, start imitating what they see on television, in advertising, on video games, and in magazines. Dohnt and Tiggermann

(2006) conducted research on girls' aged from five to eight years to identify the influence of the media at this age. They discovered that most preadolescent girls are dissatisfied with their body proportions due to the slim and attractive women they have seen in the media. As a result, their levels of self-esteem are significantly lower than of those not concerned with body image. In addition, a majority of the girls surveyed revealed their desire to look like the women illustrated on TV and in fashion magazines. There was little interest in imitating their friends' appearances since their peers also experience body dissatisfaction (Dohnt & Tiggermann, 2006).

In their attempt to imitate beauty ideals promoted by the media, children exercise dieting and disordered eating. According to a number of studies, eating disorders are mostly diagnosed in women. Recent research shows the rapid increase in eating disorders among young children reflected in binge eating; negative body image; abuse of diet pills, diuretics, and laxatives; over exercising; and restrictive dieting. A longitudinal panel study of children revealed that despite the existing gender difference in body obsession, there is no dependence on age and ethnicity (Moriarty, & Harrison, 2008). The current trends show that females of different nationalities, including Chinese, Japanese, and Latin American, desire to achieve the same body proportions as girls and women in the media (Holmstrom, 2004).

The research of Lawrie et al. (2006) proved the statement that media promotes a thin beauty ideal. The content of contemporary media emphasizes the importance of physical attractiveness among both boys and girls. Due to the individual mental states of the audience, the media produces different perception levels of body image. However, 965 students involved in this study agreed that the main message perpetuated by media is

that thinness is more attractive and desirable in contrast to being overweight (Lawrie et al., 2006).

Though it is impossible to imagine modern life without media, it is essential to pay attention to the content of the information provided through its many channels. The overwhelming depiction of thin women and muscular men substantially impacts children's social behaviors, self-esteem levels, mood variables, and body satisfaction. The influence of the media on the psychological health and well-being of girls should not be taken lightly (Monnot, 2010). Girls reading fashion magazines are seven times more vulnerable to exercise a variety of unhealthy weight control behaviors and are six times more likely to become involved in extreme practices of weight control in contrast to girls not interested in fashion readings (Lopez-Guimera, Levine, Sanchez-Carracedo, & Fauquet, 2010). In the study, 69% of 548 surveyed preadolescent and adolescent females agree that media content has influenced their perception of body image, and 47% declared the desire to lose weight after observing media beauty standards (Lopez-Guimera et al., 2010). Northup and Liebler (2010) cited that 50% of girls who diet are of normal weight, and 62% of girls in general want to have thinner bodies. Starting from the age of six, modern girls experience a desire to be thin and start dieting at seven years of age (Northup & Liebler, 2010). Thus, the negative consequences of the influence of the media on children's body perception, particularly of girls, need to be addressed and require appropriate actions from the society that unfortunately has created this thin ideal.

### **Chapter Three:**

#### ***The Influence of the Family***

The family has always had a tremendous effect on the growth and development of the child. The family is often considered a primary socializing agent, implying that it is responsible for shaping the behavior and concepts of an individual at an early age (An & Lee, 2010). In most families of the world, preparation of food is the role of the mother (Richardson, & Rehr, 2001). Research shows that this role has remained unchanged since the mother is still depended upon to fulfill some of these domestic roles. A number of activities related to eating, such as shopping for groceries, planning and preparing meals, analyzing the effects of food on the health of children, reading nutrition signs, discussing the preferences of various family members and coming up with decisions related to diets, are the roles of the mother. Studies in the United States and Europe suggest that the family plays a critical role in educating children in healthy and nutritious eating (Attie, & Brooks-Gunn, 1989). The family frequently try's to teach children to use the best nutritional practices, as well as employ proper dietary practices. Thus, the family has a

large influence on the eating habits and attitudes of children (Fisher, Sinton & Birch, 2009).

A study conducted by Jaffe and Worobey in 2006 on body image indicated that a strong relationship exists between mothers and daughters regarding eating, dieting and the body image. Verbal and non-verbal messages received by daughters from their mothers influence their body images. Mothers would communicate to their children in a manner suggesting that they ought to possess certain body images. Mothers would do this through various means such as teasing, pressurizing children to abandon some form of behaviors, and restricting them on some forms of food. Through such actions, parents are known to influence the body images and eating behaviors of their children (Forbes, Adams-Curtis, Jobe, White, Revak, Zivcic-Becirevic, & Pokrajac-Bulian, 2005).

#### ***Parenthood: A Critical Bond***

Studies have shown that children develop varying attitudes regarding their bodies at a tender age. Boys and girls receive varying comments about their bodies from different family members (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005). Boys would try as much as possible to emulate their fathers by employing all available means to develop muscles. These methods include lifting weights in excess or even utilizing drugs to enhance muscle growth (Ricciardelli et al. 2000). In contrast, girls undertake steps to ensure that they lose or maintain a particular weight or recommended body size. Girls employ weight loss strategies such as dieting, exercising in excess, and using drugs such as laxatives and diuretics. However, this would be in accordance with what a female family member deems an appropriate weight or body size (An & Lee 2010)

Even in their early ages, parents teach their children what their culture considers ideal regarding body size and image. Preschool children learn that obesity in women is not acceptable. In this regard, they would reject images of fat and obese women in favor of the slimmer images perceived to be role models (Hays & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010). In the course of development, girls would develop a negative attitude towards obesity and would appear to be dissatisfied with their own bodies just in case others perceived them as fat. Girls seek advice from their parents regarding the best practices to employ in order to reduce or maintain a particular ideal body size. Some girls would even use dangerous drugs to achieve this ideal body size. Research shows that body dissatisfaction among girls starts at a tender age and continues on to maturity. The situation worsens when the girl attains the adolescence age (Keery et al. 2004, p.106).

McCabe and Ricciardelli (2004) observed that mothers and their best female friends influence the behavior of girls regarding their body image. In a research examination both adolescent girls and boys had shown a link between parental behavior and body dissatisfaction (Bearman et. al 2006). In contrast fathers influence their sons to lose weight and gain muscle mass (McCabe & Ricciardelli 2003) Current trends in society do not encourage obesity, so parents would attempt to prevent their children from becoming obese through intimidation.

Recent studies indicate that the family has a significant impact on the health of a child. A mother would speak to her daughter suggesting that the mother's body image is perfect and the child needs to develop such a body (Thelen & Cormier 1995). When it comes to body dissatisfaction between mothers and sons diet and weight was not a concern (Keery et al., 2004) Parents who are concerned about their own health would



always influence their children since they would urge them to develop ideal bodies that would be admired by each person in society.

Pierson and Cohen (2003) posited that mothers perceived to be slim would still want to lose weight to attain the BMI index. In the same way, these mothers would want their daughters to continue to lose weight to attain the ideal weight on the BMI index as well. The findings indicate that these mothers want their daughters to be thinner as compared to other girls in society. If given some drawings of girls showing various shapes, mothers would want their daughters to be close to the thinnest or emaciated drawings as opposed to the heavier or obese figures. Mothers also had an influence on boy's body image, but it was through positive communication, whereas fathers influence on boys was through criticism (McCabe & Ricciardelli 2001, p. 227).

### ***Repercussion for Mothers, Daughters, and Families***

Thus, parents influence the body images of their child by passing on certain attitudes. If a parent develops a negative attitude towards a certain body size, the child would have to change the diet or use drugs in order to reduce the body size. Negative comments regarding body size from the parent would encourage poor eating habits in their children.

The development of the self in girls is influenced by the mother-daughter relationship. A girl develops in accordance to the wishes and preferences of their mother. Research shows that parents should be attentive to the messages they send to their children regarding body images since such messages affect their children either positively or negatively. It is evident that parents can influence their children to develop a body size and image that is deemed desirable by their particular culture and society. Before they

project their conceptions of body image on their children, mothers should ask themselves whether or not they feel positively towards their own body sizes. If a parent's body image was positive, they would encourage their children to emulate their behavior. This in turn would affect the body size of their child. However, negative comments affect children in a detrimental way because they might start engaging in practices that are harmful to their normal growth. For instance, they might start using harmful substances aimed at reducing body weight or use steroids to build muscle. It is established that parents have a strong influence on the lives of their children (Grogan, 2008).

#### **Chapter Four:**

##### ***Influence of the Peers***

Peer pressure is an important variable in the development of body image among children. Over the past several years, researchers have tried to investigate how the relationship between parents and children is reflected in the development of companionship (Johnson, 2001). It is noted that parents play a critical role in regards to the intimate relationships their children develop. Parents influence their children regarding adolescence depression, eating disarray, and general well-being. Some scholars, such as Archibald, Graber, and Brooks-Gunn (1999) observed that parents'

presence in the lives of children is crucial in the development of self-perception.

However, the formation of intimate relationships and the development of contacts with same sex friends plays a more salient role in the development of desired or undesired behaviors, feelings, and principles among children (Presnell, Bearman, & Madeley, 2007).

During adolescence, children try to emulate the lives of their peers, particularly when it comes to body image. Adolescence is a stage in which interactions and the social atmosphere play a crucial role in determining the health and satisfactory body image of a teenager (Clark & Tiggemann, 2006). The establishment of relationships among peers may influence self-perception pertaining to body images and self-competencies. Therefore, peer relationships influence body image and conversely, body image influences peer relationships. As time goes by, adolescents spend less time with their parents and more time with their peers (Krcmar, Giles & Helsne, 2008)

The psychoanalytic model postulates that detachment from parents among children is part of normal development during adolescence. However, recent models, such as the Bowlby' lifetime model, hypothesize that attachment and connectedness to parental figures among children is conducive to growth and development of children. It is well documented that peer pressure among youths is known to transform group norms and standards (Musher-Eizenman, Holub, Edwards-Leeper, Persson, & Goldstein, 2003). Peers have their own methods of ensuring that group members abide by set rules and regulations. Those who follow the rules and regulations are rewarded while those who deviate from the rules are severely punished. Among peers, certain body images are

adopted while some would be discouraged. This adoption of certain standards is greatly influenced by the media and which body figures are ideal compared to others.

Quite a number of researchers illustrate that the quality of relationships between adolescents and parents is complex and has a significant impact on the self-esteem of adolescents. Youths frequently relate to friends more than their parents, which would further affect their capabilities in social circumstances (Hutchinson & Ropee, 2007). This means that peers influence the social life of their fellow adolescents, it also indicates that peers and parents play different roles in regards to the behavior of children and adolescents. In a study conducted by Auslander and Dunham in 1996, it was established that same-sex relationships among peers greatly influences the socialization of children as opposed to any other relationship. Such children would frequently share information regarding intimacy and companionship. Children of the same sex would consult over intimate relationships, including outlining the best body figures that would attract a partner of the opposite sex. It was found that adolescents rely upon their friends in establishing intimate relationships, self-disclosure, and forming true companionships (Auslander, Dunham, 1996).

Adolescents tend to spend little time with their parents and more time with their friends as they turn sixteen (Knauss, Paxton, & Alsaker, 2007). This implies that they start discussing with their peers issues affecting them as opposed to discussing with their parents, as they did when they were children. At age sixteen, adolescents start talking about what they consider perfect body images (Kashubeck, Marchand-Martella, Neal, & Larsen, 1997). They would want to be like their close friends in terms of body figures, so they seek the advice of friends on how to lose weight. Some youths share secrets and

inner feelings freely with their peers since they would be comfortable exposing their body problems to friends as opposed to parents (Jones, 2001).

A study conducted in Japan by Mukai in 1996 demonstrated that same-sex friends and mothers influenced adolescent girls to adopt some eating behaviors and attitudes. It was found that girls consider mothers and same-sex peers to be role models and try to emulate these figures they consider their role models. These role models usually urge girls to embrace thinness since it is the accepted figure in women. In Japan, like many other parts of the world, role models deliver messages to girls suggesting that thinness makes women attractive. In this regard, overweight girls would be criticized. These findings of Mukai were consistent with the postulations of psychological adjustment theory, which states that older adolescent girls tend to interact more with their peers as opposed to young adolescents.

Levine, Smolak, Moodey, Shuman, and Hessen conducted a similar study in the United States in 1994. The study revealed that the need to be slim among girls resulted in various eating problems. The researchers observed that older girls received significant pressure from their peers to maintain certain body figures. Similarly, Kashubeck, Marchand-Martella, Neal, and Larsen (1997) analyzed the correlation between the need to be slim and the bulimic tendencies among college students (Alta, Ludden, & Lally, 2007). The correlation between peer influence and bulimic tendencies was investigated by analyzing whether a student resided within the campus premises or went home after classes. Peer pressure seemed to be much higher among students residing on campus. The students who lived on campus were discovered to suffer from eating disorders in an attempt to keep up with the demands of their peers. Students on campus would influence

other group members to be slim by forfeiting food. In 2006 Eisenberg et al. conducted a longitudinal study that found 30% of boys and 50% of girls were teased by their peers in regards to body image.

Even though few researchers have tried to conduct studies regarding the influence of peers on the body images of children, it has been established that friendship affects the body image, diets, and behaviors of children. In 2001, Lieberman, Gauvin, and Bukowski conducted an extensive study on Canadian students and postulated that peer pressure influenced peer related components such as mockery, attractiveness, and negative relationships. The above-mentioned peer components were found to influence dieting and affect eating behaviors, as well as the self-esteem of students. In 1999, Paxton, Schultz, Wertheim, and Muir conducted a similar study on Australian high school girls. The findings in Australia were similar to the findings in Canada. Peer and friendship attitudes were believed to influence the body image of children, especially regarding eating behavior and diet.

Additionally, it is established that eating malfunctions and attempts to control diet are related to the desire to establish relationships with members of the opposite sex. Girls are interested in pleasing members of the opposite sex and explore all avenues to ensure that they are attractive (Lieberman, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 1999). This would entail checking the physical appearance, losing weight, and maintaining an attractive body shape. Therefore, the desire to belong and be accepted pressures an adolescent to maintain a slim body, which affects the eating practices of an individual. As for boys they would want to show lean muscle and strength as a sign of longevity (Jones & Crawford 2006)

*Conclusion*

The studies related to body image among children suggest that thinness among women and masculinity among men are the desired qualities of females and males in society, which causes children to strive to attain these images. Various socializing agents are responsible for these behaviors in children. Each socializing agent affects children differently. While the family is usually the primary socializing agent and expected to significantly affect the child, other socializing agents such as peer relationships and the media play a crucial role. Regarding body image, the media plays an integral role in the development of body image perception among children since it portrays certain body figures to be significant as opposed to others. Right from early childhood, the individual is introduced to society's ideals of perfect body images. Information regarding the perfect body size is readily available in the mass media, both print and visual. While the family urges children to adopt certain diets, the media influences children to believe that certain body figures are superior to others. Peers ensure that children comply with the requirements of particular beauty ideals in order for them to be accepted.

In addition, self-assessment on physical appearance among children is an important feature as far as self-worth and psychological health are concerned. This discussion suggests that socio-cultural and psychosomatic components affect the development of children. The findings suggest that socializing agents affect girls and boys differently. For instance, the mass media affects boys differently, and video games affect boy's body images concerns more readily as opposed to girls. The family influences, especially the mother-child relationship, affects girls more than boys.



It should be noted that scholars have not yet generated enough data regarding the effects of various socializing agents on the growth and development of children. Children grow up knowing that only recommended shapes are allowed in society. Girls would sacrifice their health by using harmful substances in order to attain slim bodies. The studies from various parts of the world tend to suggest that women would wish to lose weight even if they have the slimmest bodies. In the case of Japan, students encouraged each other to lose weight in order to look attractive. In Canada, those found to stay on campus had poor eating habits since they strived to lose weight as influenced by their peers. In the United States, mothers and other female friends influenced the eating habits of female children. Girls consult with these adults on the best eating practices aimed at attaining desirable figure. Girls want to emulate certain media personalities they view on television, and boys want to emulate masculine personalities portrayed in the media as well. Therefore, it is necessary for society to realize the influence these socializing agents have on the health and psychological well-being of its youth and implement plans and strategies to encourage healthy behavior and positive images to boost self-esteem.

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