

MEDIA AND PEER INFLUENCE ON FAD DIETS TRIED BY ADOLESCENT
FEMALES

by

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ABSTRACT

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<u>The Influence of Media and Peers on Adolescent Females Fad Dieting</u>		
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The purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of the influence of the media and peers to the number of fad diets attempted by female adolescents ages 13-17 as measured by The Ruth Gilfry Female Adolescents Informative Survey. More recent trends show that teens are influenced by modern pop culture depicting thin to equal happiness (Kilbourne, 1987). The problem seems to be that negative messages toward overweight people began early in the twentieth century and early in one's life. Women have been depersonalized through the media and peers and their body parts exploited as decorative objects. Consequently, females have become obsessed with the fear of fat and with dieting (Schur, 1984). A teenage girl's self-evaluation is powerfully influenced by concerns about their weight (Bramwell, 1996). Approximately 7 million women in the United States are affected by an eating disorder (Zimbardo & Gerrig, 1996).

The subjects involved in this study are thirty-seven adolescent females, ages 13-17 attending self-esteem groups at a counseling center in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. The subjects surveyed

will have had varying duration of counseling from three months to years. The female adolescents surveyed are voluntary and will have the option to not participate in the study.

The results of this study indicated that the media and peers do seem to influence the number of fad diets attempted by adolescent females. The study is supported by the literature. Studies show that teens get their values today more from media and friends than from family or community (Berg, 1997). The study seemed to show that the influence of magazines is the greatest, followed by peers, and television approaching significance. The cultural focus on looking a certain way is evident through television, magazines, and peer pressure (Berg, 1997).

Although, there are not a substantial amount of recent studies done nor sufficient studies with adolescent females as the subject (Fallon, et al., 1994). A recommendation would be to do more research using teenage girls as subjects. More recent studies with their own population may educate and help teen girls dispute the media and peers and make decisions as to what their healthy weight is and what traits are important in a friend.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

United States culture historically has had a preoccupation with thinness and dieting. Worship of thinness has heightened low self-esteem and poor body image as an expectable and normative aspect of adolescent female development (Berzins, 1997). Throughout time teenage girls have been judged by their appearance and above all, thinness (Berg, 1997). A media explosion has occurred in the last century, perpetuating the message that thin means one is beautiful, intelligent, and in control of one's own life.

More recent trends show that teens are influenced by modern pop culture depicting thin to equal happiness. Media portrayal of waif-like models is another way that the media exacerbates the deterioration of women's self images through the diet trade (Kilbourne, 1987). In America today, there is a \$33 million dollar diet industry. Many of the magazines that are marketed specifically to women put great emphasis on weight loss; the same is not true for the magazines that men read (Anderson & DiDomenic, 1992). Magazines, television, and peer pressure have promoted fear of fat and an obsession with dieting. The present day female adolescent culture has fallen easy prey to the diet industry, which has targeted these young females, leaving them with low self-esteem, false hopes, and desperation.

Negative messages toward overweight people began early in the twentieth century and early in one's life. Women have been depersonalized and their body parts exploited as decorative objects. Consequently, females have become obsessed with a fear of fat and with improving their body (Schur, 1984). This discrimination against heavy people has planted deep wounds and left lifetime scars. Adolescent girls are more afraid of becoming fat than they are afraid of cancer, nuclear war, or losing

their parents (Levine, 1987). A recent study found that 11 percent of females would abort a fetus if they believed it had a tendency toward obesity (Pipher, 1994)

In this day and age females view their bodies more negatively than at any other time in history and are more likely than not to believe that they are fat even when they are underweight (Williamson, 1990). Females who view their body negatively are more likely to engage in diet fads. Ninety-five percent of dieters regain the weight along with guilt, shame, and self-blame, thus starting the vicious cycle of yo yo dieting (Dermer & Thiel, 1975).

This is a serious problem in a society where adolescent girls tend to become depressed twice as often as adolescent males, and are ten times more likely to develop an eating disorder. Teen girls that try more than two fad diets are more prone to develop an eating disorder than those who do not are. Eating disorders have increased dramatically in recent years. Forty-nine percent of teenage girls in a recent survey admitting to using diet pills, while thirteen percent used laxatives and/or diuretics for weight loss (Fallon, Katzman, & Wooley 1994).

The two major eating disorders seen in adolescent females are anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Teen girls with anorexia nervosa are unable or unwilling to maintain a body weight that is normal for their weight and height. Girls with anorexia nervosa display a pronounced fear of weight gain and a dread of becoming fat even though they are underweight (Garner & Garfinkel 1997). Approximately 0.5% to 1.0% of adolescent females meet the criteria for the diagnosis of anorexia nervosa. The girls with bulimia nervosa engage in periods of eating followed by attempts to rid their bodies of food and calories, such as vomiting, laxatives, starving, and rigorous exercise. Approximately 1.0% to 2.0% of adolescent females met the criteria for the diagnosis of bulimia nervosa. In the case of both disorders the teenage girls' self-evaluation is powerfully influenced by concerns about their weight

and how they believe they look (Bramwell, 1996). Approximately 7 million women in the United States are affected by an eating disorder (Zimbardo & Gerrig, 1996).

Eating disorders have caused a wide array of medical problems such as dry skin, bone decay, and undernourishment. Eating disorders can also be quickly fatal with problems to the heart and electrolyte imbalances (O'Halloran, 1993). There are also deep psychological implications ranging from depression, self-hatred, obsessive-compulsive issues, and suicide attempts.

A research study was done with the hypothesis that females that bought into the superwoman body beautiful ideal were more likely to have developed an eating disorder (Steiner-Adair, 1986). The subjects were 32 girls attending a private high school in a lot of contact with each other. The girls were aware of the superwoman ideal, and described this ideal as thin, smart, beautiful, and successful. The girls were also administered the EAT test which measures eating habits and attitudes. Of the girls who saw through the ideal, not one had an EAT score within the eating disorders range. Of the girls who identified with this superwoman ideal, 85 percent had scores in the eating disorder range (Steiner-Adair, 1985).

The media, including magazines and television portraying the perfect, thin; happy images have an impact on the self-esteem of adolescent females. In addition, peer pressure and peer opinions contribute to poor self-worth. These factors seem to contribute to the diet obsession in our teen culture, which can lead to very serious eating disorders. This is a serious widespread problem encompassing adolescent girls that needs immediate attention (Grigg, Bowman, & Redman, 1996). Prevention should first be directed at the messages that teenage girls are receiving and the diet industry rather than later trying to treat the psychological and medical disorders.

This study is important for four reasons. The first reason is to take a critical look at the media that is intentionally printed and geared toward teenage girls. Magazines for adolescent girls show

advertisements with very thin young women. In actuality this thin figure accounts for only five percent of the female adolescent population, leaving the other ninety-five percent feeling large (Wolf, 1991). This study can serve to help teen consumers become aware of the misconception that everyone is thin, and look at how this belief promotes an obsession to be thin.

Second, it is important to point out how television exhibits models, beach parties, dating games, and sitcoms with very thin young ladies, appearing gloriously happy. Weight equating to happiness has been one of the most often stressed elements in television (Anderson, 1992). Readers can decide if this portrayal is true and realistic.

Third, the study will discuss peer discrimination against their perception of overweight people. Teenage girls should be able to decide if peer pressure regarding beauty and weight is really important and accurate (Pipher, 1994). The study can help adolescent females to make their own decisions as to what their healthy weight is and what traits are important in a friend.

Fourth, the study may educate counseling professionals in working with female adolescents on body image issues. The findings will determine what major factors influence fear of fat and fad dieting. Counselors will also be able to point out false hopes in society's worship of thinness.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study will examine the influence of the media and peer pressure on the amount of fad diets attempted by adolescent girls ages 13-17 as measured by The Ruth Gilfry Female Adolescent Survey. Specifically, the study will determine if there is any relationship between the amount of magazines read, television watched, time spent talking with peers and the amount of fad diets attempted. Therefore, the research hypothesis for this study states that adolescent girls who read more magazines, watch more television, and talk with peers more will attempt more fad diets.

NULL HYPOTHESIS

Ho1: There will be no significant correlation between the amount of magazines read and the number of fad diets attempted.

Ho2: There will be no significant correlation between the amount of television watched and the number of fad diets attempted.

Ho3: There will be no significant correlation between the hours spent talking with girlfriends and the number of fad diets attempted.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

For clarification, the following terms are defined:

Anorexia nervosa – a type of eating disorder where the person maintains an unhealthy low body weight by restricting food and calorie intake, and, possibly by excessive exercise.

Bulimia nervosa – a type of eating disorder where the individual restricts their food intake, but also regularly engages in eating and purging behaviors such as self-induced vomiting or the misuse of laxatives, diuretics or enemas, and at times excessive exercise.

Depression – an emotional condition involving feelings of hopelessness, sadness, gloominess, and lack of energy and desire to do things.

Diet – a special or limited selection of food chosen to promote the loss of weight.

Eating disorder – a persistent pattern of aberrant eating or dieting behavior, associated with significant emotional, physical, and relational distress.

Fad diet – usually short term diets with very specific limited food given to eat.

Obsessive-Compulsive disorder – recurrent, persistent, repetitive thoughts, impulses, and images often experienced as intrusive and inappropriate, causing anxiety and/or distress.

Pop culture – the current trend that is popular and by many considered the norm in society.

Yo Yo Dieting – engaging in a diet where one loses weight, gains it back and then returns to dieting again forming a cycle.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

As has been previously stated, the purpose of this study is to determine a correlation between the media and peers to the number of fad diets attempted by adolescent females, ages 13-17. The second chapter deals with a review and analysis of the supporting literature relevant to this topic. The methods and procedures of this study are presented in chapter three and the results of the statistical analysis of the data are presented in chapter four. The final chapter of the study is concerned with the summary of findings, discussion, implications, and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to examine the correlation between media and peers influence and the number of fad diets tried by adolescent females. This chapter deals with the review and analysis of the studies relevant to this topic. The literature review has been divided into four sections. The first section deals with literature on magazines targeted for females stressing appearance, thinness, and popularity. The second section examines television and the messages it sends to teenage girls. The third section focuses on peer influence on the body image and diet habits of adolescent girls. The fourth section given an overview of the impact of the diet industry on fad diets marketed toward females.

Modern culture claims to be youth-centered yet fails to provide an environment that is nurturing and supportive for healthy physical and mental development and growth of children. This seems to be especially true for teenage girls. Today's culture is a girl-poisoning, girl-destroying place (Pipher, 1994). Studies show that teens get their values today more from media and friends than from family or community (Berg, 1997). Society is so focused on appearance and body image that it becomes the foremost influence on the feelings of self-esteem and self-worth of adolescent females. The cultural focus on looking a certain way is evident through television, magazines, and peer pressure (Berg, 1997).

INFLUENCE OF MAGAZINES

Magazines for teenage girls have cover articles offering training in lookism (Berg, 1997). The emphasis in magazines targeted for females is on makeup, fashion, how to attract boys, and weight. To teenage girls the message is be thin and avoid fat and you will deserve a wonderful life (Pipher, 1994).

A reported increase in eating disorders over the last several decades has aligned with a decrease in women's ideal body weight as depicted in the media (Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992). Parallel with the rise in eating disorders is an increase in articles and advertisements promoting weight-loss diets in magazines for women (Wiseman et al., 1992). One study discovered that magazines for women contained 10.5 times more advertisements and articles promoting weight loss than magazines for men, which happens to be the same sex-ratio reported for eating disorders (Andersen, 1992).

Models shown in magazines are reedy, small, frail-looking women with slim curves (Berg, 1997). This really is not showing an honest sample of females across the United States. Increasing pressure to be thin in this culture is illustrated through a 30-year survey using Playboy magazine centerfold model from 1959 to 1988. The research shows that these models became thinner each year. Today the typical model weighs 13 to 19 percent below their healthy expected weight (Berg, 1997). Teenage girls looking at these may think that this body type is the expected norm.

By failing to represent the whole segment of the female population, models create the false impression that all women are thin. Eleanor H. Wertheim (1997) did a study to determine why adolescent girls watch their weight. The study was done in Australia using as subjects 30 girls ages 14-16. Wertheim conducted audio taped interviews using open-ended questions assessing for themes, coded and rated. Findings suggest a strong role of media influence leading to unhealthy body attitudes. Fashion magazines were reported to exert the strongest pressure to be thin (Wertheim, Paxton, Schutz, &

Muir, 1997). More and more, reliance on fashion magazines in defining the ideal body image and how to attain this ideal are associated with teen dieting efforts (Levine, Smolak, & Hayden, 1994).

Advertising, a \$130 billion industry, is the most powerful education force in America (Berg, 1997). In many ways through editorial copy, female readers are being sold to advertisers.

Dermer and Thiel (1975) examined 150 women appearing in magazine advertisements, and found only one – advertising a mop – to be of average rather than high attractiveness (Dermer, 1975).

Advertisements are shattering teen girls' sense of what is normal.

Fashion magazines are among the biggest sellers in print for females. Yet, the habit of critiquing the female body has reached such a high level of judgment that the clothes may as well be invisible (Hollander, 1978). A very thin body image is too readily available to the young women to carry in their heads and make comparisons. Under the influence of fashion the behavior and appearance of females has been drastically restricted and confined to an ideal body image in order to be acceptable in society (Wolf, 1991).

To clarify the point, in Great Britain between 1965 to 1981 women began spending less on clothing and sales of female targeted magazines decreased from 555.3 million to 407.4 million copies. Advertisers, distressed by this drop in their prime audience, changed their message to focus on the body rather than on clothing (Wolf, 1991). Since then subscriptions have been on the rise.

Consumers have become so accustomed to beautiful women in advertisements that sales pitches do not always work as well without them. Loken and Howard-Pitney (1988) examined the effectiveness of cigarette advertisements with and without photos of attractive females and found that female college students (whether they smoked or not) rated the ads with the models as more persuasive and attractive than the ads without models (Loken & Howard-Pitney, 1988). Unrealistic body image ideals have been drilled into females' minds for years (Antonello, 1996).

In America, presentation of body image that deviates from normal body size has been the norm, leading many women to believe they are abnormal. The average American is exposed to over 1,500 ads everyday through some sort of media, many being magazines. The potential for advertising to model an unrealistic, unhealthy body size is great. In another study of female college students the impact of magazine advertisements on decreased body satisfaction is substantial. Brief exposure to several ads displaying highly attractive, very thin models resulted in decreased satisfaction with one's own appearance and weight, in comparison to the satisfaction of students in a control group who saw ads without models (Richins, 1991).

Many magazine advertisements show a thin, beautiful woman with a quote from a man giving male approval. Many teen magazines portray adolescent girls who are very thin as being vulnerable, sexually alluring, and frantically outgoing. On the other hand, magazines targeting the older female population portray middle-aged women as being plump and nearly always engaging in some domestic activity (Umiker-Sebeok, 1981).

Models in magazines have changed over the years in body size. In a 1970 poll in a London magazine participants were asked to name the most beautiful woman in the world. The number one choice was curvaceous Elizabeth Taylor. Just four years later the same poll was given and Twiggy at 5'7" and 97 pounds was voted number one (Levine, 1987).

One doesn't need to buy a magazine to get the ultra thin message. Instead one could glance at the racks in check out lines. Magazines such as Cosmopolitan, Glamour, and Teen Magazine have only beautiful, lean models on the cover. In most gas stations and some bookstores Penthouse, Playboy, and the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition are easy to pick out and graze through the pictures.

Furthermore, there are a variety of magazines available at many locations that show the very thin female that is ideal to society. However, magazines are only one type of media displaying an ultra-thin

body ideal. Television is another form of media exhibiting distorted images of what is supposed to be normal female bodies.

THE INFLUENCE OF TELEVISION

Television, movies, and other social media have a strong influence on teenagers. The average American spends 11/2 years of their lifetime watching television commercials (Kilbourne, 1987). A recent study compiled statistics for television commercials on diet food, diet programs, and chemical-based reducing aids using advertising data from the Network Television Books. The findings of the study found diet promotions, nonexistent in 1973, now comprise about 5 percent of television advertisements (Berg, 1997).

In one study of television, Levine (1987) found that a mere two percent of the actresses on prime time television were plump or overweight, and that thinness in actresses was positively correlated with a likable personality (Levine, 1987). Television is normalizing and glamorizing what is abnormal and unhealthy. These false status expectations contribute to fad diets and eating disorders; girls react to it.

Average, normal weight seems to be unacceptable. Alicia Silverstone, a healthy looking movie star of the movie, *Batman*, was humiliated by the press when she attended the 1996 Academy Awards, because she had gained 10 pounds since making her last movie. Headlines called her *Batman* and *Fatgirl*. This can only send a fearful message to other young girls. Women are oppressed to be thin. A good example is Oprah Winfrey who has lost weight, regained, lost again, and regained. She is a prime example of a yo yo dieter. Oprah, reportedly the most influential woman in The United States has shared this triumph and tragedy with the public (Young, 1992). She has lived through it on her talk show, made a video, and has co-written a cookbook. She appears to be a caring, compassionate woman

yet, her greatest accomplishment seems to be losing weight (Young, 1992). Another example of women tyrannized into being thin is that of Sarah Ferguson. She was once an average size and looked ordinary and happy. After media ridicule Sara plunged into a well-publicized exercise and weight reducing regiment (Young, 1992). As the world watched she turned into a thin person who now is a spokesperson on Weight Watcher commercials.

What is considered beautiful is getting thinner and thinner. An example is The White Rock mineral water commercial. The White Rock girl was 5'4" tall and 140 pounds in 1950 and today she is 5'10" and 110 pounds (Pipher, 1994). Body image proportions continue to become more and more unhealthy and unrealistic. Television commercials for weight loss are seen at any time of the day. Saturday morning cartoons are interrupted for an advertisement aimed at elementary school girls called "Get in Shape, Girl" (Levine, 1987). Scanning television for a few hours reaffirms the idea of media assault on body image. Discussion on television talk shows often concerns body image. On The Tonight Show one evening a skinny actress said straight out that fat people pollute the esthetic environment (Levine, 1987). This is blatant prejudice and a harsh message to send out to impressionable young ladies. Another popular television show, LA Law ran an episode which featuring the wedding of a successful, outgoing, fat woman to a handsome man. The episode revolved around the rest of the characters being shocked and deciding the man's motive must have been something other than love (Fallon, et al., 1994). Had it been a plot involving a disabled woman viewers would have been outraged but prejudice against fat is one of the only social prejudices remaining that seem to be socially acceptable (Rothblum, 1990).

Television is shouting out with attractiveness-based messages. A message pertaining to attractiveness was found in one out of every 2.1 personal care ads, 1.1 clothing ads, 0.5 weight reduction ads, 1.2 cosmetic ads, and 0.8 physical fitness ads. Overall, a message pertaining to the way one looks

was observed in one out of every 3.8 television commercials (Fallon, et al., 1994). Television is reinforcing to society an ideal of the desirable way that people should look.

Television also runs infomercials that attempt to sell diet programs, exercise equipment, and beauty aids. They generally use a famous television star as their spokesperson and tell how wonderful her life is because she feels fit and slim. In the course of the infomercial the person goes on to say that they feel younger, more attractive, successful, social, and energetic since they've gotten slim and fit. This is yet another way the media equates thinness to a happy life.

In various ways television influences society's idea of what the ideal body is. Through commercials, sitcoms, and shows like MTV adolescent females are offered a distorted view of what an average healthy body looks like. The message for females is that their bodies are public property to be judged and sized up by society. Yet another influence on adolescent females is their peers and the acceptable body image message conveyed through friends.

PEER INFLUENCES

Perceived pressure to be thin from friends and dating partners is associated with teen dieting (Stice, Shaw, & Nemeroff, 1998). Peer criticism of weight and peer investment in dieting are also associated with adolescent dieting (Cattarin & Thompson, 1994). Pathologically underweight females are being flaunted as the ideal. The ideal body image makes almost all females feel inferior and hate their bodies, thus manifesting feelings of inferiority, insecurity and depression (Berg, 1997). Feelings of insecurity and inferiority push adolescent females to thrive on the approval of their peers. Adolescent girls talk to each other about the way they look and diets throughout the day. On the bus to school, between classes, during lunch, after school and on the phone they scrutinize their bodies (Berg, 1997). It seems to be a part of their life and influences the way they feel about themselves.

Teenage girls have been known to spend endless amounts of time on the phone sharing beauty and diet secrets (Levine, 1987). Adolescent girls compare themselves to others and seem to be able to find someone else in school that is thinner and therefore happier. Young females can be cruel and quick to make judgement, which can crush a girl who does not feel comfortable with her own body image. A pursuit to be thin to become more acceptable can ensue (Pipher, 1994).

It is not uncommon to see a lineup of girls such as cheerleaders from the side with their stomachs caved in and hips protruding. “One wonders where the bodies are they have worked at so hard to be perfect when there’s no body there” (Berg, 1997, p.3). The teen culture message is thin is in, fat is out. Research indicates that adolescent friends tend to resemble one another in a wide array of attributes, including physical likeness and their degree of attractiveness (Levine, Smolak, Moodey, Shuman, & Hessen, 1994). Indirect empirical data suggests the possibility of friendship-group similarity in body image concerns and eating behaviors (Szekely, 1988). Perceived peer dieting and talk about diets are related to girls’ own fad diet efforts (Levine, 1994). These findings could suggest that peer influence, behaviors, and talk served as direct role models for adolescent female diet fads.

In one study both normal weight and overweight adolescents described obese silhouettes as stupid, dirty, lazy, sloppy, mean, ugly, and sad (Berzins, 1997). Preschoolers in one study preferred to play with a thin doll rather than a chubby one (Wooley & Wooley, 1985). A recent study found that at age 5 children selected pictures of slim people when asked to point out people who look good (Pipher, 1994). Students also showed a preference for making friends with a handicapped schoolmate over a fat schoolmate (Hampshire, 1988). Teen girls hear remarks made about chubby girls in the school lunchroom and feel guilt and shame about their own bodies. “No one feels thin enough “(Pipher, 1994, p. 184). In teens this can lead to segregation of peers that do not meet the ideal body image.

Research shows that most children do not outgrow this vicious stereotype. College students recommended a thin person over a fat person for a job in one study, even though their task performance on a video was identical (Garner & Bemis, 1985). “The prejudice and ostracism that surround the overweight child undoubtedly influence later perceptions of self and others, particularly when they are reinforced by our cultural overemphasis on a female’s appearance” (Wooley, Wooley, & Dyrenforth, 1979, p. 17).

In other research, there is substantial evidence that adolescent girls discuss dieting and body image issues with friends. It was hypothesized that the amount of time to which teen girls were thought to talk about weight and the extent to which the individual girl reported modeling friends as a source of dieting ideas would predict the individual girl’s body image concerns and dieting behaviors (Levine et al., 1994). Further observations in previous studies hypothesized that pressure from peers to be thin would predict a female adolescent’s body image concerns and eating patterns (Wetheim et al., 1997). Adolescent females who have developed an eating disorder tend to feel shame and frustration, and constantly engage in conversations focusing on exercise and diet (O’Halloran, 1993).

Adolescent girls have no way to keep peer culture influences in perspective. The parental role in teenage girls has radically changed in the 1990’s (Pipher, 1994). Teens are more vulnerable to pressure from peers and inclined to reject parental and educational advice. In responding to peer pressure teen girls are operating under a false self and set of values (Pipher, 1994). Female adolescents hardly speak to their parents and talk all night to friends (Berg, 1997). Peers validate their choices and operate as a support system. The girls that do not respond to peer pressure are made fun of and shunned. Teen girls become good haters of those who do not conform to the ideal, beautiful image (Pipher, 1994).

FAD DIETS

A substantial percent of elementary school girls are worried about their body shapes and have already tried to lose weight. By fourth grade, 40 percent or more of girls have dieted at least once (Berg, 1997). Body dissatisfaction, fear of fat, and weight preoccupation are occurring earlier and earlier. Six year olds understand that fat is bad and that people who want to lose weight had better diet (Berg, 1997).

Teen girls in pursuit of the goddess of thinness start to diet and eat poorly in order to achieve this beauty. Eating disorders begin in children as young as ten years old (Macloed, 1982). Children of all ages are subject to advertising, media, and comments by peers about weight and appearance. Low fat and low calorie advertisements are all over and it seems a new fad diet comes along every week (Macloed, 1982). “America’s children are in the midst of a public health crisis that is killing some and shattering the lives of others” (Berg, 1996, p. 86). Fueled by obsession with appearance, body size, and popularity the crisis includes dysfunctional eating, eating disorders, and irrational diets (Berg, 1996).

Adolescent girls try fad diets without consulting a physician, thus endangering their health. To them it doesn’t matter. They would rather die than gain ten pounds (Cooper & Stein, 1992). America’s teenagers are afraid to eat in fear of gaining weight (Berg, 1997). Adolescent girls with a poor and distorted body image will try just about any kind of diet, including; the cabbage soup diet, the grapefruit diet, and 500 calorie per diets.

Teenage girls bond over diets and work them together, keeping tabs on each other, at times competing for quick weight loss. Some also diet to be on a sports team (Levine, 1987). Many vulnerable girls have dieted after hearing or reading about some celebrity’s victory over weight (Antonello, 1996). In a study examining 320 adolescent females ages 16-19 years, results indicated that

pressure to be thin, thin-ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction were positively correlated with dieting (Stice, Mazotti, Krebs, & Martin, 1998).

In another study, 869 Australian 14-16 year old females were given a self-report survey to determine the existence of abnormal eating patterns. The results indicated that over one-third of the total sample had used at least 1 extreme diet in the past month. Examples of those used were crash diets, fasting, slimming tablets, diuretics, laxatives, and/or cigarettes to lose weight. Dieters fail to consider the health risks involved such as abdominal distress, disruptions of normal bowel functioning, and irregularities of the heart rhythm and only look at the motivating factors (Garner & Garfinkel, 1997). Motivations for these unhealthy diets were peer pressure, media pressure, and the idea that fad diets were harmless (Grigg, et al., 1996).

Every year several new weight regimens capitalize on easily influenced adolescents, pandering to a thin body and offering magical solutions to life's problems (Wooley & Wooley, 1982). These weight programs glamorize dieting, encouraging teens to plan binges and compensations/fasts, eat foods in order to induce diarrhea and get rid of water retention (Wooley, 1982). Dieting leads to anxiety, passivity, and low self-esteem (Wolf, 1991). They give the message that no price is too high for thinness and do not warn of the possible health risks.

Body dissatisfaction more so than body mass has been found in data to motivate teens to diet (Patton, Johnson-Sabine, Wood, Mann, & Wakeling, 1990). This is surprising because most people assume that diets are for reducing body mass. Also, the majority of the adolescent girls in the data reportedly had normal or below normal body mass (Patton et al., 1990). In a 1978 Nielsen survey it was reported that 60 percent of all women ages 24 to 54 diet and that three-quarters of these women stated that they do so to look better rather than feel better (Levine, 1987).

Rosen and Gross (1987) sampled 3000 adolescent girls' age's 13-18 years and found that two-thirds of them were trying diets to lose weight (Rosen & Gross, 1987). More than half of American women are dieting and three-fourths of American normal-weight women think they are fat (Sims, 1986). Society encourages females to be thin and delicate while males are encouraged to be bigger and stronger. Therefore, many more women diet than do men (Sims, 1986).

Many of these dieters have engaged in risky yo yo diets. They quickly lose weight only to regain it and start the cycle all over again. Ninety-five percent of women who have lost 25 pounds or more on a diet regain the weight within 2 years and ninety-eight percent regain the weight within five years (Black, 1990). Not only is yo yo dieting associated with higher mortality rates than maintaining an above average or stable weight, studies also indicate that the diet/weight loss cycle itself increases the risk of death (Berzins, 1997).

The media is filled with diet messages. Foods are labeled diet, light, guilt-free, and fat free. Advertisement captions give messages about self-control, and enjoy seeing your bodies like this (with pictures of very slim females), along with before and after pictures showing the slimming effect of their product. Ads also encourage and normalize female's fears about fat asking them to remember back when they sat at a table eating a fattening meal, yet now have the option of a Lean Cuisine (Fallon, et al., 1994). Advertising is constantly asking females to perfect, improve and change their bodies rather than advocate societal change (Fallon, et al., 1994).

A 1989 study (Basow & Kobrynowicz, 1990) at Lafayette College found that both men and women judged women who ate less to be more feminine and likable. This is reflected in an ad for low-fat pizza. First he eats a brownie while she eats a rice cake, then he eats a juicy burger while she eats a low-fat entrée, finally with a low-fat pizza they both get to eat it (Fallon, et al., 1994). This reinforces

the idea that females should feel guilty and less feminine for eating. Once again, America's children are afraid to eat (Berg, 1997).

Fad diets are influenced by different variables including the media and peer influence. Female adolescents seem to be a target for the diet industry. Dieting can be a health risk and lead to an eating disorder. Fad diets also can lead to yo yo dieting manifesting in a vicious cycle of dieting, regaining, low self-esteem and dieting again.

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 2 has presented selected literature that examined the relationship between the media and peer influences and teenage girls' fad diets. To facilitate the presentation the chapter was arranged in 4 sections. The first section dealt with the connection that magazines have on dieting behaviors of adolescent girls. The literature indicated that the vast majority of females affected by poor body image and dieting attempts have a distorted reality of a normal body due to magazine articles, pictures, advertisements, and fashion models (Brownell & Rodin, 1994). In the second section the relationship between television and the dieting behaviors of adolescent females was examined. The literature reported that television portrays the majority of women to be too thin and unrealistic, along with television commercials influencing the self-image and low self-esteem of young girls (Wolf, 1991). The third section explored the relationship between peer influence and teenage girls' dieting habits. The literature presented a correlation between peer pressure, fear of being an outcast and girl talk about dieting to teenage girls' dieting behaviors (Levine, 1987). The final section presented fad diets and overall diets attempted by teenagers. The literature presented found a connection between these fad diets and the influence of the media, magazines, and peer pressure on distorted body images, motivating dieting (Attie, Brooks-Gunn, & 1989).

The analysis of the literature indicated a strong correlation between the influence of the media and peers on the fad diets attempted by adolescent females. At any one time, between one half and two thirds of all high school girls in the United States are on a diet, many of which are unnecessary (Rosen, Tracey, & Howell, 1990). Standards of beauty and happiness are transmitted through advertising, other media, and peer culture influence are blamed for the high incidence of dieting and disordered eating among young U.S. women (Striegel-Moore, Silberstein, & Rodin, 1986).

The literature provides support for this thesis study that there is a correlation between the media and peer influence to the amount of fad diets adolescent females engage in. The direct relationship of all three variables together has not been established. No one study examined the three variables together. Also there is a small proportion of research done involving females under the age of 18 as subjects. The majority of the research has been done studying adult women (Fallon, et al., 1994). The literature fails to provide a majority of research done within the last 10 years, disclosing the need for more current research studying adolescent females.

There is a lack of research on adolescent females compared to the research done on adult women. Eating disorders develop during adolescence, yet the bulk of empirical studies have been done on adult women. For example, only 14 out of 199 studies on eating disorders published in 1988-1989 in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders* involved participants under the age of 18 (Fallon, et al., 1994).

The purpose of the present study is to examine the link between the media and peer influence to the number of fad diets attempted by adolescent females. The Ruth Gilfry Female Adolescent Survey will be used to examine the link between the amount of magazines read, hours of television watched and amount of hours spent talking with girlfriends to the number of diets attempted. The following chapter will continue to discuss the relationship of these influences to fad diets.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

SUBJECTS

The subjects for this study consisted of 37 adolescent females between the ages of 13 and 17. The subjects were all enrolled in therapeutic self-esteem groups at a mental health clinic located in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. The subjects have had varying duration of counseling from three months to several years. The subjects lived either in foster homes or with their parent or guardian.

INSTRUMENTATION

The Ruth Gilfry Center-Female Adolescent Groups Informative Survey (See Appendix A) which was developed by the author of this research paper was administered. It consisted of a ten-item survey in which the subjects were instructed to respond to the questions on the survey sheet. The survey was developed to measure the amount of magazines read and subscribed to and the number of hours of television watched. It also measured how much time they spent talking with their peers and the time the subjects spent talking about and thinking about dieting. In addition, the survey measured how the subjects felt about their body as well as their weight.

PROCEDURES

The Ruth Gilfry Center-Female Adolescent Groups Informative Survey was accompanied by a cover letter (See Appendix B) stating that the test would be given on a voluntary basis and that all participants would be anonymous. The cover letter also stated that choosing to not participate would in no way effect their standing in the self-esteem group. The survey was administered at the beginning of

the groups. The researcher of the paper administered the survey. The survey took the participants approximately ten minutes to take.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

A bivariate correlation was computed measuring the qualitative relationship between different variables. One variable, the amount of fad diets tried, was held constant against the different measures of number magazines read, hours of television watched and hours spent in contact with peers. A scatterplot with a fitted regression line was also employed to further summarize the qualitative aspects of the relationships.

LIMITATIONS

This study has the following limitations:

1. The sample is made up of voluntary subjects. The attitudes of those who chose not to participate may have been different than those of the subjects who voluntarily participated.
2. The data on the independent variables is for a short period of time and could have recently changed or may change in the future.
3. The subjects were only from one counseling clinic in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. Therefore, it is not known if the findings can generalize to the entire population of adolescent females.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to examine the correlation between the influence of the media and peers and the number of fad diets attempted by adolescent females. Therefore, the research hypothesis for this study stated that adolescent females who were exposed to more media and peer interaction would attempt more fad diets.

The research hypothesis stated that the variables, reading more magazines, watching more hours of television, and talking with their girlfriends more would have a positive correlation with fad diets attempted. According to the reviewed literature all of these variables are associated with fad dieting.

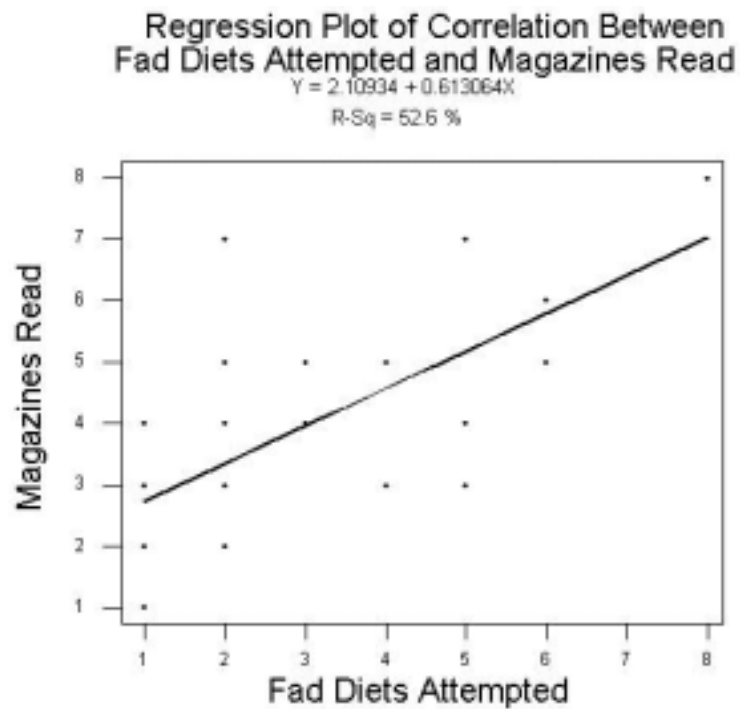
FINDINGS

Null Hypothesis 1

There will be no significant relationship between the amount of magazines read to the number of fad diets attempted.

There was a significant linear relationship found between the amount of magazines read and number of fad diets attempted. The obtained correlation coefficient between these two variables was $r=0.725$. Because the obtained correlation coefficient did not fall within critical values of $-.325$ and $.325$ under the null hypothesis distribution - the model and the corresponding null hypothesis are

rejected. The obtained correlation is highly significant at the .001 level. The relationship is a positive linear relationship where as the value of the number of magazines read increases so it is likely that the value of number of fad diets attempted will also increase. The squared correlation coefficient (R-Sq) of .526 is the proportion of variance of number of fad diets attempted, which can be accounted for by knowing the number of magazines read.



Correlations (Pearson)

Correlation of Magazines Read and Fad Diets Attempted = 0.725, P-Value = 0.000

Regression

The regression equation is $y = 2.11 + 0.613 x$

Predictor	Coefficient	StDev	T	P
Constant	2.1093	0.3739	5.64	0.000
x	0.61306	0.09833	6.23	0.000

S = 1.213 R-Sq = 52.6% R-Sq (adj.) = 51.3%

Analysis of Variance

Source	DF	SS	MS	F	P
Regression	1	57.230	57.230	38.87	0.000
Residual Error	35	51.526	1.472		
Total	36	108.757			

Null Hypothesis 2

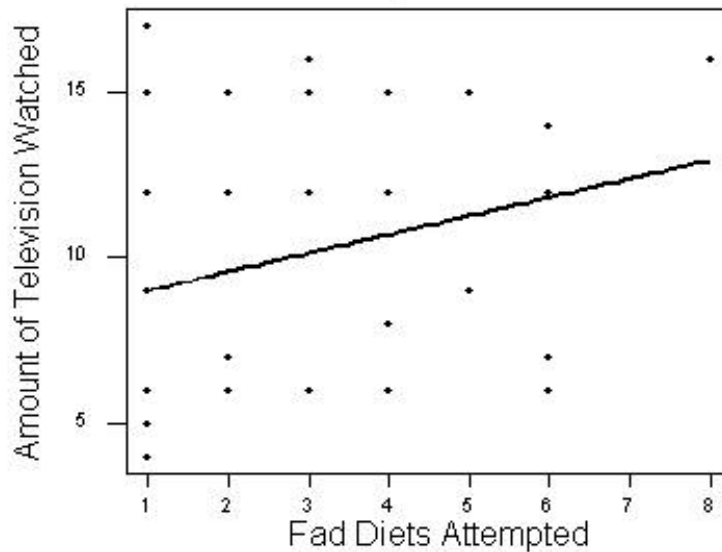
There will be no significant relationship between the amount of television watched and the number of fad diets attempted.

There was not a significant linear relationship found between the amount of television watched and the number of fad diets attempted. The obtained correlation coefficient between these two variables was $r=0.294$. Because the obtained correlation coefficient did fall within critical values of $\pm .325$ and $\pm .325$ under the null hypothesis distribution - the model and the corresponding null hypothesis cannot be rejected. The obtained correlation is not significant at the .05 level, although it does approach significance ($p= .077$). The squared correlation coefficient (R-Sq) of .087 is the proportion of variance of number of fad diets attempted, which can be accounted for by knowing the number of the amount of television watched. This low coefficient of determination is very close to a value of 0 where the number of fad diets attempted can be accounted for by the amount of television watched merely by chance.

Regression Plot of Correlation Between Fad Diets Attempted and Amount of Television Watched

$$Y = 8.42563 + 0.565140X$$

$$R\text{-Sq} = 8.7\%$$



Correlation's (Pearson)

Correlation of Amount of Television Watched and Fad Diets Attempted = 0.294, P-Value = 0.077

Regression

The regression equation is $y = 8.43 + 0.565 x$

Predictor	Coefficient	StDev	T	P
Constant	8.426	1.179	7.15	0.000
x	0.5651	0.3100	1.82	0.077

S = 3.825 R-Sq = 8.7% R-Sq (adj.) = 6.1%

Analysis of Variance

Source	DF	SS	MS	F	P
Regression	1	48.63	48.63	3.32	0.077

Residual Error	35	512.18	14.63
Total	36	560.81	

Null Hypothesis 3

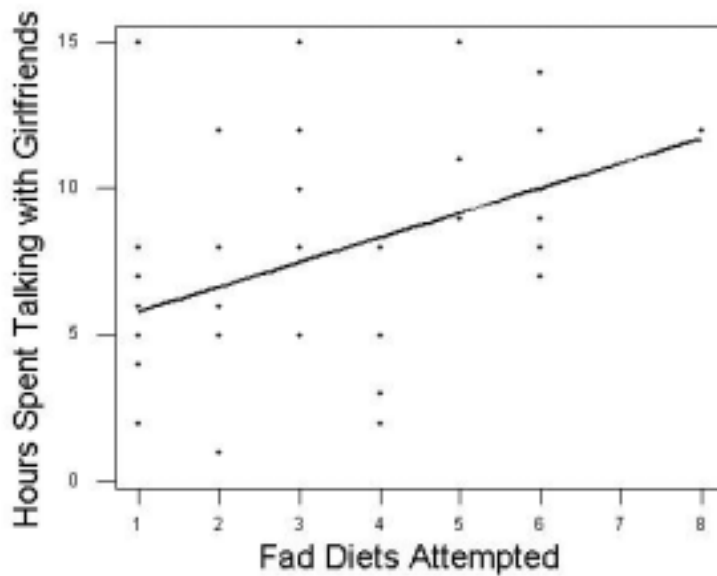
There will be no significant relationship between the hours spent talking with girlfriends and the number of fad diets attempted.

There was a significant linear relationship found between the hours spent talking with girlfriends and the number of fad diets attempted. The obtained correlation coefficient between these two variables was $r=0.440$. Because the obtained correlation coefficient did not fall within critical values of $-.325$ and $.325$ under the null hypothesis distribution - the model and the corresponding null hypothesis are rejected. The obtained correlation is significant at the $.01$ level. The relationship is a positive linear relationship where as the value of the hours spent talking with girlfriend's increases, so it is likely that the value of number of fad diets attempted will also increase. The squared correlation coefficient (R-Sq) of $.194$ is the proportion of variance of number of fad diets attempted, which can be accounted for by knowing the hours spent talking with girlfriends.

Regression Plot of Correlation Between Fad Diets Attempted and Hours Spent Talking with Girlfriends

$$Y = 4.92794 + 0.845935X$$

$$R\text{-Sq} = 19.4\%$$



Correlations (Pearson)

Correlation of Hours Spent Talking with Girlfriends and Fad Diets Attempted = 0.440, P-Value = 0.006

Regression

The regression equation is $y = 4.93 + 0.846 x$

Predictor	Coefficient	StDev	T	P
Constant	4.928	1.109	4.44	0.000
x	0.8459	0.2917	2.90	0.006

S = 3.599 R-Sq = 19.4% R-Sq (adj.) = 17.1%

Analysis of Variance

Source	DF	SS	MS	F	P
Regression	1	108.97	108.97	8.41	0.006
Residual Error	35	453.47	12.96		
Total	36	562.43			

SUMMARY

Overall the hypothesis for this study, which focused on media and peer influence to the number of fad diets attempted by female adolescents was supported. The variable, the number of magazines read was found to have a significant and highly positive relationship to a greater number of fad diets attempted. The variable, the amount of time spent watching television did not show a positive relationship to the number of fad diets attempted yet did approach significance. The last variable the amount of time spent talking with girlfriends was found to have a positive and significant correlation to the number of fad diets attempted. Further explanation for the results of this study will be reviewed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was any correlation between the influence of the media and peers to the number of fad diets attempted by adolescent females. There was also a specific interest in three variables; the number of magazines read, hours of television watched, and the amount of time spent talking with girlfriends. It was hypothesized that the variables would show a positive correlation to the number of fad diets attempted.

The number of magazines read shows a highly significant and positive correlation to the number of fad diets attempted. This finding seems to be supported by the literature in a study done by Anderson & Di Domenic (1992) stating that many of the magazines that are marketed specifically to women put great emphasis on weight loss; the same is not true for magazines that men read (Anderson, 1992). In addition, the amount of time spent talking with girlfriends does show a positive relationship and significant correlation to the number of fad diets attempted by adolescent females. The literature seems to support this finding, reporting that peer pressure and peer opinions contribute to poor self-worth which leads to fad dieting (Grigg, 1996). The hours of television watched does not show a positive correlation yet approached significance to the number of fad diets attempted. However, the literature states that weight loss equating to happiness has been one of the most often stressed elements in television (Anderson, 1992). Overall, the study seems to show a significant correlation between the influence of media and peers on the number of fad diets attempted by adolescent females. The literature supports this finding in reporting that the cultural focus on looking a certain way is evident through television, magazines, and peer pressure (Berg, 1997).

DISCUSSION

The study seems to support the hypothesis that magazines influence teenage girls to engage in fad diets. The study and hypothesis seems to be supported by various literature discussing the influence magazines have on teenage girls and fad dieting. Magazines for teenage girls have cover articles offering training in lookism and dieting (Berg, 1997). To teenage girls the message is be thin and avoid fat and you will deserve a wonderful life (Pipher, 1994). One study discovered that magazines for women contained 10.5 times more advertisements and articles promoting weight loss than magazines for men, which happens to be the same sex-ratio for eating disorders (Andersen, 1992). The influence of magazines (including the cover, advertisements, and articles) seems to increase the number of fad diets attempted by adolescent females, which is supported by this study and the literature.

In addition, the study does seem to support the hypothesis that peers influence teenage girls to engage in fad diets. The literature also seems to support this hypothesis. Perceived pressure to be thin from friends and dating partners is associated with teen dieting (Stice, et al., 1998). Peer criticism of weight and peer investment in dieting are also associated with adolescent dieting (Cattarin, 1994). Teenage girls have been known to spend endless amounts of time on the phone sharing beauty and diet secrets (Levine, 1987). These findings and literature could suggest that peer influence, behaviors, and talk serve as direct role models for adolescent female diet fads. The correlation and relationship may have been more significant and positive had the subjects surveyed been a more typical representation of adolescent females. Many of the teenage girls participating in the study live in foster or group homes in a very structured environment perhaps prohibiting them from more peer interaction.

However, The study does not seem to significantly support the hypothesis that television influences teenage girls to engage in fad diet. Yet, the literature seems to support a more positive

relationship and significant correlation between the influence of television and fad diets tried by teenage girls. In one study, Levine (1987) found that a mere two percent of the actresses on prime time television were plump or overweight, and that thinness in actresses was positively correlated with a likable personality (Levine, 1987). Another research finding is that diet promotions, nonexistent in 1973, now comprise about 5 percent of television advertisements (Berg, 1997). Discussion on television talk shows often concerns body image. On *The Tonight Show* one evening a skinny actress said straight out that fat people pollute the esthetic environment (Levine, 1987). Television is shout out with thin ideal messages. The findings may have shown a positive correlation would the subjects have been a more typical representation of adolescent females. Many of the subjects surveyed are living in foster or group homes within a very structured environment in which much television viewing may be prohibited.

The results of the study may also have been more highly, positively correlated had the subjects been among the middle to upper class. Irregular dieting habits and eating disorder are most common among the middle to upper class (Berg, 1997). Many of the adolescent females surveyed are from lower socioeconomic families. The results may have also been highly and positively correlated had many the subjects been living in their primary home. As stated earlier, many live in foster or group homes within very structured environments. They do not have a lot of freedom to spend their free time as they might if they were living at home.

Overall, the study did seem to support the hypothesis. According to the study, there does seem to be an influence between the media and peers and the number of diets attempted by adolescent females. The study also seems to be supported by the review of the literature.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Practical Implications

There were a number of findings that can be derived from this study, which may have practical importance for individuals directly involved in working with adolescent females. The findings of this research study demonstrate that, overall; media and peers do have an influence in the number of fad diets attempted by female adolescents. The results from the survey show that the number of magazines read and the amount of time spent with peers do have a positive relationship to the number of fad diets teenage girls engage in. The results also show that the hours of television watched do approach significance in teen girls and fad dieting.

The first step in preventing unhealthy eating habits and eating disorders is education and knowledge. A recommendation would be that physicians become acquainted with the measures that teen girls go to, to engage in fad diets. Fad dieting is an unhealthy practice, which may lead to serious health risks as well as the possibility of developing into an eating disorder for a teenage girl. Teen girls that try more than two fad diets are more prone to develop an eating disorder than those who do not (Fallon, et al., 1994). Eating disorders have increased dramatically in recent years. Forty-nine percent of teenage girls in a recent survey admitted to using diet pills, while thirteen percent used laxatives and/or diuretics for weight loss (Fallon, et al., 1994). This is information that a physician should be aware of and looking out for when treating teenage girls.

This research study seems to reveal cognitive distortions in the minds of teenage girls that could benefit therapy if mental health practitioners are aware of them. First, that much of the influence seems to come from the media and peers could aid the practitioner of situation the client could dispute their cognitive distortions. A reported increase in eating disorder over the last several decades has aligned with a decrease in women's ideal body weight as depicted in the media (Wiseman, et al., 1992). It could

be helpful to therapists to understand the extreme fear teenage girls have of fat. Adolescent girls are more afraid of becoming fat than they are afraid of cancer, nuclear war, or losing their parents (Levine, 1987). In addition, a recent study found that 11 percent of females would abort a fetus if they believed it had a tendency toward obesity (Pipher, 1994). An educated therapist could teach a teenage girl the tools to negate these cognitive distortions and negative thoughts.

School counselors, health teachers and peer groups might benefit from the findings of the positive influence peers have on fad dieting. On the bus to school, between classes, and during lunch teenage girls scrutinize their bodies (Berg, 1997). Adolescent girls compare themselves to others and seem to be able to find someone else in school that is thinner and therefore happier. Young females can be cruel and quick to make judgement, which can crush a girl who does not feel comfortable with her own body image. A pursuit to be thin to become more acceptable can ensue (Pipher, 1994). Health teachers could implement a unit on peer influence and body image into their class. School counselors could develop groups and awareness programs and peer groups discuss this knowledge and how it seems to influence them.

Parents could benefit to become more aware of what their teenage daughters are doing and the influences they are vulnerable to and take steps toward prevention. Parents might pay attention to what their teenage daughters are watching on television and reading. Parents themselves may take a look at the magazines that the household subscribes to and the messages they send. In a study of female college students the impact of magazine advertisements on decreased body satisfaction is substantial. Brief exposure to several ads displaying highly attractive, very thin models resulted in decreased satisfaction with one's own appearance and weight, in comparison to the satisfaction of students in a control group who saw ads without models (Richins, 1991). Television can send out harsh body image appraisals to impressionable young women. A popular television show, *LA Law* ran an episode which featuring the

wedding of a successful, outgoing, fat woman to a handsome man. The episode revolved around the rest of the characters being shocked and deciding the man's motive must have been something other than love (Fallon, et al., 1994). Parents who are aware of these influences could talk with their daughters and become more aware of their influences within the household.

Implications for Further Research

The first recommendation for further research would be to do more research studies with adolescent female subjects. There is very little research done using adolescent subjects while adolescence is when most poor eating habits and eating disorders begin (Fallon, et al., 1994).

Another research implication would be to do a study using a more typical adolescent female population that could generalize more to the entire population.

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APPENDICES A-B

Appendix A

RUTH GILFRY CENTER – FEMALE ADOLESCENT GROUPS

INFORMATIVE SURVEY

Please CHECK the following that apply:

1. If you read magazines, how many have you read in the last month:
 0-3 4-6 7-9 9-11 more than 11.
2. How many magazines do you subscribe to:
 0-2 3-5 6-7 more than 7.
3. How many hours of television do you watch a week:
 0-3 4-6 7-9 10-13 14-17 more than 17.
4. How do you feel about your body:
 not good good very good
5. How many hours per week do you talk on the phone to your girlfriends:
 0-2 3-5 6-8 9-11 more than 11.
6. How many hours per week do you spend face to face with your girlfriends:

____ 0-5 ____ 6-10 ____ 11-15 ____ 16-20 ____ more than 20.

7. Which applies to you:
 _____underweight _____overweight _____ideal weight
8. I think about dieting this many times per week:
 _____ 0-2 ____ 3-4 ____ 5-6 ____ 7-8 ____ 9-10 ____ more than 10.
9. I talk to my friends about diets this many times per week:
 _____ 0-2 ____ 3-4 ____ 5-6 ____ 7-8 ____ 9-10 ____ more than 10.
10. I have tried this many diets in the last month:
 _____ 0-1 ____ 2-3 ____ 4-5 ____ 6-7 ____ 7-8 ____ more than 8.

Appendix B

HUMAN RESEARCH SUBJECTS CONSENT FORM

I understand that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary and I may discontinue my participation at any time without prejudice to my standing in this group. I understand the purpose of this study is to investigate the media's effect on adolescent girls and fad diets. I understand that the survey is self-report to be filled in and handed directly to the researcher. I understand that there are no potential health or medical risks in filling out the survey. I further understand that any information about me that is collected during this study will be held in the strictest confidence and will not be part of my permanent record. I understand that at the conclusion of this study all records identifying individual participants will be destroyed.

Signature of Client _____ date: _____

Signature of Guardian _____ date: _____

NOTE: Questions or concerns about participation in the research or subsequent complaints should be addressed first to the research or research advisor and second to Dr. Ted Knous, Chair, UW-Stout Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, 11 HH, UW-Stout, Menomonie, WI 54751, phone (715) 232-1126.