

2008

An exploration of the influence of media, advertising, and popular culture on the self esteem, identity, and body image in adolescent girls

Jennifer A. Irving

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Irving, Jennifer A., "An exploration of the influence of media, advertising, and popular culture on the self esteem, identity, and body image in adolescent girls" (2008). *Theses, Dissertations, and Projects*. Paper 1239.

This Masters Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations, and Projects by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact elanzi@smith.edu.

Jennifer A. Irving
An Exploration of the
Influence of Media,
Advertising, and Popular
Culture on the Self Esteem,
Identity, and Body Image in
Adolescent Girls

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the impact of the media, advertising, and popular culture on the self esteem and body image of adolescent girls. This study aimed to understand the amount and to what extent girls were potentially negatively impacted by a variety of media sources.

Twelve adolescent girls, ages sixteen to eighteen, were asked a series of questions regarding their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in dealing with the ways the media influences and impacts their lives. Narrative interviews were used to understand the perspectives of the participants around topics of media, advertising, magazines, self esteem, body image, celebrity culture, and life pressures.

AN EXPLORATION OF THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA, ADVERTISING, AND
POPULAR CULTURE ON THE SELF ESTEEM, IDENTITY, AND BODY IMAGE IN
ADOLESCENT GIRLS

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

Jennifer A. Irving

Smith College School for Social Work
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

2008

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the help and support of people whose contributions are gratefully acknowledged. First and foremost, I would like to thank my participants in this study for their time, and for sharing their experiences and stories with me. I am honored to give voice to your thoughts and feelings.

Thank you to my parents and my family for all their support and motivating words. My wonderful friends, who listened as I discussed this topic repeatedly for months; I am lucky to have you all! Bonnie, thank you for your support and for being my pseudo-therapist! My little sister Caroline, thank you for your patience and help with everything. Rich, words cannot describe how grateful I am for your non-stop love, support, and endless reassurance...you kept me sane!

Lastly, I would like to thank my phenomenal thesis advisor, Shella Dennery, for her wisdom, advice, insight, and encouragement. I am so lucky to have gotten you, thank you for being so fantastic!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
II LITERATURE REVIEW.....	4
III METHODOLOGY.....	25
IV FINDINGS.....	30
V DISCUSSION.....	52
REFERENCES	58
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer.....	60
Appendix B: Recruitment Letter.....	61
Appendix C: Human Subjects Review Board Letter of Approval.....	62
Appendix D: Informed Consent.....	63
Appendix E: Demographic Questions	67
Appendix F: Interview Guide.....	68

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study explored the multitude of effects that modern day advertising, media, and pop culture can have on the development of adolescent girls' self esteem and body image. The research question was does the media, advertising, and pop culture influence adolescent girls' self esteem and body image. My hope was that this study would illuminate protective and preventative factors that could help teach resistance to external influences for adolescent girls. I did this by asking the girls their thoughts and opinions around particular media influences. This study is unique in that it allowed teenage girls to share their opinions and thoughts on media influences on their own lives.

Many previous studies have found correlations between advertisements and exposure to unrealistic beauty standards in relation to higher amount of eating disorders and lower self esteem in women, and especially in adolescent girls. This study looked at the affects of high amounts of media exposure, measured in time and quantity, as well as voluntary and involuntary media consumption. It examined how the influence the media on adolescents is greater now than it ever has been before, due to a variety of factors, such as more advances in technology, advertising, societal pressures on adolescents, and general increase in the amount of media teens access. It also looks at the other variables and influences that girls must face in addition to the media.

The limitation of this exploratory study was that it was not generalizable, and while the relationship between the two factors can be examined, no conclusions about the cause and effect can be made.

This study includes a review of literature on the subject from a variety of sources. It also includes interviews with twelve adolescent girls, between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. The girls were from Boston suburbs, as well as towns in western Massachusetts. The subjects were all in tenth through twelfth grade and attend high school. The participants were gathered through a convenience sample, including posted signs, word of mouth, and snowballing sampling techniques. The girls participated in interviews with the researcher, and each interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes to one hour.

There are many people who will benefit from this study, including social workers, therapists, teachers, parents, and other helping professionals who work with adolescence. The study can better help adolescents cope with and process all of the exposure and influences in their lives. Most importantly, this study will hopefully benefit girls by helping them develop awareness or skills to think more critically about their identity and self esteem in relation to media exposure.

This study is extremely important to the field of social work because teens and adolescence are forced to grow up much faster these days, and are exposed to so many more negative images and influences towards their self esteem and image, with the average American being exposed to over 3,000 advertisements a day (Kilbourne, 1999), and with the increase in television, movies, video games, and the Internet, the average adolescent is faced with more media exposure now than ever before. While there is a lot

of literature on this subject, much of it was done before many of the technological advances that teens have now.

This study explored the increase in influencing factors aimed at young women, why there is such an increase, and what can be done to prevent the high volume of negative thinking that it may cause. The study could also bring about change as far as what kind of messages and images are sent to young women, on both micro and macro levels (Kilbourne, 1999). It is also crucial for social workers and other clinicians who work with adolescent girls to have a knowledge base of popular culture and the influences it has on their clients, as well as up to date information on what adolescents are exposed to and deal with currently. By better being able to understand the constant challenges, pressures, and expectations that adolescent girls are forced to face in today's society, we can be better equipped to empathize, understand, and guide them in a positive direction.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review will examine previous studies regarding body image, self esteem, body confidence, sense of self, and identity development in adolescent girls. This chapter will explore the impact of the messages and images sent by the media, including television, movies, internet, advertising, magazines, and the exposure of celebrity influence on adolescent development.

The literature review will be divided into ten sections and subsections. It will begin with identity development, followed by introduction to media, impact of television, influence of magazines, influence of advertising on body image, sexuality and advertising, celebrity culture, eating disorders, prevention and solutions, and conclusions. In this study, advertising will be defined by commercial and printed ads that intend to sell products. Media will be defined by internet, television, movies, magazines, and the overall concepts and content they portray. Celebrity exposure will be defined by personal stories, pictures, and information about celebrities and pop culture icons. Body image will be defined as how one feels about her own personal physical appearance.

Female Adolescent Identity Development

Adolescence is a very complex time in a teen's life. Most adolescents struggle to find an identity that is individual and unique, while at the same time conforms to the various societal pressures to which they are exposed. Identity is the most critical thing in an adolescent's life, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to establish one without

falling short of the many expectations that our American society has for this age group. Developing a sense of self can be even more challenging these days, due to the changes in school, work, and family. Another major factor is due to the increase of media exposure, the advertising that targets this group specifically, and all of the technological advances that increase the types of exposure (White & Wyn, 2004).

An adolescent must look at how they relate to the world through a social context. This broadly covers relationships with friends, family, and through school, as well as cultural influence and economic conditions. Developing an identity and figuring out the “Who am I?” question can also be looked at as a problem that one must resolve. Erik Erikson developed the concept of person identity in the 1940’s and 1950’s that proposed that during adolescence, the most important work of ‘searching for’ and establishing one’s adult identity is carried out. He built his theory out of Freud’s psychosexual development, and expanded by saying there are different and evolving social and individual contexts through which we live, and that we are always moving through different stages in life. Out of Erikson’s eight stages, it is his fifth stage; identity vs. role confusion, that is most closely identified with adolescence (Nakkula & Toshielis, 2006). Erikson said that in order to achieve an integrated sense of self through the psychosocial moratorium; or between the pause of childhood and adulthood, one must experience some sort of crisis (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). This has become exemplified by the demands to navigate one’s need for identity not only for themselves, but for the parents, teachers, friends, and society as a whole. It has become a struggle to find the balance of being unique and individual, while also fitting in and conforming to societal expectations.

During the time of adolescence, teens also are becoming more aware of their expansion of cognitive abilities, and how their self concept and identity is also connected to personal characteristics such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. They also become more aware of relational connections, faith perspectives, and moral convictions (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). While adolescents seek to find their true self, they also are looking for orientation, and for meaning and purpose that informs their growing views. They are learning their values and roles, and developing their self concepts. This can make them very susceptible to cultural fads as well as following other leaders, and can make it difficult to resist or question dominant cultural messages from the media, even if it might be dangerous or detrimental to their identity development (Kilbourne, 1999).

Adolescent girls in particular can have a very difficult time establishing an identity for themselves. There is tremendous pressure on many levels for women today to be high-aspiring, career and family oriented and successful in all areas of their lives. This can have a dramatic impact on identity development, as well as on their self esteem and self worth (White & Wyn, 2004). Studies from all over the world show that high levels of anxiety is one thing that keeps high achieving girls thinking that they are not good enough, and must constantly try to achieve perfection in various areas of their lives that is often unattainable (White & Wyn, 2004). This phenomenon to overachieve carries over from not only education and work goals, but to ideas about their bodies. It can be argued that this visual display of identity is the most important for young women and girls, who cannot hide their physical appearances, the way they might be able to do with academic achievement. This message is strongly reinforced on multiple levels by the

media and advertisers, who encourage girls to stand out and get noticed based on their looks, and not on their intelligence or personalities (Kilbourne, 1999).

In today's society, girls not only choose identities, but "shop" for them as well. Never has it been so important in the lives of young people to purchase the right style, brands, and products to create the ideal visual image (White & Wyn, 2004), and purchasing the consumer goods is key to the formation of adolescent identities. This also extends to the disturbing idea that the body has almost become separate from the person, and is something that can be shaped and constructed to fit in with particular societal ideals. This is problematic because many young girls therefore feel the need to emulate this physical perfection in order to be able to relate themselves to the world and the society in which they live.

Introduction to Media

Media, defined by television, movies, magazines, and the overall concepts and content they portray, is a huge part of the lives of most adolescent females. An American writer named Allen Ginsberg once said "whoever controls the media-the images-controls the culture" (Underwood, 2000). This is true, and the media continues to gain more control every day. There are many reports that high exposure to media images that portray extreme thinness can create strong body dissatisfaction, poor self esteem, and body image. Researchers have looked at the concept of 'thin ideal internalization' by testing amounts of media exposure against a personal drive for thinness amongst adolescent girls (Hargreaves & Tiggeman, 2003). Since self concept is developing during adolescence, exposure to media can make it more difficult to resist the pressure of internalizing a certain standard of thinness. This extreme exposure to unrealistic

standards has created a high rise in eating disorders over the past years (Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996). With all of the countless advertisements aimed towards very young viewers, media is now reaching out to younger and younger children. One study showed that girls ages five to seven years old, reported lower body esteem and showed a desire to be thinner after seeing pictures of Barbie dolls than those who did not see the images (Bell, Lawton, & Dittmar, 2007).

The average teen is exposed to as many as eight to ten hours of various media per day, with more and more teens having multiple forms of media exposure at once, including cell phone use (both text messaging and talking), television, internet (instant messaging and social friend networks), movies, video games, music, magazines, and more (Roberts & Foehr, 2004). The average teen ages 12-19 reported to regularly watching MTV approximately 6.4 hours a week (Bell, Lawton, & Dittmar, 2007).

Media, defined by television, movies, magazines, and the overall concepts and content they portray, is a huge part of the lives of most adolescent females. Many studies have shown that the more television or magazine exposure a young woman has, the more likely she is to be dissatisfied with her own body. This is enhanced by the idealization and comparison to models or television personalities (Ward & Harrison, 2005). In addition to overall body dissatisfaction, greater concerns and self consciousness about one's weight and size are also higher. However, another study showed that it was not the amount of exposure to multiple media genres that predicted a drive for thinness and internalization of the thin ideal, but rather their attraction to thin personalities and celebrities (Ward & Harrison, 2005).

Another reason that the media has such a strong influence over young women is that the cultural standard of beauty has become something that many young girls have learned through their families. Therefore, they receive negative messages that impact their body satisfaction, self esteem, and self identity both from both the media that they take in on a regular basis, as well as from their parents and families. This can be particularly challenging for girls ages 16-18, who can already be under extreme pressure from over-controlling and intrusive parents to achieve perfection in all areas of their lives (Wykes & Gunter, 2005).

Impact of Television in Adolescent Lives

Television strongly effects young girls' body image and attitudes by constantly and consistently portraying females who are thin, young, and extremely attractive. Everyone from news reporters to talk show hosts depict a very high standard of beauty. Even characters on television shows that supposedly represent strong and intelligent women with high powered careers, such as those from "Law & Order" or "The West Wing", are tall, thin, and beautiful. Similarly, shows like "Sex and the City", and the new "Lipstick Jungle" and "Cashmere Mafia" all depict strong women who have successful careers. However, despite being intelligent and well educated, their lives continue to revolve around impressing and trying to obtain boyfriends or husbands. They are all beautiful, unrealistically thin, exude sexuality, and have lots of money and endless designer wardrobes. While they sometimes talk about important issues regarding friendships or relationships, they rarely discuss the "unglamorous" areas of their lives, such as diets, exercising, birth control, sexually transmitted diseases, and more. By not addressing issues like this, the millions of teenage girls who watch them may believe that

obtaining perfect bodies and wardrobes is the answer to everything, and all other problems will be small in comparison (Zuckerman & Dubowitz, 2005).

Combine the above named shows with more soapy programs aimed at teenage girls such as “The O.C.”, “Gossip Girl”, “One Tree Hill”, with reality shows such as “Real World” and “The Hills”, and there is an overwhelming amount of thin, beautiful, and wealthy female characters. They are popular and well liked, leading many of their viewers to believe they can achieve happiness and glamour if they can look, shop, diet, exercise, and act like them. Rarely do any of the television shows portray anybody overweight, and when they do, they are often the unpopular, ugly, plain, or unliked character. This just perpetuates the stereotype that fat is now equated with ugly, lazy, poor, or stupid. One of the only other times that popular television shows portray people who are overweight is when they are trying to lose weight; once again showing that it is not okay to be heavy or overweight by any means. Furthermore, girls are put into a double bind of balancing the desired amount of sexiness while also being passive, innocent, and virginal. They are supposed to repress their power and feelings to be “nice and sweet”, while at the same time trying to achieve career or job success on the same level of men, who are not subject to any of those expectations (Kilbourne, 1999).

This message can be especially conflicting for teenage girls who are struggling to define their identity, both internally and externally. Along with other negative connotations that being fat or overweight can carry, comes the message that thinness equals will power and self discipline, and therefore fatness depicts lack of will, control, and weakness. Society has also scarily come to associate thinness with goodness (Shields & Heineken, 2002). These combined values can make it even more important for a

teenager to strive to achieve the ideal, due to the extreme amounts of pressure that teenage girls are under. The associations that go along with “fat” and “skinny” come to represent far more than just body weight, but also how good, determined, hard working, self controlled, and strong of a person they are. The message that girls receive is that they must be not only very thin and pretty, but popular, wealthy, smart, have a boyfriend, be extremely social and outgoing, while also being athletic, contributing to their communities, and achieving success towards their futures. Girls come away with the message that if their bodies are not the right shape and size, nothing else will fit, especially not positive self identity or esteem (Wykes & Gunter, 2005).

Teens who watch a lot of music videos on television or on the internet have a more positive attitude towards recreational sex as well as having high expectations of the sexuality of their peers (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). These teens also have higher body dissatisfaction after watching thin models in music videos, than those who just hear the lyrics without seeing the videos (Bell, Lawton, & Dittmar, 2007). Along those lines, teens between the ages of 16 and 18 watch an average of three hours of television per day (Roberts & Foehr, 2004). This high amount of media consumption ties into the increasing views by young women that they must adapt to media stereotypes in order to achieve their goals and be successful. Girls who have higher media exposure also believe that more people will divorce, have affairs, and that more of their peers are sexually active. In turn, it can lead them to be more critical and disapproving of their own body, their own virginity status, and can lead them to aspire to more traditional feminine careers (Ward & Harrison, 2005).

The Influence of Magazines

The increase in the level of printed material in magazines also has a strong hand in the ways that adolescent girls view themselves. Teen magazines are filled with articles and tips aimed towards losing weight and being thinner. This is why findings show that the two most common dieting methods that adolescents use; calorie restriction and diet pill consumption, are influenced by the amount of reading of beauty and fashion magazines (Thomsen, Weber, & Brown, 2002). A study in Boston found that girls who frequently read magazines were more likely to diet and to feel that the magazines influence their ideal body shape. More than half wanted to lose weight because of a picture they had seen in a magazine, while only 29% of those girls were actually overweight (Thomsen, Weber, & Brown, 2002). Studies at Stanford University found that 70% of college women felt worse about their own looks after reading women's magazines (Kilbourne, 1999).

Studies have shown that eight in ten teenagers read magazines, exposing them to thousands of advertisements as well as pictures of stick thin models and celebrities. The consumption and reading of these magazines alone becomes an important experience, allowing the teen to feel like they can and are relating to the models and celebrities that fill the pages and sell the products (Malik, 2005). The magazines that teens read allow them to feel that they are crossing the boundary between inaccessible and attainable glamour. While 59% of teens read at least ten minutes a day from a magazine, 77% of teens subscribe to some magazine (Roberts & Foehr, 2004). Teen, women, and fashion magazines account for 72% of magazines read by females ages fifteen to eighteen years old (Roberts & Foehr, 2004). One study showed that at least three in every four

teenagers read beauty and fashion magazines on a regular basis, making magazines most likely the most influential media format to perpetuate and reinforce society's preference for thinness (Wykes & Gunter, 2005).

There is also pressure to grow up very quickly, and now eight to twelve year olds are reading *Seventeen* magazine, *Teen Cosmo*, and *YM*, which used to be marketed to teens fifteen to eighteen years old. Older teens are now reading *Cosmo*, *Elle*, *Glamour*, *In Style*, and *Self*, showing that you must always try to be more mature, grown up, and more advanced than everyone else (Malik, 2005). While there are a few "healthy" alternatives for girls who want to rebel against media dictated gender roles and stereotypes, they are few and far between. There are magazines such as *New Moon*, *Hues*, and *Teen Voices*, that offer empowering and nurturing messages for girls, but they struggle to stay in print because they do not use advertising. There are also websites that offer similar messages, but they are often lost amongst the thousands of others that push the importance of finding boyfriends, buying the right clothes, and perfecting your hair and makeup (Kilbourne, 1999).

The Influence of Advertising on Body Image

Average Americans, including children and adolescents, are exposed to over 3,000 advertisements a day, and it is thought that with the amount of technology that youth have access to, they are the highest viewers of the movies, television shows, and magazines that portray the advertisements; many of which sell unrealistic images (Kilbourne, 1999). Since these numbers were from 1999, one may assume that with today's technological advancements these numbers have increased, especially with advances of the Internet.

Advertising for many products such as clothing and food often brings the message back to being about looking a certain way and the importance of appearance. National surveys show that almost 75% of women consider themselves too fat, which is why on any given day in America, 56% of all women are on diets (Wilson & Blackhurst, 1999). In a survey of girls ages eleven through seventeen, their number one wish was “lose weight and keep it off,” which is why over 80% of girls have dieted by the time they reach age eighteen (Wilson & Blackhurst, 1999). The images of unrealistic body standards that girls are exposed to from a very young age have contributed to the “3 D’s” which are body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, and dieting; all of which have been identified as precursors for eating disorders (Wilson & Blackhurst, 1999). These statements and statistics are why a study like this is so important.

Food advertisements in particular send many messages to young women about what is the “right” way to eat, and what people will think about people who are fat or eat too much. The stigmas that go along with being fat are not only meant to encourage thinness, but also make the associations that being fat equals being lazy, disgusting, stupid, slow, unhealthy, and just less of a person than someone who is thin (Kilbourne, 1999). Advertisers go the extra steps to send this message across by specifically comparing women to men in food advertisements, and try to make the women feel bad for wanting or trying to eat the same way as men.

Sexuality & Advertising

Sexual exposure is another dominating area of the media and its influence over young girls. Sexuality and the media have long gone hand in hand in America. Advertisers have used sex to sell every kind of product imaginable, from hotels and

shampoo, to soda and sneakers. Teens view over 14,000 sexual references, innuendos, and behaviors a year, in which fewer than 170 of advertisements involve the use of birth control, self control, abstinence, or responsibility (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). Over 75% of prime time television shows feature sexual content, with movies and sitcoms having the most (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). Sexual dialogue or sexual behavior can occur as often as eight to ten times per hour of prime time television. Furthermore, most of the advertisements in glossy magazines that young girls read suggest that ones appearance and sexual love are related (Wykes & Gunter, 2005). This can then make young girls feel as though if they look or appear a certain way, they can not only have the love and affection that is portrayed, but will feel sexy and special as well.

It is no wonder that girls are being exposed to sexuality from a very young age, and from many different sources. The average age of first sexual intercourse for girls is sixteen years old (Martin, 2007). One in every ten girls under the age of twenty in the United States becomes pregnant; higher than any other industrialized country in the world (Martin, 2007). While advertising and the media are not solely to blame for this, they are the leading source of sexual education. In the three to five average hours of television watched by teenagers a day, they see more than 2,000 sexual acts in one year (Kilbourne, 1999). These acts, along with the roles and characters they see portrayed in movies, song lyrics, books, cartoons, video games, and more, show a glamorized and consequence-free exploitation of women and their bodies.

This pressure also includes sexual pressure, regarding sexual attitudes, expectations and attributions. The amount of sexuality that is in the media impacts young

women's views and ideas on what it means to be a woman, and what one has to do and sacrifice in order to achieve that goal.

The multiple layers in the media, including advertising, celebrity culture, plastic surgery, sexuality exposure, eating disorders, and more, all contribute to a confusing and conflicting time for adolescent girls and their identity development. Girls are constantly bombarded with messages to look, dress, appear, and act a certain way, all while supposedly maintaining good morals and a sense of individuality. Additionally, while girls may be told to ignore media influence and not succumb to the pressures of advertising, they are given far more praise for how they appear when they do incorporate society's standards into their lives. All of these factors contribute to the emotional, physical, and mental challenges and struggles that face adolescent girls today.

Celebrity Culture

The growing obsession with celebrity culture is another one of the major influences on the distortion of body image. Studies show that there are significant relationships between body image and attitudes towards celebrities, but only in female adolescents (Maltby, Giles, Barber, & McCutcheon, 2005). Adolescent girls are more likely to have poor body image when the celebrities that they worship are perceived as having ideal body shape, which has most often been a unrealistic standard dictated by media and society.

Young women are also targeted audiences for purchasing the clothes, workout methods, beauty products, and special diet foods that "make" their celebrity role models who and what they are. However, when interviewed, celebrities rarely discuss or reveal the difficulties and stress that it takes to look a certain way. Teenage girls spend over \$4

billion annually on cosmetics alone, with many of the most popular brands having celebrity spokespeople or endorsers (Kilbourne, 1999). When combining beauty products with everything else that teenagers buy, they spent \$155 billion total in just 2000 alone (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). This sends the message to young girls that if they just work hard enough and spend enough money, they can easily achieve the bodies of celebrities, which is usually a very unhealthy and unrealistic goal (Underwood, 2000). When young girls see positive images of their favorite celebrities, they begin to emulate their strong, glamorous, and positive qualities, and become oblivious to the negative qualities (Schneider, 1996). Furthermore, there is a message being sent to the girls that they are now experiencing something new, exclusive, and exciting by always having the latest “it” product. The products in the magazines become just as important to obtain as the figures of the girls or celebrities who are shown using or wearing them.

The access that young women have nowadays to information about celebrities is also much higher than it has been in previous years. People have long been obsessed with celebrity culture, but it became a large feature of social life in the 1980’s and early 1990’s. It has grown to surround us, and shape our thoughts, style, conduct, and manner (Cashmore, 2006). While people often express dissatisfaction with their own lives, they often secretly attach to the perceived glamorous lives of celebrities as a way of filling some type of void in their own lives (Cashmore, 2006). People develop extremely strong feelings, values, and attitudes, towards and about celebrities that they identified. However, these imagined relationships have often taken the place of real values, ideas, and attitudes, and have instead been replaced with ones that the media and advertisers sell

us in order for us to believe what we want about our favorite celebrity obsessions (Cashmore, 2006).

Some researchers compare celebrity obsession to being almost like a religion, with celebrities taking human forms as fans worship them the way they would gods, and with celebrities being able to offer affirmation of belonging, recognition, and meaning in the lives of their “worshippers” (Cashmore, 2006). Young women are often likely to pick celebrities figures as their role models who are close to them in age, which can make them believe that achieving their looks or body size is actually more achievable, if they just have enough dedication, self control, and will power. If it seems more attainable to them, they are often even more strongly influenced and therefore “worshipping” of those role models.

Related to celebrity culture is the increased acceptance in our society around plastic surgery. Plastic surgery is just one of the many drastic steps that many young girls are taking to achieve a higher standard of beauty. Many of the 9 million Americans who have plastic surgery every year are under the age of eighteen (Martin, 2007). Consumerism has now expanded to young girls being able to “buy” the looks of their favorite celebrity; the coveted J-Lo bottom, the Halle Berry nose, or the Jessica Simpson breasts. Furthermore, television shows such as “The Swan”, “Dr. 90210”, and “Nip/Tuck”, amongst many others, are not only normalizing the idea, but glamorizing it as well. Advances in technology are also making surgery seem less invasive and more affordable, no longer making it a luxury just for the wealthy. Teenage girls are the perfect targets for advertisers who know how important and influential celebrity culture is on a population that is just beginning to have a significant amount of disposable income,

and are very susceptible to developing brand loyalty that could last a lifetime (Kilbourne, 1999).

Eating Disorders, Self Harming Behaviors, and Mental Health Issues

For decades, the media has been thought to contribute to eating disorders, by consistently portraying only stereotypically thin attractive bodies, glorifying thinness as the key to success and beauty, and by sending messages that if one is not thin, they must be lazy, ugly, and unsuccessful (Gilbert, Keery, & Thompson, 2005). The ideal of beauty has changed throughout the years under the growing influence of the media to portray an often unattainable standard of beauty. One study found that 69% of girls twelve to eighteen years old said that magazine pictures influenced their idea of the “perfect” body shape, and 47% said they wanted to lose weight because of it (Field, 2000). Girls who read magazines are three times more likely than those who do not to diet or exercise more frequently to lose weight, and are also more likely to feel that magazines influence their idea of an ideal female body, leading to a stronger likelihood of disordered eating symptoms (Gilbert, Keery, & Thompson, 2005). The advertising that girls are exposed to makes it even more confusing and difficult to ignore the double standard message that advertisers send; to both eat all of the food that is advertised while also dieting (Wykes & Gunter, 2005). Two variables that can contribute significantly to the media’s effect are the tendency to engage in social comparison with media images, as well as to psychologically internalize the societal ideal of beauty. This can make adolescents especially vulnerable and susceptible to the media’s influence, since adolescence is the time where girls are struggling to define themselves.

However, weight and eating issues have become a huge problem over the past few years, on levels of both over and under eating. Both obesity and eating disorders are on the rise. More than 50% of American adults are now overweight, and the number of overweight children has doubled in the past two decades (Wilson & Strasburger, 2002). Eating disorders affect approximately 5% of adolescent girls, with the most suffering from anorexia and bulimia (Martin, 2007). However, researchers believe that this number is most likely much higher. 15% of teenage girls show disordered signs, and 19-30% of college girls in the United States are diagnosed with an eating disorder. In a recent survey of teenage girls, more than 75% considered themselves overweight and have tried to lose weight (Wilson & Strasburger, 2002). Anorexia nervosa has the highest mortality rate of all mental illnesses, with over 20% of its victims dying from the disease (Martin, 2007).

Social comparison theory states that it is normal for humans to compare themselves to others and the qualities others might possess (Wykes & Gunter, 2005). However, the idealized images that women are comparing themselves to are most often altered and extensively edited. Many women compare themselves to women on television shows, and those who do so show higher levels of body dissatisfaction, stronger drive for thinness, and more eating disorder symptoms. It is interesting to note that while there has not been nearly as much research done with girls and women of color, they often reported having higher body and weight satisfaction and are less likely to develop an eating disorder. This is often due in part to media images most often depicting thin white women, therefore making it easier for women of color to have greater acceptance of larger female body types (Gilbert, Keery & Thompson, 2005).

Some women from different ethnic or racial backgrounds may also vary in the extent to which they are dissatisfied with their bodies because meanings of the body depend on cultural and social group context (Grabe & Hyde, 2006). Studies have shown that African American women often feel more accepting of larger sizes and feel less societal pressure, which may be in part to wanting to resist conforming to White standards of beauty. A study on Hispanic women showed higher body satisfaction with women, possibly due to the fact that larger, full bodied women are thought to be healthy and of high stature in many Latin American cultures (Grabe & Hyde, 2006). However, there are overall very few studies done on groups of women of color and their perception of body image, and even less done on adolescent females of color.

One popular example of this is a study that was done in 1995 in Fiji. The study showed the sharp rise in eating disorders among young women in Fiji after the introduction of television into their culture. Within three years the number of teens at risk of eating disorders had doubled, 74% of teens said they were too fat, and 62% of them had dieted in the past month. While this doesn't prove a direct link between television and eating disorders, it is fair to say that advertising and television do promote abusive and abnormal attitudes about eating, drinking, and thinness (Kilbourne, 1999).

The internalization of the "thin ideal" is also a factor in eating disorders, due to the social reinforcement of these ideals by friends, family, and the mass media. When the ideals are encouraged and promoted, the benefits of being thin are enhanced, making it even more of a desire for many girls. This is especially heightened when the girls feel that becoming thin and losing weight might be one of the only things they have control over. However, since the portrayed ideal of beauty is unattainable for most girls, they

turn to disordered eating and exercise, which in turn can lead not only to eating disorders, but to depression, anxiety, and other self harming behaviors (Gilbert, Keery & Thompson, 2005). While mere exposure to media influences will not necessarily cause disordered eating and poor body image, it is becoming more difficult for young women to ignore, with the importance of being thin emphasized so strongly from many sources from a young age.

In addition to eating disorders, there are many other self harming behaviors that society influences young women to engage in. Although anorexia and self-starvation are often placed at the top and appear to be the most visible body-morphing activities, activities such as self mutilation, drug abuse, over exercise, cosmetic surgery, and smoking have all become methods by which young women feel the need to do in order to achieve a “normal and desired” appearance to society (Wykes & Gunter, 2005).

Prevention, Solutions, and Interventions

Some types of prevention and early intervention techniques include media literacy programs that educate girls about how the media alters images in order to achieve the look they want to sell. This allows the girls to cognitively and verbally challenge the thin ideal promoted by the media (Gilbert, Keery & Thompson, 2005). Teaching media literacy at a very early age is extremely important also, both at home and in school, in order to help children become more aware and critical of the images to which they are exposed (Shields & Heinecken, 2002). Also, since celebrities can have so much influence over adolescents, media literacy programs should enlist the help of the albeit few, but willing and dedicated celebrities to help raise awareness of the seriousness of the negative images and messages that the media sends to young girls. Organizations

such as “Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off,” a Toronto based fat-activist group, have had success putting on plays and holding workshops to raise awareness, and other groups around the U.S. should do more of the same (Underwood, 2000). Other programs include feminist psychotherapy, where girls are empowered by learning about cultural values and norms, with the use of self esteem building exercises. It is also important for schools and education settings to begin to focus on this as a serious problem that needs to be addressed. Curriculums need to reflect the importance by teaching skills such as peer relations, stress management, self esteem building, as well as information on healthy living and eating, body image, and eating disorder awareness.

This is obviously a very large societal and cultural issue, and one that is not being addressed in our country. There is a strong need for not only more awareness as to the severity of the problem, but also for more thorough and pervasive psychoeducation for all adolescents and children.

Conclusions

Advertising is a major area that can influence women in a very negative way, due to the unrealistic portrayal of perfection. However, it will take much more than just the images in advertisements and media changing. The overall culture of women in society has to change, which is no small feat. Changes need to be made on many institutional levels, in order to stop the devaluing of girls and women. There needs to be more equal treatment of boys and girls in education, on all age levels. The “glass ceiling” in the workplace needs to be noticed and eliminated. Also, changes in access need to be made in healthcare, politics, and more (Shields & Heinecken, 2002).

My research question is timely and important to address, because of the growing presence and influence of media in the lives of teenage girls. I think that teenage girls, especially those ages sixteen to eighteen, are at a very critical point in their lives, and are under more pressure to achieve and succeed than they have been in past years. While there have been some studies that have looked at if various media forms have any influence over young girls, there are none that show exactly how much importance and influence. There are not studies in the literature that ask teens what their perspective is, and how they view the media and its impact on their lives. Therefore, the severity of the situation and the true understanding of the pressures that girls face continue to be unknown. It is my hope that this study will enlighten and inform parents, teachers, therapists, and more, about the extreme challenges that the media places on teenage girls every day.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to answer the following question: Does the media, advertising, and pop culture have an affect on the self esteem and body image of adolescent girls? In order to answer this question, I conducted a qualitative, inductive, exploratory study. The flexibility of this design allowed me to gather information that has not previously been studied through an adolescent perspective (Anastas, 1999). In order to fully explore this topic, I used induction, a process whereby data collection and analysis precedes theory. Going along with flexible methods research, I created an interview guide that contained semi-structured, open ended questions to gather narrative data from the participants. This chapter will describe the sample, ethics and safeguards, data collection, and data analysis.

Sample

The study participants were twelve adolescent girls between the ages of sixteen and eighteen; in grades ten through twelve. The age range of the participants was selected because of the high susceptibility of influence of media sources, and the high amounts of pressure girls this age may experience. Girls of this age will also have perspective of how much media exposure is a significant part of their lives. I recruited the participants through posted signs, word of mouth, and through snowballing sampling techniques (See Appendices A and B). Due to the small sample size, this population did not reflect an extremely varied or diverse population; however I attempted to recruit

participants from diverse backgrounds. I realized that this type of sample might introduce some volunteer bias due to the recruitment methods (Anastas, 1999). After finding participants through various sampling methods, I arranged individual meetings and conducted the interviews.

The limitations of the study included a sample that was most likely to be primarily white and middle or upper-middle class, due to the area where participants were recruited. Also, the participant might have felt as though she should answer the questions in a certain way. Lastly, due to the prevalence of media exposure to girls, starting at such a young age in life, it can be difficult to suggest realistic alternative ideas for adolescent girls being able to ignore or resist the influences.

Obtaining a Sample

This study was approved by the Human Subjects Review Board at Smith College School for Social Work (See Appendix C). When I received a phone call from a potential interviewee, I first asked them two selection criteria questions: their age and whether they are in high school. I discussed parental consent and asked if they were in agreement and willing to participate. If they agreed, I then explained how I would need a signed informed consent form from them; signed by them if they are over eighteen, or by them and their parents if they are under eighteen (See Appendix D). I informed them that I would be mailing two consent forms to them for both the participant and the parents; a copy to sign and mail back to me, and a copy for each of them to keep for their records. The consent forms would arrive with a self addressed stamped envelope for return. I also explained more about the study. I did not schedule any meetings until the consent forms were returned back to me. I then set up an interview time with the

participants. I conducted in-person interviews that were forty-five minutes to one hour in length. Interviewing was chosen because it is an effective method to gather narrative data for a flexible method design, and was the most appropriate design given my research question.

Ethics and Safeguards

To protect the confidentiality of the study participants I labeled the interview notes and tapes with numbers and used pseudonyms instead of real names. I will store informed consent forms, interview transcripts, and interview tapes locked in a file drawer during the thesis process, as well for three years after, per federal regulations. After three years I will destroy the above mentioned material. I did not use demographic information to describe each participant, but combined the data to describe the subjects in the aggregate.

The benefits for the participants included an opportunity to reflect on and share their exposure to popular culture, and the affects it has on self image and identity. This opportunity to self reflect may also enhance the way one views exposure to media and pop culture through a more critical lens. Participation will also contribute to the field of social work by shedding light on some of the potentially negative affects that advertising and media can have on the development of adolescent girls. There are many societal pressures and norms for adolescent girls to live up to, and in recent times this does not appear to have been thoroughly examined.

Risks included the possibility that someone could experience strong or uncomfortable feelings while talking about their experiences with popular culture and the

media. They might have also felt negatively towards themselves or the media around these issues. A list of mental health resources was provided to all participants.

Data Collection

I conducted twelve semi-structured interviews and used an interview guide. This allowed me to ask certain questions that would elicit more information around specific topics. It also allowed for the participants to share their individual thoughts, experiences, opinions, reactions, and responses to the degree that they chose.

My interviews began with demographic questions, specifically: age, grade, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, extra curricular activities, access to finances, and average daily/weekly exposure to various media sources (See Appendix E). A complete list of the questions for the interview session can be found in Appendix F.

The themes gathered from the interview questions provided great insight to the question of how much influence media, advertising, and popular culture have on the self esteem, body image, and identity of adolescent girls. In order to enhance the validity and reliability of the study, I reviewed all of my questions in detail with my research advisor, and piloted my interview questions on several adolescent girls that were not in the study. I also made sure to ask all the participants the same questions and in the same order.

I kept a record of my thesis process and materials, and organized each participant's interview in a confidential individual file with names removed, along with field notes and other relevant data.

Data Analysis

I recorded the narrative data with a digital recorder for each interview. I transcribed the interviews verbatim from the tapes after the interviews were completed. I

used the theme analysis to guide my process of coding the data. Prior to beginning the coding, I re-read all of the transcriptions. During this reading I took notes looking for common themes, similar words and phrases across interviews. I also made note of any unusual or uncommon responses. My notes also documented illustrative quotes that would best represent themes or statements of the participants. In this model, I explored the data by assigning provisional codes to all of the indicators in the data (Anastas, 1999). I began with open coding, which means I looked for themes that emerged from the data and coded them. I then used axial coding, which was extensive coding done around one specific category or theme at a time. I went back and forth between open and axial coding, and assigned various labels and categories to certain themes and ideas that I found. I also made note of where and how I found them, and how frequently they were stated.

This study will hopefully bring more awareness to the field of social work. Attention should be paid to the growing severity that the impact of media is having on adolescent girls, and what can be done to help. The study can be used in further research to explore even more issues around the development of young girls, and what preventative measures can be established to help them navigate adolescence.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how the media influences adolescent girls. Some of the expected findings of this study were that adolescent girls are now more than ever, strongly influenced in many ways by the media, popular culture and advertising. These influences can have very negative impacts on self esteem, body image, and identity, and can lead to problems such as eating disorders, depression, anxiety, unrealistic body images, and more. An unexpected finding was that some adolescent girls were not influenced strongly at all by various media sources, and might have developed ways to resist the negative impact. There could be a variety of reasons for why some girls are not influenced.

Descriptive Data

Twelve young women participated in the study. There was one sixteen year old, five seventeen year olds, and six eighteen year olds. The group was largely white and middle class. There was one girl who described herself as Puerto Rican. Three of the participants attended private high schools, and nine attended public high schools. All of the participants participated in at least one extracurricular activities, with the average being three activities. All but one of the participants listed television shows or channels that they watch regularly.

The findings are presented according to themes emerging from general coding analysis. The interview questions were designed to elicit information about the thoughts,

feelings, and experiences that the participants had about their personal experiences with the influence of the media. The findings are organized as follows: general exposure to media, how the media overall impacts their lives, general thoughts about the media, thoughts on advertising and magazines, the personal pressures they face in their lives related to self esteem, self image, and identity, the impact of media on self esteem and self image, and what they wish was different or could be changed about the media. Additionally, this chapter presents other themes relevant to the research question that participants brought up during the interviews.

General Exposure to Media and Preferred Forms

This section contains participant's reports of their general exposure to a variety of media forms. The data is arranged by the average amount of time spent on each of the media forms, and is followed by a ranking of preferred forms.

Exposure to Media

When asked about their exposure to television, magazines, movies, and the internet, all of the participants reported having access to and using all types of media. Six out of the twelve participants reported watching an average of one hour of television a day, three reported watching at least two hours a day, two reported watching very little television, and one reported watching at least three to four hours a day. For magazine exposure, seven girls reported reading magazines occasionally, three reported reading them often, and two reported reading them rarely. Watching movies appeared to be very popular, with six participants reporting watching at least two movies a week, four watching at least one movie per week, and two reporting watching "lots" of movies per week.

Internet use appeared to be the most popular, with three girls reporting at least half an hour of use daily, three girls reporting one hour of use a day, one girl reporting an hour and a half of use a day, four girls using at least two hours a day, and one girl reporting at least three to four hours of internet use per day.

Preferred Form of Media

Seven out of twelve participants reported the Internet as their favorite or preferred form of media, three participants reported movies being their favorite, one reported television as being their favorite and one was undecided.

How the Media Impacts their Lives

In this section, the participants discussed how they feel the media overall impacts their lives. They first talked about how and what kind of impact the media and popular culture has on their lives. They then discussed feelings and experiences of being between the ages of sixteen and eighteen, and how their age is affected by the pull to be both young and innocent and “tween like” as well to fit into an older and more mature “womanly” market.

Media Impact

Eleven out of the twelve participants agreed that the media impacts their lives, with the majority concurring that it is a very strong influence. Eight participants stated that the media definitely affects how they feel they should dress and appear, and that they feel more self conscious about their weight, clothing, and overall appearance after being exposed to various media forms. When answering this question, one girl stated “I absolutely am impacted by the media...I know that it’s happening and I hate it.” Another girl responded, “The media definitely influences how I think about myself fitting

into...well I would say world at large, but the media definitely doesn't reflect the world at large, so it's a very specific 'in crowd' of whatever they are projecting." The majority of the participants also agreed that it is nearly impossible to avoid being exposed to all of the images, making it inevitable that you'll end up comparing something about yourself to the images the media shows. A participant, Danielle, talked about a time where she watched marathons on television of the popular show *America's Next Top Model*. She stated:

I had nothing to do last summer, and watched it, and it was terrible. I was so self conscious about my weight, and that definitely played a huge role in it. And once you start reading too many fashion magazines you start hating your clothes, because that's not what they're showing, so it influences it a lot.

Overall, almost all of the girls felt that the media played a strong and active role in their lives, and how they thought about themselves.

"Tweens" versus Women

Another way that the media impacts the lives and identities of adolescent girls is by creating a conflictual pull between what is nowadays referred to as the "tween" market, meaning young adolescence, and between a much older and mature "women's" market. It can often be a delicate balance between being youthful and innocent versus mature and experienced. Seven out of twelve participants strongly felt that being sixteen to eighteen years old made them feel "stuck" between two markets. Many of the participants referred to the magazines that they read as being a measure of where they should "fit in" and what they should be drawn to. Seventeen year old Elizabeth stated:

Reading *Seventeen* magazine is sooo cheesy, but reading *Cosmopolitan* is just like sex, sex, sex, and I'm not really at either of those places. If I could take *Seventeen* seriously, and have it be by girls my age, and who are not so naïve,

than that would be better, but I feel like when I read it now, even if it says it's written by a seventeen year old, I feel it's still aimed at eleven year olds.

Another participant, Danielle, stated:

I do feel stuck in the sense that I could go older, because of the way I think, but sometimes I'm torn between going into Victoria's Secret and buying all that PINK stuff, or can I just go to the GAP because I like it, or do you have to be a mommy to wear that? So you don't really know where you should go. I don't feel a pull to the younger side though, because I hate it when I'm out with people, and kids are acting crazy, and you get those stares like, stupid teens, and I just want to run over and apologize on behalf of them, because I'm really not like that.

Many of the girls reported frequently feeling torn over which direction they should lean towards, and how they will be thought about and looked at if they went in a certain direction. However, four of the participants clearly stated they felt they could relate more towards the older side, because they felt more sophisticated and grown up.

Role Models

The participants in this section discuss who their role models are, and the qualities that make a good role model. There were no guidelines given regarding if the role models had to be people the participants knew personally versus people who were famous. Three out of the twelve participants reported only a famous person or people as their roles models. Another three reported both a famous person and their mothers as their role models. Four reported just their mothers as their role models, and two stated their older sisters were their role models.

The three celebrity role models that were reported were Paul McCartney, because "he is very talented and he behaved for the most part," The Beatles because "they are just great," and actress Katherine Heigl, because "you never hear a bad thing about her and she is classy."

The three girls who listed their mothers in addition to a famous role model reported looking up to Martin Luther King, “because he was a great man,” actress Kate Winslet “because she is talented, and seems very down to earth and easy going,” and Julie Andrews “because she is a talented actress and also a writer.”

The most commonly reported traits that make a good role model is someone who is hardworking, handles situations well, has experienced a lot of things in life, is responsible, a good leader, strong, and is kind. One participant stated that she felt the best role model would “have some moral values to stick by, and not let the media and stuff like that pop into your head too much, and sticking by what you think is right.”

Media & Celebrity Culture

In this section, participants discuss their thoughts and feelings about the media in general, as well as thoughts of celebrity culture. The subsections are as follows: Thin & Pretty; Admired Celebrities; and Positive Media Representations.

Thin and Pretty

When asked about who and what they think of when they hear terms in the media such as thin, pretty, and successful, the participants had a lot of strong feelings and thoughts. Nine out of twelve participants stated that when they hear those terms, they think about lots of celebrities. However, even though over half of the participants stated that most images they view in the media are of girls who are too thin, they still looked up to them, and think that not only are they some of the prettiest, but the most successful as well. Michelle stated:

Right now I'm at the point where I've always been skinny, but now I'm wondering if I should really care about being skinny, or if I'm just feeding into this whole media garbage, and if I should not care...but that's also how I want to

look, so I'm not sure how to think about it. If you're in Hollywood you have to be that way, and I want to be an actress, so in a way, I want to be in that.

Two participants said they don't like to think about the "whole outside image because it isn't important." The majority of the girls stated they felt the standards of what is thin is "out of control" and more than half talked about having to be a zero in order to be accepted, and that even "a size two is becoming considered fat." Samantha expressed her frustrations:

I'll refer to the show America's Next Top Model...there's this whole thing with Tyra Banks trying to have more 'real women' in here, and first of all you have to be at least 5'7" to be on the show, and most people are not...I mean, I don't think about it as much because I'm taller, but like, I realize I could be on this show technically, if I lost 20 pounds...but there are a lot of people who aren't like that, and you can't just make yourself grow taller. And most of the girls are very, very thin, like their wrist is the size of their upper arm circumference, very oddly thin, and I understand that some people are that way naturally, but then there are the plus size models, who they encourage these girls, that if they lose too much weight, they have to gain more weight, because it's still a very specific range...you either have to be a zero or a size twelve...there's no room for in between, or for shorter or bigger or anything like that, and it's frustrating because they say that they are encouraging this 'real image' and then they don't do it at all, so I wish they wouldn't be so hypocritical.

Several of the participants also expressed that they feel being successful has come to be almost synonymous to pretty, and that it is hard to be noticed for your talents if you do not look a certain way. Only one of the participants associated these terms with anyone or anything other than Hollywood celebrities, and stated "I think of actresses and models, and also my ballet teacher."

Admired Celebrities

When asked about celebrities that they admired, two participants stated they did not admire anyone in particular, two stated they admired "several musicians," and eight

reported on specific actors and actresses. Kate Winslet, Jessica Biel, and Jessica Alba were listed the most frequently among all of the participants, with others being Jennifer Lopez, Reese Witherspoon, Katherine Heigl, Jennifer Aniston, Kiera Knightly, Drew Barrymore, and Blake Lively. Only one participant listed a male celebrity, Denzel Washington, as being admired. When asked what they liked most about the particular actresses, seven out of twelve stated that they admired them “because they are pretty, and also because they remain strong despite everything that they have been through.”

When asked about whether or not they compared themselves to the celebrities they admired, the majority of participants said they do not, mainly because they “do not have the lifestyles and finances of them.” Three participants did compare themselves to celebrities, when the celebrities appear to come off as “down to earth, normal, and someone who can have fun.” The two participants who listed musicians as their admired celebrities both compared themselves to the artists, because of their own similar artistic abilities.

Positive Media Representations

When asked about what positive images and television shows are shown to encourage ‘real women’ and that try to go against the common societal stereotypes of how women looked, several participants said that “there are lots of things out there, you just have to look for them.” However, when asked to elaborate, they could only come up with a few programs. One the shows that came up quite frequently in this study as both good and bad was *America’s Next Top Model*. Four of the twelve participants thought that this was a “great” show, because they often show girls who are more unique and exotic looking, who don’t fit into a classic, blond hair, blue eyed cookie cutter look.

Also, the past season of the show banned the girls from smoking, and almost every season has had “at least one plus size model.” However with that said, most of the participants agree that “even if the girls are more exotic looking, no one large or plus size has ever won, and no one probably will.” Elizabeth stated that “shows like Oprah and Tyra are good examples I guess because they show ‘real women’, but even Oprah and Tyra are beautiful, so it’s really tricky.” The show *The Biggest Loser* was another show mentioned as being positive, because even though it is about people losing weight, Jessica pointed out that “the show really focuses on people getting healthy, and not just about being glamorized like that awful show *Extreme Makeover*, where they would go head to toe and point out every single flaw on a person. *The Biggest Loser* really focuses on being healthy, which is the most important thing.”

Advertising and Magazines

This section looked at how girls viewed magazines and advertisements, and their thoughts about them. It is divided into three subsections of: Magazine Selection: Likes and Dislikes; Advertising; and What Could Be Different. All of the participants had access to and read magazines, even if they did not personally subscribe to them.

Magazine Selection: Likes and Dislikes

When asked about the magazines that they read, all of the participants reported reading at least one magazine. Seven out of the twelve participants reported reading at least one of the following magazines; *Seventeen*, *Teen Vogue*, and *Cosmo Girl*; on a regular basis. Seven girls also reported reading *Cosmopolitan* on a regular basis, and six out of the twelve reported reading gossip magazines on a regular basis, such as *US Weekly*, *People*, and *In Touch*. Two out of twelve participants reported reading

magazines such as *Vogue* and *Elle* on a regular basis, and three girls reported reading *Rolling Stone* regularly.

The number one attraction to the magazines is to look at the clothes and get fashion ideas, tips, and inspiration, as reported by seven out of twelve participants. Five of those seven also stated they read to get makeup and hair ideas as well as fashion tips. Nine girls out of the twelve stated that they like to look at celebrities and see “how they look and what they’re wearing.” While four participants stated they enjoyed reading about celebrity gossip, three other girls admitted they try to avoid the gossip, but find it entertaining.

There were many things that the participants reported not liking in the magazines. The top three dislikes were having models that are too thin, having too many advertisements, and being too “fake” about topics, or over simplifying them. Elizabeth stated:

I don’t like that they make things seem so simple, like getting the guy of your dreams and stuff like that. Or weight loss plans, like, do these five exercises a day and lose ten pounds...stuff like that. They over simplify things. They make everything seem really easy, and it’s not.

Advertising

All twelve participants agreed that there are many advertisements aimed specifically at their age range, and that a lot of the ads are very successful. Four out of the twelve girls talked about anti-drug and drinking campaigns at being aimed at them, and all agreed they were important advertisements. Several of the participants stated that “cigarettes and clothing” are the two biggest items pushed at girls their age. Many of the participants also discussed how the ads they often see represent a very unrealistic

situation, both in the variety of the models, as well as how the product will change their life. Some participants express distain for the way the models appear; very thin, pretty, and always having a good time. Jessica stated, “look at Abercrombie, where you have to look a certain way to work there, and everyone in the ads looks the same, and you have to maintain that look...I don’t like that.” Elizabeth stated, “I think that along with magazines, the ads over simplify things, like if you chew this gum, you’ll get the man of your dreams. It’s not like that.”

While many of the girls reported that they often feel advertisements don’t represent “real girls and real people,” they also talked about still wanting to have those things, and the pressures and judgment that they might face if they don’t have certain things and dress a certain way. Danielle explains in more detail:

They definitely hit our age group, just because we’re the most easily influenced. The Victoria’s Secret line PINK, is definitely for our age, and is portraying sexy little lingerie. Along with that you just think skinny, because who’s going to want to parade around in little boy shorts if you’re not! Makeup lines and hair stuff, they all hit us, and I mean, I don’t think it’s good at all and it sucks, because with girls in high school especially, it’s such a brutal environment. But if you don’t have that Victoria’s Secret something, or anything...if you can’t separate that, it really doesn’t matter, and if you’re really feeding into it, it will really affect you, because you’re going to feel like you’re below it, and you’re going get made fun of for whatever. I see a ton of it in school, but you have to try to stay out of it. And it’s hard because it’s cute, and I like it and want it, but I can’t afford it, I can’t afford a \$40 tank top, so it’s hard to stay in with everything.

The one positive advertisement that the participants could think of was the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, and five out of the twelve participants brought up this advertisement. However, below Samantha shares her thoughts about it, which show the double standard that we often have when thinking about advertisements in the media.

I guess there is the Dove campaign, but that's only thing, and I guess the one I've noticed. They actually show these women in their underwear, and they show this one woman with her stomach flopping over, and she like, flopped it to show people, and I remember my mom saying, eewww, and I was thinking, you look like that too, you're just not used to seeing it on TV! And it's just that that is so shocking, and I was shocked by it too until I thought about it for a second, and that just shows that there just really isn't anything else like that out there that I've noticed.

What Could Be Different

Participants were also asked what they wish would be different in both advertisements, as well as with magazines in general. More than half the participants discussed how their number one wish would be for more variety amongst models. Several participants talked about adding more diversity, with Charlotte adding, "I think that they need to come into the real world, and put real people on the covers, and real clothing, not just size zero, and that they need people of different races, because it is just not diverse." Samantha also states:

I heard this thing that said, zero isn't a size it's a warning sign. And while that might be true for most people, it's not true for a lot of people who really are naturally skinny, and so to just be accepting of everyone, and instead of taking out all the skinny models, just put in other people so there's more variety all around.

Another major issue that came up was that participants wished there was less materialism in all the magazines, and that there were more topics about important issues. Cadence said "it's fun to read about guys once in a while but not all time. I'd rather read more stories like the dangers of drinking, and stories that are better researched and well written, instead of all boy stuff." Several of the participants discussed that while they know the magazines they read are categorized as 'fashion' magazines, they would be a lot more interesting if they included some articles about current events or real world issues. Danielle explains her thoughts:

I wish that they were less materialistic and talked about things that matter, like Cosmo for example is huge with girls my age, and it doesn't ever talk about things that matter. You get all the bed tips and hair tips you want, but how is that really important? If they popped in one article, say about Darfur, it would really put it in the eyes of teens, and would actually give us something valuable, and make us really want to read it. Editors aren't stupid though and know that fashion will sell more.

Another point that came up amongst many of the participants was that they do not like when the advertisements and magazines focus so much on the flaws of the celebrities, models, and even the occasional 'real' women they feature. Five of the twelve participants said when magazines focus on "fixing flaws," whether they are with body weight, clothing, hair, or other flaws, it made the participant focus more on their own flaws that they hadn't given much thought to previously. Michelle explained her thoughts on this by saying, "the adult magazines don't really deal that much with fat people, but teen magazines do more. If only more magazines were like that, and would stop telling you what was necessarily pretty or attractive, but were just like hey, you're pretty, you're attractive; regardless of what you weigh."

Personal Pressures

This section was particularly interesting, and sheds light onto many of the issues, pressures, and stressors that adolescent girls face. It explores the areas of the participants' lives where they feel the most stress and pressure, and looks at how the media as well as particular people influence their self esteem, body image, and overall self identity. The subsections are as follows: Current Life Stressors; Direct and Indirect Pressures; Self Likes and Dislikes; and Self Esteem and Body Image.

Current Life Stressors

When asked about current stressors and pressures in their lives, the most common response was school, with nine out of twelve participants reporting that stressed them the most. School was followed by applying and getting into college, working, and time management. In response to this question, no participants mentioned any specific people who they felt were a stressor in their lives.

Direct and Indirect Pressures

There was a much stronger response to the question of if they felt that any people in particular either directly or indirectly put pressure on them. Nine out of twelve girls stated that their parents definitely put pressure on them, and the majority of them felt it was in a negative way. Sarah stated “my parents are constantly not satisfied with anything that I do,” while Miranda said “my parents put pressure on me, not an excessive amount, but always about school.” Five of the twelve participants reported that their parents put pressure on them about their weight and/or bodies. Claire reported that “my parents put pressure on me, and it’s because there are health issues in my family, and they want me to eat right and stay healthy, and they don’t really know that they’re doing it, but I know it’s there.” Jessica recalled a memory from when she was younger, “in middle school, my mom was like, if you slim down, you’ll get your ears pierced, and then if do that you can get your hair highlighted.” She continued with stating, “At the time I remember thinking, oh my god, that’s great, but looking back on it, I’m like Mom, why did you do that? That’s kind of mean! And she said she just wanted me to be healthy, and I know she just wanted the best for me but still.” Several of the girls expressed that it can

be difficult to argue with a parent's good intention when it comes to being healthy.

Samantha said:

I think my parents definitely try to get me to become more active for one thing, which is one thing that I guess they encouraged when I was younger, but I've never been athletic. Now they're trying to be healthier, so now when I get home at the end of the day after having 5 hours of play rehearsal, I just want to sit on the couch and eat ice cream and watch TV, and then it's, do you want to go for a walk with us? And I don't want to at all.

A few of the girls also mentioned an indirect pressure at their schools to dress or appear a certain way. Elizabeth explained:

There's always pressure from peers, not direct, but social pressure, and even if people don't talk about it, there's definitely a pressure to look and dress a certain way. The people that everyone try to look and dress like, they won't advertise that they know they look and dress the way everyone wants to; they pretend to be really modest, but there are just very specific forms that everyone is expected to look like. And at this school, there's a different form than most places, but there is still a form. And people try to pretend like there is not but there is.

The consensus from the majority of the girls interviewed showed that they all face a lot of different pressures in their lives, from many different sources, and that they all can be very overwhelming.

Self Likes and Dislikes

When asked about what they like most about themselves, the most popular response was "having friends that I love," followed by their personalities. Several girls stated that they felt they were optimistic, genuine, and fun to be around.

In response to what they did not like about themselves and wished they could change, four participants stated their weight was the biggest thing. Elizabeth explained:

I've always wanted to be thinner, since 4th grade, and obviously I'm not fat, but I've always wanted to be thinner than I am, and I want straight A's, which I know isn't very realistic, but I definitely try really hard. I also wish I had a few more random talents that would make me look different than every other college

applicant, because I'm a white female who dances and likes to write; not too different from everyone else.

One participant stated she wished she was less of a leader so she wouldn't have so many responsibilities. Another stated she wished she weren't as lazy when it comes to school work, and four girls said they wished they weren't so critical of themselves in general, and that they wished they could "worry less". Overall, the majority of the girls listed more things they would change about themselves than qualities they liked about themselves.

Self Esteem and Body Image

The question of how one feels about themselves and their body after being exposed to a variety of media forms brought out extremely differing answers. Three out of the twelve girls responded positively, with answers like "I feel the same, I'm confident in myself," "I don't have a problem at all, it doesn't phase me," and "I know I'm not average, but it doesn't make me want to change; I am who I am." The nine other participants all stated in some way that their self esteem and body image was affected negatively by the media, either currently or in past years. Claire responded she feels "depressed, and I know I can't look like that but still." Carrie stated "I feel I need to work out or get a different body, because they're looking for a type of body different than what I have." Michelle said "I feel like I need to work out more and eat less," and Elizabeth followed by explaining "I usually feel guilty, for eating ice cream, because they make it look so easy to have a grilled chicken salad for lunch, and who really has the time to plan out every meal of the day? I feel like, why can't I do that?"

Impact of Media on Self Esteem and Self Image

This section investigated how the media influences and affects self esteem, body image, and identity. It looked at what girls have done to change or alter their appearance due to media influences, as well as other potential influences such as school, peers and family. It also looks at how the media impacts the participants' consumer experiences, and sub-sequential thoughts. The findings in this section are organized as: Personal Changes to Self Appearance and Influencing Factors; and The Consumer Experience.

Personal Changes to Self Appearance and Influencing Factors

The question of, if the participants have changed their eating or exercise habits, or aspects of their appearance due to the media, elicited very intriguing, yet varied answers. Three out of the twelve participants stated that the only thing they have changed due to media influence is occasionally their clothing style. Two girls reported that they have changed their eating habits, but it was due to family influence and not media. Sarah stated she changed “not due to media at all, but I’ve changed dieting to stay healthy. My mom is the same body structure as me, and she got me to do the Atkins diet in eighth grade, and it worked, I lost 50 pounds, so yeah.” The other seven participants all reported changing physical aspects of their appearance, due to not only media, but peers as well. A few of the girls said that a combination of friends and media impacts them. Michelle has been influenced by both, stating:

I watch TV shows about other people losing weight, and that gets me motivated and also just seeing lots of skinny people around me and I’m like, okay, I can do this too, it’s not that hard. My friends influence me too, because I have a lot of friends who are athletes and do a lot more than me. I only do dance, but it doesn’t keep in that great of shape. I wish I could run and have zero body fat, and I see that and it makes me want it for myself.

Elizabeth also felt that it was a combination of reading exercise routines in magazines, along with people at her school.

Combining factors such as being around other people who struggle with eating and self esteem issues along with media images, can cause a lot of stress. Danielle talks about coming back from visiting family in Europe, where people tend to be thinner than Americans to begin with. She explains:

I came back from Europe, and it's not like I had an anorexic problem or anything, but I was definitely not eating as much as I should have, and then I was working and flipping through those magazines, and it was all about weight, and my friends that I worked with are nuts about Victoria's Secret, so the catalogues were all over the place, and obviously VS models are rail thin, so I'd look at them and be like, this is ridiculous, and I'd be so self conscious about everything. It got to the point where I'd eat a tiny bowl of Special K for breakfast, and then at lunch I'd have a tiny bowl of cottage cheese and milk mixed together, and that would be it! And my stomach would literally be growling all day, and it got to the point that I would like it, and that's bad. I'd get dizzy, and it got to the point I would want to eat but I wouldn't, because I didn't want to get in that full state again, I'd like the feeling of hunger, which is not normal. Luckily my mom noticed right away after about a month and was like no, you're not doing this, and would stuff my face and not let me leave the table if I didn't. That was the worse for me, and while I did definitely lose weight, and I liked how I looked...feeling like that all the time, I wouldn't want to do it again, because it sucks. When I would wake up, the first thing I would do would be to look in the mirror at my stomach, and be like it's flat, or it's not flat, and if I was going to the beach that day, there was no way I was putting food in my face, no way. It was definitely a stupid time more than anything, so since then I've definitely tuned out the magazines and TV and stuff, especially this year, because there would be no way I'd be able to handle it.

Samantha also talked about struggling with eating issues, as detailed below:

I had several friends who had really severe eating disorders, bulimia, anorexia, and it was very nurtured in our little group, nobody really ate at lunch, there would even be this thing like when you had your packed lunch, like I'd have a really tiny piece of my sandwich and then I'd throw it away, but then I'd just eat when I got home. It's just this weird culture thing...people wouldn't even talk about it so much, but it was really present.

I think there was this pressure on everyone...I had friends who were dancers, ballet dancers... and when they were little they could be chubby and still be cute

dancing around in their tutus, but then one of my best friends one day said I have to lose weight, and I asked why, and she said, I have a recital coming up...and it just became this really obvious thing, that that was okay, and it's okay that you do that, but it was excluding the possibility of an eating disorder, or that it was unhealthy in some way, or that it was a crash diet. You could criticize other people for doing it, but then it was still that people were doing it themselves...and I was the same way.

The Consumer Experience

When asked about their shopping experiences, most of the participants shared very similar views on frustrations they held. Seven out of twelve participants often feel frustrated when they go shopping, due to available sizes, how the clothing fits, how the sizes vary in different stores, and how the mannequins look. Michelle said:

I get upset because I used to be a size zero, then it was a one, then a three, now I'm a five, so I keep going up, and I want to stay how I was freshman year, but I can't do that, so that always kinds of upsets me.

A few girls talked about feeling worse going into stores like Abercrombie, where everything runs "small like baby clothes, and makes you feel so much fatter than you felt before." Charlotte added, "I get frustrated because I like preppy stores, but the reality is that most of the girls who shop there are a double zero, and even someone like me who is pretty petite, I need to get a large there." Three participants reported that their biggest frustration isn't about how the clothing fits, but more so the expensive costs. Several girls stated that this makes buying "cute and trendy" things more difficult.

What Could be Different or Changed about the Media

This section looked at the overall thoughts and wishes of the participants in regards to how they wish things could be different, in magazines, advertising, and media in general. It also looks at their advice for younger girls, as well as suggestions for

magazine editors and media. Furthermore, it takes a sobering look at the participants' personal thoughts on the potential for positive change in our society, and why they feel changes may or may not be possible. It consists of two sections; Advice for Girls and Media, and Potential Societal Change.

Advice for Girls and Media

One of the most important questions in this study was what the participants wish they could share with not only magazine editors and media personnel, but with younger girls as well, having already gone through the experience themselves. Six out of the twelve girls agreed that more of a focus needs to put on girls' personalities, talents, and inner strengths rather than weight and outer physical appearance. Several of the participants emphasized that younger girls shouldn't try to rush their childhood, and to accept that some people have baby fat when they are younger, and that they shouldn't worry about it. However when asked to share her thoughts, Danielle stated:

Even if I did share, I don't think it would make much of a difference. I think the context could change without a doubt, in the magazines. But it makes money for the companies and everything, and I don't know how many people work on that magazine, let's say 500, and they make their money and go off and live their lives, and then the millions of people who read that magazine will go puke their food out because of what they read. Obviously these people in charge of magazines aren't going to pass up a million dollar salary. It sucks, but that's the mentality unfortunately, and if it means they lose something over the gain of something else (the well being of magazine readers), they wouldn't do it.

Potential Societal Change

The participants were also asked their opinions on if our country or society would be able to, in their lifetime, make a positive leap in the direction of change in the media. Five out of the twelve participants were adamant that it would not be possible. Claire supported her thoughts by saying "I think it would take a lot of courage and patience to

change everything, and it would take a lot of time. I know there are some people who would want to change, but only a few, which isn't enough." Three of the participants again cited *America's Next Top Model* as a hope that society could move in a positive direction, with plus size models becoming more popular. However, the overall feeling was that there are too many people making money off the magazines and clothing companies, and while it might come at the expense of someone's body image and self esteem, there would need to be a massive amount of people behind the movement to make any real, positive change.

Summary

The data from this chapter present the thoughts and experiences of adolescent girls' and impact of the media on their lives. The findings suggest that there are many different influencing factors within the media, as well as in other areas of their lives, that impact the thoughts, feelings, identity, self esteem, and body image of the participants. Participant's narratives revealed that exposure to television shows, advertisements, magazines, the internet, and more, all impact how they feel they should look and appear, as well as how they should feel about themselves. Numerous examples were also given that discussed other influences such as parents, peers, and school, and how they can add immense stress and pressure to their lives. Furthermore, the categories presented in this chapter reflect the high expectations that young girls face in multiple important areas of their lives.

Many participants' responses overlapped in their personal experiences and challenges in dealing with media influence in their lives. One of the biggest concerns of the girls was how to find a balance in their lives of being able to engage in media

exposure while resisting many of the negative images and messages it sends. Additional challenges included dealing with parental pressure to achieve high, deal with and relate to peers who struggle with similar issues, and how to protect their self esteem, confidence, and body image in a society where so many obstacles are presented. The implications of these findings will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The objective of this qualitative study was to explore the influence and impact that the media and pop culture can have on the self esteem, identity, and body image in adolescent girls. In this chapter, I will discuss the key findings, the strengths of the study, and the limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with a discussion of implications for clinical practice and opportunities for future research.

Major Findings

The major findings showed that there are many different influencing factors within the media, including advertising and magazines, as well as celebrity culture, that impact the thoughts, feelings, identity, self esteem, and body image of the participants. Additionally, findings suggested that girls are also often overwhelmed and pressured by their parents, making it even harder to resist the negative messages. This finding is consistent with the research of Wykes & Gunter (2005), who discuss the extreme pressure that parents can put on adolescent girls to achieve perfection in many areas of their lives. Roberts & Foehr (2004) talk about the high levels of various media sources that adolescents are exposed to, which supports the findings that the girls felt it is nearly impossible to ignore the impact of the media and the messages it sends.

The majority of the participants also felt that the media has a definite negative impact on their self esteem, body image, and overall identity, and almost all of the participants have physically changed their appearance in some way due to media and peer

influences. Kilbourne (1999) as well as Wilson & Blackhurst (1999) discuss the staggering number of girls and women who think they are fat, who diet, and who are unhappy with how they appear. The study also reflects these ideas, and perhaps the most alarming aspect of it is that the majority of the participants seemed to be aware of how much and how negatively the media impacts them, but have come to accept it as the norm.

Another key finding was the idea that girls feel discouraged by the content in magazines and advertising as far as how easy the media portrays it to be to achieve a perfect body, wardrobe, boyfriend, etc. This finding was in accordance with Zuckerman & Dubowitz's (2005) ideas about how the media only shows fun and attractive activities, and often leaves out the 'unglamorous' side of things, such as diets, exercising, sexually transmitted diseases, and more.

In discussing celebrities and popular culture with the participants, many of them talked about admiring certain celebrities because of their talent, or resistance to public scrutiny. However, without even realizing it, most of the girls reported the celebrity's beauty as the first thing they liked about them. This corresponded with Cashmore's (2006) concepts of how when young girls see positive images of celebrities they admire, they don't take into consideration the process and finances that the celebrities have access to that allows them to achieve a certain look. Many of the participants in this study stated that the actresses they admired seemed very "down to earth" and "just like them".

An unexpected finding in the research was related to the emphasis that the participants placed on fixing negativity in the media for younger girls. Many of the participants in the study agreed that they felt even more susceptible to the negative

pressures of the media, and its unhealthy influence on their self esteem when they were between the ages of nine and fourteen. This coincides with the research of Bell, Lawton, & Dittmar (2007), who talk about self esteem and body image issues becoming an issue in girls as young as five years old. Several of the participants stated that the media's influence and pressure to be thin and beautiful was extremely overwhelming and difficult to deal with at that younger age; around the onset of puberty. There were significant commonalities between the findings that came from this study and the existing findings found in the literature pertaining to the extreme, overwhelming, and most often negative impact of the media on the body image and self esteem in this population of girls.

Strengths & Limitations of the Study

The research question in this study was what kind of impact the media and popular culture has on the self esteem, identity, and body image in adolescent girls. A strength of this study was the flexible, semi-structured open ended questions. They allowed the participants to share as much as they desired about their feelings and experiences, while still having structure and focus. Another strength of this study is that the research gives voice to adolescent girls' thoughts, ideas, and feelings on the topic. This is extremely important in this day and age, where many teenagers feel they are not heard. Also, as technology advances and media exposure increases to this population, it is important to discuss this topic and not let it be minimized in society.

There were several limitations in the data of this study. The first is while the snowball sampling method proved to be fruitful in recruiting participants, it led to a relatively homogeneous sample, despite attempts to obtain girls of diverse racial and

socioeconomic backgrounds. Also, the small sample size of only twelve participants limits the generalizability to other or larger populations.

The validity of the study and reliability of measurement must also be taken into consideration as a potential limitation. Since the researcher designed the questions for this study, there is likely to be some bias involved, in both the questions themselves, along with how I, as the researcher, interpret the manifest and latent content of the responses. Furthermore, due to the nature of the questions, the participants could have potentially felt they should answer a certain way, therefore affecting what they chose to share and omit.

Implications

This research study aimed to explore the negative and intense impact that every day exposure to various media sources can have on the self esteem, identity, and body image in adolescent girls. While previous studies have been conducted regarding this population and related to this topic, none have gone as in depth as to learn the true feelings and thoughts of the girls who are being affected by it every day. This study will hopefully be the beginning in an increasing body of research that takes into consideration the voices of the girls and women who deal with the bombardment of media pressure and influence.

Future areas for research include continuing to examine how girls of different races are affected by advertising and media, looking at younger girls (even as young as kindergarten) and their experiences with media, how media literacy programs could be created and implemented in society, as well as how other issues of importance such as peer relations, stress management, self esteem building, healthy living and eating, body

image, and eating disorder awareness can be incorporated on home, school and community levels. While time was a factor in completing the masters' thesis project, I would like to explore this issue further in the future; possibly by involving girls from elementary to college age levels. Furthermore, while adolescent boys definitely do not face as much direct pressure from media and society, another area of potential research would involve studying males of similar ages to explore their experiences of dealing with the media, and the affects on their self esteem and body image.

The implications of this study for social work practice are also important due to the growing presence and influence of media in the lives of girls. It is my hope that by better understanding how adolescent girls conceptualize and internalize their experiences with the media, clinicians, parents, and teachers will be able to approach girls who are struggling with more empathy, insight, and understanding. This study showed that girls constantly internalize the images around them, which largely conform to a negative and unrealistic perception of how an adolescent girl should look. When girls receive nothing but these types of images from the media, which are then reinforced by parents and peers, they are often left thinking they must change things about themselves, often with harmful behaviors. It is therefore extremely important that parents, educators, and clinicians all gain awareness about this topic, and incorporate it in curriculums, clinical treatment, and general support towards young girls.

Conclusion

In this study, I set out to find out how much impact the media actually has in the lives of the adolescent girls in this study. In looking at both an examination of the past literature, as well the interviews, I gained a better understanding of how strongly girls are

impacted by the media today. The narratives offered insight and experiences, both positive and negative, on how these girls balance and deal with messages from the media. While a couple of girls appeared to be only slightly impacted, I was disturbed to hear so many of the girls not only talk about how negative they feel about themselves after media exposure, but also how they seem to have accepted that this is the way it will always be. However, even though I was bothered that so many girls thought that the television show *America's Next Top Model* was a show that sent positive body image messages, I found inspiration by the girls who recognized that there are not many truly healthy media images out there, and have a desire for positive ones to exist. Furthermore, deconstructing media images that are presented can raise awareness with not only the girls and the people in their lives, but hopefully on a larger institutional level as well. Lastly, while the sample size of this study was small and the generalizability limited, this work represents a larger societal issue that clinicians, parents, and teachers alike need to face to making positive strides for a stronger and healthier generation of girls.

REFERENCES

- Anastas, J. W. (1999). *Research design for social work and the human services* (2nd ed.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bell, B.T., Lawton, R., Dittmar, H. (2007). The impact of thin models in music videos on adolescent girls' body dissatisfaction. *Body Image, 4*, 137-145.
- Cashmore, E. (2006). *Celebrity/culture*. New York: Routledge publishers.
- Field, A. E. (2000). Media influence in self image: The real fashion emergency. *Healthy Weight Journal, 11*, 88-95.
- Gilbert, S.C., Keery, H., & Thompson, J.K. (2005) The media's role in body image and eating disorders. In E. Cole & J.H. Daniel (Eds.) *Featuring females: Feminist analyses of media* (pp.41-56). Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Grabe, S., & Hyde, J. S. (2006). Ethnicity and body dissatisfaction among women in the United States: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 132*, 622-640.
- Hargreaves, D., & Tiggemann, M. (2003) The effect of "thin ideal" television commercials on body dissatisfaction and schema activation during early adolescence. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence, 32* (5) 367-374.
- Kilbourne, J. (1999). *Can't buy my love: How advertising changes the way we think and feel*. (1st ed.) New York: Touchstone.
- Malik, F. (2005) Mediated consumption and fashionable selves: Tween girls, fashion magazines, and shopping. In C. Mitchell & J. Reid-Walsh (Eds.) *Seven going on seventeen: Tween studies in the culture of girlhood* (pp. 257-277). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
- Maltby, J., Giles, D.C., Barber, L., McCutcheon, L.E. (2005). Intense-personal celebrity worship and body image: Evidence of a link among female adolescents. *British Journal of Health Psychology, 10*, 17-32.
- Martin, C.E. (2007) *Perfect girls, starving daughters*. New York: Free Press.
- Nakkula, M.J., Toshalis, E. (2006). *Understanding youth: Adolescent development for educators*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Roberts, D.F., Foehr, U.G. (2004) *Kids and the media in America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Schneider, K. (1996). Mission impossible: Mass media images create unrealistic standards of beauty for teenage girls. *People Weekly*, 45, 64-68.
- Shields, V.R, Heineken, D. (2002). *Measuring Up: How advertising affects self image*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Strasburger, V.C., Wilson, B.J. (2002). *Children, adolescents, & the media*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Thomsen, S.R., Weber, M.M., Brown, L. (2002). The relationship between reading beauty and fashion magazines and the use of pathogenic dieting methods among adolescent females. *Adolescence*, 37 (145) 1-18.
- Tiggemann, M. & Pickering, A.S. (1996) Role of television in adolescent women's body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 20, (2) 199-203.
- Underwood, N. (2000). Body envy. *Maclean's*, 113(33), 36-40.
- Ward, L.M. & Harrison, K. (2005) The impact of media use on girls' beliefs about gender roles, their bodies, and sexual relationships: a researched synthesis. In E. Cole & J.H. Daniel (Eds.) *Featuring females: Feminist analyses of media* (pp.1-24). Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- White, R., & Wyn, J. (2004). *Youth and society: Exploring the social dynamics of youth experience*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, N., & Blackhurst, A.E. (1999). Food advertising and eating disorders: Marketing body dissatisfaction, the drive for thinness, and dieting in women's magazines. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling ,Education, and Development*, 38 (2), 111-122.
- Wykes, M., & Gunter, B. (2005) *The media & body image*. London: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Zuckerman, D. & Dubowitz, N. (2005) Clash of cultures: Women and girls on TV and in real life. In E. Cole & J.H. Daniel (Eds.) *Featuring females: Feminist analyses of media* (pp.59-70). Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer

**COME TALK ABOUT MAGAZINES,
MOVIES, MUSIC, TV, AND
MORE!!!**

**Do you love watching TV, reading
magazines, or surfing the web? Love
to look at US Weekly, can't miss an
episode of The Hills, or always on
I-Tunes?**

If so, I am interested in talking with you!! I am conducting a research study on teenage girls and their exposure to media. I am looking for girls who fit the following criteria:

- 1)Must be between the ages of 16 and 18 years old.**
- 2)Must attend either a private or public high school.**
- 3)Have some exposure to the media (magazines, TV, internet, movies, etc.)**

Participants will take part in a 45-60 minute interview. All responses are kept confidential. Parental permission will be needed for your participation if you are under the age of 18.

**Interested? Please contact me at:
jirving@smith.edu**

Appendix B

Recruitment Letter

Dear _____,

I have received your contact information from _____, who thought that you might be interested in participating in a study on how the media influences adolescent girls. Parental permission is required for you to participate in this study if you are under the age of eighteen. I am a masters' level graduate student at the Smith School for Social Work, and I am conducting a study about how the media, advertising, and pop culture influence the lives of adolescent girls. For this research, I am interviewing girls between the ages of 16 and 18, who attend either a public or private high school.

You will participate in an interview lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. The interviews will be audio recorded for my use only. All information from the interviews will be kept confidential.

You may find participating in the study to be beneficial for a number of reasons:

- 1) The interview may present an opportunity to talk about how various forms of media have influences different areas of your life.
- 2) The Interview might allow you to look at different aspects of the media through a different lens.
- 3) Your participation will contribute to furthering professionals' understanding of the various pressures and influences that adolescent girls face in today's society.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me. I will also follow up with you in one week. Thank you for your consideration!

Sincerely,

Jennie Irving
jjirving@smith.edu

Appendix C

Human Subjects Review Board Letter of Approval

November 5, 2007

Jennifer Irving

Dear Jennifer,

Your revised materials have been received and reviewed. You have done a fine job with your revisions and all is now in order. We are happy to give formal approval to your study.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Shella Dennery, Research Advisor

Appendix D

Informed Consent

January 1, 2008

Dear Potential Research Participant,

My name is Jennie Irving and I am a master's student at Smith College. I am conducting a study on the influence of media, advertising, and pop culture on the body image and self esteem in adolescent girls. The data collected will be used for a thesis, for the Masters of Social Work requirements at Smith College School for Social Work, and for possible future publications and presentations.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an adolescent girl between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. If you choose to participate in this study, I will set up an appointment with you at a convenient time and location. The interview will take 45 minutes to one hour. I will audiotape the interview. I will ask you general background questions about yourself. I will also ask you open ended questions about how you feel you are affected by the influence of media, advertising, and pop culture. If you are under the age of eighteen your parent must also provide consent for you to participate in this study. There is a separate consent letter for your parent to sign.

There are potential but limited risks associated with the participation of this study, which include the possibility that you may have strong or uncomfortable feelings while talking about your experiences with popular culture and the media. To soften the impact of participating in this study, a list of referral resources of mental health professionals in your area will be provided.

There will be no financial compensation for participating in this study. In participating in this study, possible benefits may include an opportunity to reflect on your exposure to pop culture, and the affects it has on your self image and identity.

Confidentiality will be maintained in this study. All interview data will be numerically coded; names and other identifying information will be concealed. Data will be published or presented only in the aggregate; individual participants will not be identifiable in the final written or orally presented product. I will be the sole handler of all written transcripts of the interview. I will review the data with my research advisor only after identifying information has been removed. All written transcripts of the interview will be kept in a secure, locked place for three years, according to federal regulations. At that time, interview materials will be destroyed. If they are needed longer than the three year period they will be kept in a secure, locked place.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You can decline to answer any question in the interview. You can also choose to withdraw, without penalty, at any time

before March 1, 2008, as the final report will be written at that time. If you withdraw, all materials pertaining to you will be destroyed immediately. You can withdraw by contacting me at any of the below contact information. Also, please feel free to contact me at anytime before, during, or after participation if you have any questions or concerns. You may also contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974 if you have any questions or concerns about this study.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

Thank you for participating in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

If you have any questions, or wish to withdraw consent, please contact:
Jennie Irving
jirving@smith.edu

January 1, 2008

Dear Parent or Guardian of Potential Research Participant,

My name is Jennie Irving and I am a master's student at Smith College. I am conducting a study on the influence of media, advertising, and pop culture on the body image and self esteem in adolescent girls. The data collected will be used for a thesis, for the Masters of Social Work requirements at Smith College School for Social Work, and for possible future publications and presentations.

Your child is being asked to participate in this study because she is an adolescent girl between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. If you choose to allow her to participate in this study, I will set up an appointment with her at a convenient time and location. The interview will take 45 minutes to one hour. I will audiotape the interview. I will ask her general background questions about herself. I will also ask her open ended questions about how she feels she is affected by the influence of media, advertising, and pop culture. Since she is under the age of eighteen, she must have a parent or guardian provide consent for her to participate in this study. There is also a separate consent letter for her to sign.

There are potential but limited risks associated with your child's participation in this study, which include the possibility that they may have strong or uncomfortable feelings while talking about their experiences with popular culture and the media. To soften the impact of participating in this study, a list of referral resources of mental health professionals in your child's area will be provided.

There will be no financial compensation for participating in this study. In participating in this study, possible benefits for your child may include an opportunity to reflect on her exposure to pop culture, and the affects it has on her self image and identity.

Confidentiality will be maintained in this study. All interview data will be numerically coded; names and other identifying information will be concealed. Data will be published or presented only in the aggregate; individual participants will not be identifiable in the final written or orally presented product. I will be the sole handler of all written transcripts of the interview. I will review the data with my research advisor only after identifying information has been removed. All written transcripts of the interview will be kept in a secure, locked place for three years, according to federal regulations. At that time, interview materials will be destroyed. If they are needed longer than the three year period they will be kept in a secure, locked place.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your child can decline to answer any question in the interview. Your child can also choose to withdraw, without penalty, at any time before March 1, 2008, as the final report will be written at that time. If your

child withdraws, all materials pertaining to her will be destroyed immediately. You or your child can withdraw by contacting me at any of the below contact information. Also, please feel free to contact me at anytime before, during, or after participation if you have any questions or concerns. You may also contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974 if you have any questions or concerns about this study.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR CHILD'S PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS, AND THAT YOU AGREE TO ALLOW YOUR CHILD TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

Thank you for allowing your child to participate in this study.

Signature of Parent or Guardian

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

If you have any questions, or wish to withdraw consent, please contact:
Jennie Irving
jirving@smith.edu

Appendix E

Demographic Questions

Before asking the demographic questions below, I will confirm the participant's information given during initial screening (the participant's age and the school they attend).

- 1) What is your race/ethnicity?
- 2) How would you describe your family's socio-economic status?
- 3) What are your extra curricular activities?
- 4) What is your access to finances?
- 5) How old are you?
- 6) What television shows do you watch, either regularly or occasionally?

Appendix F

Interview Guide

- 1) What is your current exposure to television, magazines, movies, and the internet?
- 2) Out of these, which do you like the most? (Television, internet, magazines?)
- 3) How much time do you spend on each?(per day/per week)
- 4) What magazines do you read? (either all the time or once in a while) What do you like about these magazines? What do you not like about what you read?
- 5) Do you feel the media impacts or influences your life?
- 6) If so, how much and what kind of impact does advertisements, media, and popular culture influence you? Does it impact your view or ideas of yourself and your life?
- 7) In general, who are your role models? Please describe the qualities that make a good role model.
- 8) What are some of your ideas of what is thin, pretty, successful, etc.? Who do you think portrays these qualities?
- 9) Do you think there are advertisements particularly targeting your age group? What are your thoughts about advertising for teens?
- 10) What are some of the stressors or pressures in your life right now?
- 11) What do you like about yourself and your life?
- 12) Is there anything you would change about yourself or your life?
- 13) Are there celebrities that you like or admire and why? Do you ever compare or see yourself in relation to the celebrities?

- 14) How do you feel about your self and body after reading magazines, watching TV, movies, or going on the Internet?
- 15) Have you ever changed your eating habits, exercise habits, or various aspects of your appearance due to media influences and why? If yes, please describe your experience.
- 16) Was that, or did it ever become that you were trying to fit in with your friends as much as trying to fit in to what you saw in magazines and media?
- 17) What, if anything, do you wish was different about magazines, media, or advertisements, and why?
- 18) When you go shopping, do you ever feel really happy or really frustrated with stuff you see, how the mannequins look, or what sizes are available, how does that affect how you think about the media?
- 19) Is there anything that you'd like to share with either magazine editors or media people, or with younger girls, having gone through this yourself, on your overall thoughts and experiences on dealing with this?
- 20) Do you think that where we are as a country, society, women, that we would be ready to make that change, or that in your lifetime it would be possible to see a positive change in the media
- 21) Do you ever feel like there's something about the pressure at this school that influences body image?
- 22) Do you feel there are other people, either parents, or friends or teachers or media, who either directly or indirectly put pressure on you?

- 23) Do you ever feel torn between this tween market and this womens market, and stuck in the middle?
- 24) Do you think there is any TV show or magazines or ad that sort of portray the opposite of that, and really encourage real women?
- 25) Do you have any other additional thoughts, comments, or ideas that you would like to add about this topic?