

**Sociology Essay Contest 2009**

Women, Body Image and Finding Self-Worth:  
The Importance of Validation and Support in Breaking Negative Body Cognitions

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## **SUMMARY**

Body image is defined as the way you picture your physical form and the way you think others perceive it (Coomber & King, 2008). The social implications on the individual body have been explored through criticisms of the media emphasis on restrictive eating habits and obsessive exercise regimes to achieve a perfect form. However, this promotion of the perfect body is not limited to the media; it has become a part of a social discourse of the body and becomes internalized into the minds of individuals; the result is often negative body image. An internalization of social messages has not only facilitated obsessive and dangerous behaviours but lowered women's overall self-esteem and over all quality of life. Hence, negative body image, frequently found among women, is not an individual problem but a social problem.

Through interviews and focus group sessions I hope to further explore women's perceptions of their own body in relation to other bodies. I hope to continue the work done by past researchers in discovering the roles of self-objectification, internalization, peer modeling and social comparison in facilitating negative body image. Through discussions with real women I hope to contribute a valid account of the everyday experience living in a woman's body. This study is meant to contribute to sociological research and further the recognition that, with regards to body image, the personal is indeed political.

## **OBJECTIVE**

My research will explore first-person accounts of women's experiences living in their bodies within Western society. My objective is to discover the role of discourse has in the individual perception of the body. Through discussing modes of social comparisons, modeling behaviours and self-objectification I expect to find similar cognitive patterns amongst participants based on the common belief of and/or resistance to the social discourse of the body.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

It has been widely recognized that society has become obsessed with the form of the body (Allen, 2008; Kalekin-Fishman, 2008; Mercurio & Landry, 2008; Martin, 2007; Tischner & Mulsen, 2007). Self-disciplinary methods of control such as calorie counting and aggressive fitness regimes are weight maintenance activities that have become the norm (Allen, 2008). There has been a rise of changing the body through intrusive methods such as plastic surgery and steroid use. Yet behind these seemingly regular routines of fitness or use of extreme measures, one may wonder: what are we all trying to achieve?

Is it merely physical beauty or acceptance? Is it social validation or self-esteem? The human body shape is an instrument used in social interaction and therefore is open to social criticisms beyond the individual (Kalekin- Fishman, 2008).

In his work *The History of Sexuality* Michel Foucault (1986) terms this system in society 'biopower'; the body has become a tool of controlling our movements,

communications and bodily expressions. We are constantly under surveillance. Tischner & Mulsen (2008) see biopower as a particular means for controlling women and keeping the patriarchal structures and gender performance in check. In their interviews with 18 'larger' women they found that there is an assumption among the women that individuals have the responsibility to change or maintain their shape through self-discipline (ibid).

The social perception of gender identities further complicates the interpretation of the body. In Western societies bodily discourse for women is laden with messages that thin (and only thin) is beautiful. The prescribed 'healthy' weight is determined by a standardized scale, (most notably Body Mass Index or BMI), which categorizes us into underweight, 'normal' and overweight. Within these numerically based weight groupings are loaded social connotations of attractiveness and capacity to be loved (Kalekin-Fishman, 2008). In terms of gendered performance, femininity is associated with being petite, polite and ultimately thin whereas masculine bodies are idealized when strong. In *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep*, Becky W. Thompson (1994) writes:

"The pressure to diet that many girls face from a very young age is an assault aimed directly at the very parts of the body that are decidedly female- as women throw up and out, exercise or diet away breasts, hips and buttocks. Feminists rightfully ask how different the quality of women's lives might be if the enormous energy they are taught to invest in denying themselves food were redirected toward dismantling sexism in all its many manifestations."

This quote suggests the gendered inequalities between women and men in society are also evident in gendered bodies. Feminist scholarship has noted how the promotion of the ideal female body as weak, powerless and childlike is a mode of

resistance within patriarchy to women's growing economic and social independence (Chernin, 1994).

Some biological views of sex differences also restrict women's ability to attract men within a particular body weight. In a local newsprint magazine, *Scene*, a man wrote to advice columnist Amy Alkon asking how to convince his wife to lose 20lbs. After pleading that he was no longer attracted to her, his wife refused. The response given by Alkon was as follows:

You need to help your wife understand that you're making this plea because you love her and want to keep the spark in your marriage (and sadly , you aren't able to make do with the kind generated by her thighs rubbing together).

Alkon's advice includes the ideology that men are 'hard wired to be looks driven.' This conditional aspect of love and acceptance Alkon claims need only apply to women, as "women don't care nearly as much about men's looks." This is but one cultural example of the blatant association of women's weight with their self worth and attractiveness. Thin is attractive, 'normal' is acceptable and overweight is preventable, to be avoided and ultimately unlovable.

Tischner and Mulsen (2008) call this the 'war on obesity' (p.261). 'Healthism' has arisen; a new form of discrimination communicating that fatness leads to disease while thinness is equivalent to optimal health (ibid; Allen, 2008). From a Marxist perspective, one may see this societal obsession with healthy living as a means to control the masses in hopes to implement capital gain. 'Commodity fetishism', the separation of a product value with its labour process, is in many ways applicable to construction of the perfect

body (Marx, 2008). The media are constantly tweaking the perfect body through technological enhancements (i.e. airbrushing, spray tanning); this image is becoming more and more realized in everyday life through the belief in its attainability. Through reality TV the so-called 'unrealistic' images are now shown as 'reality' and thus perceived as more attainable for all girls and women. Yet, we are distanced from the makeup artists, the stylists, personal trainers who produce these 'real' images.

In a way, technology has allowed for women to recreate the celebrity image and then advertise it on social networking sites such as Facebook. This reproduction of media images by peers imitates what Jean Baudrillard (1994) calls 'hyperreality'; the symbolic form of the perfect body has become fused with the real. We can view and monitor women as we do the celebrities in *People* magazine, except now, they are our friends and classmates.

As in Foucault's (1976) description of the panoptic structure of societal surveillance, women have become both the prisoner and the guard in the central tower, always watching and being watched by others. Women judge other women continuously on the basis of social norms and often compare to see where they fit in (Martin, 2007). In a study done by Kalekin-Fishman (2008) 18 'larger women' were interviewed some explaining their feelings of being watched when grocery shopping or eating in public. The constant surveillance flowing through the social body has led most to turn to self-discipline as a means of control; the onus is on the individual to control their body's urges and signals in order to maintain or achieve an acceptable frame. The body has



become an 'object of observation' (Foucault, 1986) or what Kalekin-Fishman (2008) call a "loci of moral responsibility" (p.545).

The theme of self-objectification and social comparison has been seen to contribute to a lower satisfaction in life. Aldeman & Ruggi (2008) found that social discourse of the body has encouraged women to place the creation of perfect bodies as central to their identity. This preoccupation of the healthy body has led to depression, disordered eating and low self-worth (Coomber & King, 2008). Mercurio and Landry (2008) found that *regardless of size*, women with higher thoughts of self-objectification had higher body shame and lower life satisfaction.

Negative body image then, can be seen as a symptom of an overall goal for perfection in young women today. Courtney E. Martin (2007) describes in her book *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters: The New Normalcy of Hating Your Body* a battle between two entities living within young women today:

The perfect girl in each drives forward, the starving daughter digs in her heels. The perfect girl wants excellence, the starving daughter calm and nurturance. The perfect girl takes on the world, the starving daughter shrinks from it. *It is a power struggle between two forces, and at the center, almost every time, is an innocent body.* (p. 21, my emphasis)

In a society that is telling young women they *can do anything*, Martin (2007) notes what they hear is that they *must do everything*. The body is merely one more mode of inadequacy, one more vehicle to work on and perfect. At times I myself have felt like I am intelligent enough to conquer the world, only later to feel deflated when I do not produce such grandiose results.

The influence from family and friends to fit the ideal body has facilitated the negative body image as well. Coomber & King (2007) found that sisters mediate Body Image Disorder through participant's practice of social comparison, modeling and internalization. The researchers found that hearing and observing reinforced social ideals of the body was even more influential when coming from peers (ibid). This illustrates the interactive nature of body image and the connectedness of women's image to those of others.

The proposed research of body image is of particular interest to me as I am a young woman very much a part of the social discourse of the body. I often hear friends, sisters, mothers pinching their waists in disgust, as if to say "I am not worthy." These thoughts in Western society are near universal in women, and I am no exception. It is rare to find a woman who does not doubt the shape of her body, torture it, attempt to mould it; yet the motive behind this desire to change our form is complex, and hard to shake. In *Appetites: Why Women Want*, Carolyn Knapp (2003) writes:

Even now, years past anorexia that sense of an independent force persists, as though some judgemental entity- me but not quite me- lives on the corner of my mind, where it stands watch, always aware of the body...always poised to deliver a slap at any hint of laziness, or sloth or relaxed control. (p. 87)

Therefore, as an undergraduate sociologist, I want to explore the relevance of my personal experience to that of the social context in which I live. Qualitative methods will allow me to gather the thoughts and feelings of other young women to further my inclination that I am only one account of a much greater epidemic. In her article "Small Stories, Big Issues" Mary E. Ryan (2008) promotes the use of Critical Discourse Analysis

(CDA) as it explores self/other roles in *interaction* giving greater insight into the macro level experience. I will consider CDA in my research. My research will be one conducted under a multi-theoretical perspective including symbolic interactionism, feminist theory and Foucault's work on *biopower* and surveillance.

I anticipate the participants of my study will share many similar experiences of living in a female body. Individual interviews will delve into women's perception of themselves allowing me to find links between social discourse and individual experience. I hope these discussions will empower women to resist modeling unhealthy thoughts and behaviours so that harmful discourses will be diluted and lead to change in the experience of all women.

## **METHODOLOGY**

For my research I conducted nine individual interviews made up of women aged 18-25 who are completing or have completed a university degree. The recruitment of my sample utilized convenience, snowballing and strategic methods. Using convenience sampling allowed me access to a wide pool of possible participants who were readily available to me; snowball sampling allowed me to gain trust of my participants based on a referral from a common acquaintance. My sample recruitment was somewhat strategic, as I sought some particular women who I knew would be open to in depth discussion.

In order to contact participants I utilized the social networking program *Facebook* ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)) where I created a group titled "Interviews for Qualitative Research Methods on Body Image" (see Appendix D). This group allowed me access to all participant emails and the ability for them to contact me at will. To maintain privacy, the

group was kept 'secret' meaning their membership was not displayed on the "News Feed" or listed in their profile. Interview participants were given the option as to where the interview would be conducted. Locations included King's University College Library, Social Science Centre, Williams Coffee Pub, and a participant's house.

All Participants were given a letter explaining the study (Appendix B) and were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix C) explaining that they have read the purpose of my study and consent to my methods. From here I explained a little bit about why I was conducting the interview, then went on to ask my pre-planned questions (Appendix F) while expanding on topics that produced interest from the participant. The interviews were audio-taped using the sound recorder program on my HP Laptop computer. I found this an extremely convenient program as I could record, listen, rewind and transcribe the interviews on a single device. A description of all participants can be reviewed in Cast of Characters (Appendix E).

After their interview, participants were given a debriefing questionnaire (Appendix G) asking them to explain their thoughts and feelings after the interview. This tool allowed me an opportunity to get feedback from more shy participants as well as incorporate their insights into any subsequent interviews. The questionnaire also acted as an effective tool for gathering demographic information such as age, ethnicity, place of birth and year of study. Most participants wrote of feeling comfortable through the process, though one participant, Star, felt an initial nervousness writing "I think I would have been even more open if I knew her intentions before hand on why she wanted to learn about body image." Using this piece of feedback, I started every interview with a

brief explanation of my experiences. This piece of information was extremely helpful in gaining rapport with the women and evidently, I feel encouraged them to speak more freely with our discussion.

After the interviews were completed, the participants were emailed a follow up questionnaire (Appendix H) including questions on topics I felt were not fully explored. Also, I wanted to give the participants who I interviewed first a chance to answer questions asked to the latter. I included a question asking for height and weight, which was decided in my research methods class as a necessary piece of information to understanding perceptions of the interviewees.

Due to time constraints, I was unable to conduct a focus group that enough participants could attend. As my methodology was framed around a symbolic interactionist perspective, the focus group would have been an appropriate method of data collection as it gives access to the social exchange incorporated in individual cognitions. I had hoped to present a slideshow of images and ask for members to explain their immediate reactions to them; this would allow the researcher to see through the eyes of participants. Also, by hearing other women speak of body image, the participants and myself will have gained more insight on the cycle of surveillance and its negatives effects. I feel that further research would benefit from this type of methodology.

Another obstacle in my planned research was found in accessing a more diverse sample. After my first few interviews with women, I realized a need to hear from a male perspective in order to have a comparison in gender. Although I had contacted to willing

males to participate, neither one could meet me in person. I followed up by sending my questions in a Word Document, though received no response. If I had thought of this initially, I feel my project may have gone in a very different direction, with a more comparative sample (i.e. 50% male, 50% female). Another lack of diversity was in race with two of Asian ethnicity, one European and seven Caucasian. That being said, for the scope of my research I feel the diversity of my participants remained evident in their experiences in the female body.

An unforeseen outcome in the research process was the completion of an online interview by one participant rather than a face-to-face interview. One participant, Finnigan, was emailed the questions in a Word Document and asked to send back the completed version. I had anticipated lengthy responses similar to those given in the interviews but found a noticeable difference in the amount of information she divulged. We then moved on to MSN Instant Messenger where the conversation flowed much more smoothly. I believe that without the ability to probe and explain questions, the online questionnaire definitely modified the data and reduced the significance of her experiences in comparison to the real time methods of interview or instant messaging.

Throughout the interview process I occasionally wrote reflections expressing the initial thoughts that were provoked (Appendix J). I found this reflective journaling an effective part of grasping the initial themes that started to form in the research process. Also, journaling reminded me of my place within the social body; I am as much living in a woman's body as my participants and at times felt my own negative bodily thoughts emerge.

## FINDINGS

### **Positive Body Image: Defining and Obtaining**

Body Image, as mentioned previously, is how you see your body and how you perceive others to see it (Coomber & Kings, 2008). Yet, there is an emotional aspect to this perception: "if you feel ashamed, self-conscious and anxious about your body, then you have a negative body image. If you feel comfortable and confident in your body, you have a positive body image." (Witmer, 2008)

When asking the participants what they thought was positive, words commonly used were "not worrying what somebody else thinks" (Star, 24), "feeling good about yourself" (Stella, 18; Veronica, 21), "not an obsession" (Malia, 21) and "self-confident" (Brigitta, 18). Lindsay, 21 mentioned the importance of "see[ing] your body that it actually is...but you don't feel bad about yourself over the reality of it."

As fixed as these definitions are, when asked if they themselves had a positive image, those participants who believed they did have a positive body image took into consideration the variation of this confidence:

*DM: So would you say then, that you have a positive body image?*

*Ya, I mean obviously everybody has insecurities about themselves, that's just part of life, but I, I mean I had it a lot worse when I was younger like I was pretty insecure in the beginning of high school. -Brigitta, 18 (average, curvy)*

*Yes. Everyone has parts about their body that aren't necessarily their favourite but overall I'm happy and confident in the way I look.- Finnigan, 21 (fit, athletic,thin)*

*Yes. I think generally I do. I think obviously there are days where I don't have a healthy outlook on my body as I could or should have, but I think overall generally I have a healthy body image.- Malia, 21(curvy)*

Um for the most part, like **I have my days where it's good and bad**, you know what I mean? But for the most part, it's pretty, good. I think that I'm comfortable with the parts of the body I like as well as knowing like I have parts I don't like but also being like, they're a part of me, and that's the way it is, so, might as well, enjoy yourself, [laughing]-Jenny, 21(average, slightly in shape)

Do I? Um, **I think 90% of the time I do but then there is this 10%, like those days where I'm like, ugh, maybe I could tone up a bit**, more, so, ya.-Lindsay, 21 (thin, toned)

*Figure 1. Do you have a positive body image?*

<b>“Overall”</b>	<b>“most of the time”</b>	<b>“getting there”</b>	<b>“depends”</b>	<b>“No”</b>
Finnigan Brigitta Malia	Lindsay Jenny	Annie	Stella	Veronica Star

These women all stated that although they mostly have positive body image, it is not something that they consistently possess. This suggests that feelings of “self consciousness, anxiety or shame” about their bodies remains an existing force in their lives.

Similarly, other women expressed variations in their body image, yet with more conditional aspects, including stress and weight fluctuations:

**I think it depends on the day.** [laughing] I think definitely other circumstances in your life that are going on. Definitely stress brings on an un- or a negative body image, for me. I'm not saying for everyone but it's just other factors in your life, but some days I feel really good, and some days I don't but, it depends on the day.-Stella, 18 (fit, athletic)

**Um, I'm getting there because I don't feel that I'm at- I don't feel that I am at my healthiest yet...**I would say that my body image is, 80% better



than it was 2 years ago. Which is like, and I mean, and throughout my life like my body image is **much better now.**- Annie, 22 (average, pear shaped)

**Um, not at the moment. I don't think, I'm not very comfortable, um like with my weight right now, but...** Um, like I've always like battled with my, weight, cause I've never been a thin person. Because I've always been like a chubby person and like my family has just always known that. But um...um, but **I think I just, more accepted it now. More than before, so... Right now, no.**- Star, 24 (voluptuous, fat)

Only Veronica, 21 explained her body image as a fixed in negativity:

**Ummm, no.** [laughing]. Probably not, I think I never really, I try to, but, um, I kind of never really have.- Veronica, 21 (average)

With defining themselves, whether it be frequent or rare, these women all hold the similar experience of self-doubt, and some with a sense that it is obvious- this suggests a normalcy within women to hold negative thoughts.

**Typifying the Experience: Everyday Thoughts, Struggles, Fluctuations and The Ideal**

Figure 2. Themes in Bodily Experience

Typology	Description	Participant(s)
Type A: The Everyday Woman	-No disordered eating patterns or extreme association with body - Confident in their body, yet aware of social influence on their subconscious.	Malia Brigitta Jenny
Type B: The Struggling Woman	- Self-confessed disordered eating and/or obsession with body, eating and exercising - Low self-confidence of the body, though wanting to overcome it.	Stella Veronica
Type C: The Fluctuating Woman	-Body is socially deemed "larger" at some point -Dealing/dealt with emotional eating or food addiction and negative social responses to their size - Have begun transforming and changing negative thoughts about the body	Star Annie
Type D: The Idealized Woman	- Body is socially deemed ideal - Receive compliments and positive social responses to weight - Experience guilt for being praised	Finnigan Lindsay

When listening to the women speak about their experiences, I realized that there were certain characteristics that were thematic. (see Figure 2). Four categories arose: The Everyday Woman, The Struggling Woman, The Fluctuating Woman and the Idealized Woman. I will refer to each participant as such throughout the findings.

Among my participants was a range of body types (see Figure 3). I had asked each woman to describe their bodies so not to impose any socially subjective titles to their form. When comparing the terms used to describe themselves with the BMI indication of health, we can see that a range of bodies are considered healthy, while those who fall outside of those circles are not necessarily 'unhealthy'. The distinction between thin and health is something a lot of the women seemed to have difficulty separating.

### ***Perceptions of Body Weight and Health***

Positive body image or healthy, balanced living were not always found exclusively in those participants who are thinner. For example, Stella, 18 who is 5'8, 125lbs struggles with cycles of negative and positive thoughts about her body:

*I think it depends on the day. [laughing] I think definitely other circumstances in your life that are going on. Definitely stress brings on an un- or a negative body image, for me. I'm not saying for everyone but it's just other factors in your life... because its like oh I can't change any of these other things so I need to start changing this, and focus on this. And that's why it's not usually days that changes, its weeks. One week it will be good and the next week it won't. and the next couple weeks it will be bad, and stuff like that.*

*DM: What do you think of when you hear 'fat'?*

*I initially think of myself and then I convince myself I'm not FAT, I may just not be skinny*

Conversely, Finnigan, 21, roughly the same height-weight of Stella at 5'7 and 120lbs is feels she has a positive body image:

*Yes. Everyone has parts about their body that aren't necessarily their favourite but overall I'm happy and confident in the way I look therefore I feel I have a positive body image.*

Also of similar body compositions, Veronica (5'7, 145lbs) feels 'overweight sometimes'

while Jenny (5'7, 146lbs) does not:

*I don't think that I'm fat or overweight however I do think that there are areas of my body that need some work and that I could improve if I wanted to. I think that I am fairly average as far as my weight goes and I think for the most part I lead a healthy and active lifestyle.*

*Figure 3 . Participants Height/Weight, Self Imposed Descriptions ,Ascribed BMI and Seeing a Realistic Body*

Name	Height/Weight	Describe their body as:	BMI description	DM: Do you think you are fat?
Malia	5'5/130lbs	Curvy	'healthy'	'No'
Brigitta	5'5, 5'6/132lbs	Average, curvy	'healthy'	'A few pounds overweight'
Jenny	5'7, 146lbs	Average, slightly in shape	'healthy'	'No'
Stella	5'8, 125lbs	Fit, athletic, average	'healthy bordering underweight'	'I think of myself as fat, then I realize... I'm just not skinny'
Veronica	5'7, 145lbs	Average, curvy	'healthy'	'Overweight sometimes'
Star	5'2, 150lbs	Voluptuous (good days), fat (bad days)	'overweight'	'Yes, though I never say'
Annie	5'7, 158lbs	Average, pear shaped	'healthy bordering overweight'	'I am no longer "fat"'
Finnigan	5'7, 120lbs	Fit, thin, athletic, sexy	'healthy bordering underweight'	'No'
Lindsay	5'3, 100lbs	Thin, toned	'underweight'	'No'

Above Jenny describes herself as healthy as she eats balanced meals, stays away from junk food and likes to keep active by walking. She feels healthier than most of her friends as she eats healthier than them. In her interview Jenny saw healthy living and physical weight as connected:

*DM: how do you find your friends? Like are they just less concerned about it [health]?*

***Some friends just don't have to be concerned about it, like I have some friends that are like 100lbs and they could eat a Big Mac every day and they would still like- where as me, I know myself, like if I eat certain foods then it's going to reflect on my body. So if I don't want to look like that, I have to, manage myself right.***

Similarly, Brigitta, 18 (average/curvy) explains that going to the gym and eating right is important to keep up over all health:

*I should be going to the gym more just for like average health, not even just being like 'ugh, I need to lose weight' just to keep yourself healthy.*

However, like Jenny, Brigitta also sees natural thinness as a way out of healthy eating:

*I actually have a couple friends you know like \*\*\*\* and \*\*\*\*, you know? And like they can eat whatever they want and they wont gain a pound, you know? ...like they can but I can't...**they can scarf that down ever week and it won't make a difference.** For me I just kinda, as a reminder...just eat a little bit healthier.- Brigitta*

Suddenly, we see that healthy living becomes less important as long as one *looks* thin, they are exempt from the expectations for a healthy lifestyle. Lindsay, 21 (thin, toned) mentions that "the more healthy you are, your body is going to look better." With Lindsay's logic, Brigitta's friends who 'scarf down' greasy foods *should* have bodies which appear undesirable. If these thin women eat unhealthy foods, are they seen as *healthier* than Jenny who leads a healthy lifestyle, but is of average build?

Participants also noted consistent exercise as associated with overall health.

Everyone who exercised felt it contributed to their health, while those who didn't exercise felt guilt for not keeping up with it.

Stella, 18 (fit, athletic) believes she lives a healthy lifestyle due to her exercise:

*I think I'm relatively healthy, because of my exercise...in terms of working out like I think my heart's good, my lungs are good because of running and stuff like that.*

Yet, ironically, Stella also sees her exercise as 'really bad' and obsessive:

*it's just really damaging and I'm not letting my muscles grow back, and I'm obsessed. I know I am, like I can't go a day without running and, that's my main control...that's my main form of exercise, is running just because it burns so many calories more than anything else.*

Stella, a Struggling Woman, later explains how she deals with disordered eating habits and obsessive thoughts about the body. Although physically fit, she does not see herself as mentally healthy. It is clear that her exercise is for more than just optimal health but for weight reduction and maintenance. This is the fine line between exercising for health and exercising as a consuming control mechanism, which can be somewhat debilitating.

Veronica, 21 (average, curvy) another Struggling Woman, attempts to resist the belief of size association and health:

*If you're not in shape I always feel like, it communicates that you're lazy or something which is not like, true and I think that, I shouldn't think that way because there's a lot of girls I see at the gym that I think are bigger and they're in shape you know? They work out a lot and maybe that's just the way that they're built.*

Although she knows logically health comes in all shapes and sizes, cannot apply this knowledge to her self. Veronica visits the gym four times a week, and eats fairly healthy, though deals with stress induced emotional eating. Though she is of average weight, and recognizes herself as healthy, she is not content with the appearance of her body:

*I think I just see myself, not, like, in a good light, so I look at other women and girls and I think "oh" you know, I should do this, or I should do this, but, I try not to ...they're all skinny! [laughing]...ya, I think in that way it motivates me*

*to like, work out... I know what I'm capable of, you know, being in shape or whatever.*

Losing weight through extreme measures is another form of weight reduction that is confused with health. Star, 24 (voluptuous, fat), a Fluctuating Woman, states:

*I was on this all fruit diet, I ate eat like great amounts of fruit, but it made me lose weight though! I lost a lot of weight and ate lots of fruit and vegetables but then I cut out like carbs, which is, you crave it afterwards.*

Similarly, Annie, 22 at 5'7 and 158lbs (average, pear shaped) has lost approximately 80lbs in the last two years. She explains:

*I did have times where it would be like 1000, 800 calories a day and then like, you know, there were a couple days with like 500 calories a day but I mean those were days when I was also working a lot, so internally it wasn't a conscious choice to do that, but I think it did help me get to the goal, 'cause every once in a while you gotta take it up a notch.*

These quotes show the complexity of defining what is healthy living and how it is perceived to appear physically.

Although Annie felt uncomfortable and lacked `range of motion` at her larger size, she explained that finding a healthy way of losing weight was a difficult, but necessary process:

*If you're that desperate and you don't know what to do so you are going to try whatever you can. It's really, like you said, it's a commitment to be healthy. And it just seems that something that's not possible. A healthy way of losing weight that I can do, just doesn't seem possible...a lot of the yo- yo dieting, the crash dieting, I've done all that. I've tried everything but none of it was ultimately helpful.*

After losing the weight through psychological overhaul Annie explains she has “forgotten how to be overweight.” This weight loss has placed her in the healthy range of weight for her height (5’7, 158lbs), though there is still a desire to become smaller:

*DM: now that you are considered, then, within the healthy range, what is in that last 20lbs?*

*...I think that when you set out certain goals...this is one way of closing a chapter. Because the original goal has a number attached to it, um, that number is still important for symbolic reasons. This is a symbolic 20lbs. I know I don't have to, I know that, um, part of why it is because I am toning so that, you know, um, it makes clothes fit a lot better, it makes it easier, you know, it's much more comfortable. But, ya not doing those twenty pounds takes something way. It leaves it feeling unfinished. And I want to finish it because it is a journey with a beginning, a middle and an end, so.*

Her intention to reach a certain goal is an admirable one, though it is clear that being toned is something that is less about physical health and more about appearances. It would be wrong to say that this is an unhealthy thought. What may become problematic is the lifestyle changes that would be necessary to reach a smaller size in such a short period of time. *Why is it unfinished?* The symbolic nature of Annie's twenty pounds sheds a light on how numbers on a scale can determine one's health or feeling of accomplishment. Annie states that achieving her goal affects her body image in saying: 'my confidence is relational to my level of success':

*I want to lose the last 20lbs at the gym so it's all toned and together where it's supposed to be. I'm like two months away from that,'cause like 10lbs a month is my, like, my standard, that I kind of go by, so. It shouldn't be too hard, this is not- like they say the last 10lbs is the hardest and it was cause like I did get down to like 10lbs to my goal and I gained 10lbs, it was the first time that I've actually gone back. But now that I've kind of like, you know, revived that original thought process that got me to where I am now, um,*

*now I feel like that last 20 is just going to be like, peddle to the metal. And then it's just maintenance after that.*

Signs of body resistance and the difficulty of losing twenty pounds off a healthy frame are evident. Annie's 10lbs weight loss a month is a goal that to her seems attainable, but is not necessarily as easy as she assumes. What if she loses ten pounds, and gains it back for the second time?

Annie was one of the most determined women I interviewed, and recognized its benefits in her life:

*DM: so what do you, in general, what do you like about yourself?*

*um, I like my ability to, I don't quit on anything. I'm very, dedicated. And when I decide I'm going to do something, it happens. I cant stand to just, you know- I really like working, I really like the process of focusing myself on something.*

This determination when applied to her body modification leaves a chance for a perpetual let down, which ultimately can be trying on one's self esteem. If Annie's confidence is related to her level of success, that symbolic twenty pounds can become a continuous battle of failure and successes, only returning her to the yo-yo dieting she once experienced at a larger weight; This feeling of failure, ironically, is a consequence

Annie recognizes:

*DM: Okay, and what don't you like about yourself?*

*I don't like...I don't know, I really, I don't like that I try, excessively. Like I work really, really hard for things that never come...I fail repeatedly and I have throughout my life.*

Consequently, if the road to Annie's goal is done by what she calls 'peddle to the metal' behaviours, one can see the possibility for hopelessness and failure.



Annie's story echoes the commodity fetishism of the body; her separation of the process to the ends is somewhat unrealistic and setting herself up to idealize a goal that may be unmanageable.

So I maintain, what *is* in that 20lbs? The symbolism Annie explains goes beyond her own personal goals, to become representative of a societal conception. To be at the smaller end of the healthy weight category is not necessary for health, but it is still seen as more attractive and desirable. The numeric weight of a woman holds a lot of power in her self-image and identity. Clothing size becomes a benchmark for certain times in women's lives, and can change our whole perception of our body. If we go into one store and are a size 8 and in the next store are a size 12 we begin to critique our body, rather than the clothing. When jumping on the scale has the power to elate our self-concept or create unwanted anxieties. All within three little digits lays our confidence, accomplishment and failures. A lower weight is inextricably linked to health and well-being. In such a health driven society, thinness has remained a culturally justified desire- so how have these cognitions of weight, health and desirability been communicated to us?

### ***Symbols of Beauty: Media Setting the Stage***

*"Do you see, like, older women, chunky women in the media that people look up to? Not very much."- Star, 24 (voluptuous, fat)*

Whether or not thinness and fitness equate to happiness and confidence, the media definitely portrays it as such. Constant flowing of advertisements show us a limited view of what a woman should look like. When looking at a body outside of a

hyper-real image of airbrushed women, it should seem easy enough to rationalize this. However, it is not in the display of thin women in the media, but the connection with desirable traits, without context to their construction that makes women feel they should want to be this image:

*DM: what do you think sets those standards [of image] for women?*

*... Just everything like commercials, everything you see, it kind of sets not only body image standards but overall image and sort of the perfect life you know the perfect beautiful, stay at home housewife who cleans, and is thin {laughing} they're always thin!... in sitcoms the wife, no matter what the husband looks like, the wife is always thin, **you don't ever see any real women on television or if you do it's very, very rare that aren't thin.**- Malia, 21 (average, curvy)*

*As soon as you open up anything, there's no- there's no one over a certain size, like realistically there isn't, especially when promoting towards people our own age, it's like, like **you have to be small and it seems like it's getting smaller and smaller and smaller**, like what was the, um the ideal, um, picture in the magazine, even like six years ago is a lot, it seems like the size, women are now a lot smaller so I don't know.- Jenny, 22 (average, slightly in shape)*

*'Cause just like healthy living is always in the media now, so I guess that every time **I turn on the TV I see commercials for it or work out stuff.**- Brigitta, 18 (average, curvy)*

*Sometimes my initial thoughts/reactions when I watch pussycat doll videos and other such things where the girls have unbelievable bodies, are somewhat negative and **I wish I looked like that.**- Finnigan, 21 (fit, athletic, thin)*

Some women felt that being in shape or having the perfect body seen in the media was in their power if they so choose:

*Ya definitely a pressure to meet that image, but also to be the best that I can be, right? You know what I mean? Like I realize I'm never going to be a really, really tiny person, that's not my body type, but like, to be like as lean and as fit as I can, it's always going to be there...I feel like the changes I could make are*

*not out of my reach so if I wanted to do them, I could.- Jenny, 21 (average, slightly in shape)*

Like Annie who is determined to reach her goal and often let down in her setbacks, many interviewed feel a responsibility to become or maintain the ideal 'thin' body:

*I know that I'm capable of, you know, being in shape or whatever, and ya, I it's cause I know I'm capable of eating healthy and being in shape or being my best or what I think is my best and sometimes I think I don't do that so I guess that's probably why. - Veronica, 21 (average) on why she admires those she feels are thin*

*Like I could make my legs smaller, **I could make my stomach smaller, so it's like why not do it?** 'Cause you can!'- Stella, 18 (fit, athletic)*

*It's just like once and a while I'm like 'ugh, ya, I could be working out right now instead of going to my friend's res[idence] and getting food and hanging out' you know? I could be going to the gym for an hour if I really wanted to, but I don't. ...**Sometimes it makes me feel a little guilty.** I guess kind of, you know not having almost enough willpower to just get down to it and just start working out ...so it's just me getting over the fact that I know it's gonna be a chore that I know its gonna be a pain in the ass but I'm gonna just have to go and do it."- Brigitta, 18 (average, curvy)*

Some participants recognized the appeal of being in shape, but it did not necessarily make them change their behaviours:

*I want to [change my body] but I don't have the motivation to. And do I feel bad about it? mmm, ya. It makes you feel kind guilty, like it makes me feel guilty...I'm not disciplined enough in that field I guess, I can't get myself to go and work out on a daily basis.- Star, 24 (voluptuous, fat)*

*I don't think it affects my life so much though that I spend so much time thinking about my body and the decisions I make eating and exercising... **I think it's always in the back of your mind. When you're thinking "Should I go to the gym today? Should I not go to the gym today?"** part of it is sort of a, you wanna make your body in good shape, you want to look good. But I don't think it's a major influence on that."- Malia, 21 (curvy) on how maintaining body shape affects her life*

For Star, depression acted as a barrier to her pursuing the ideal image that she ultimately recognizes as unattainable for her body type (‘I’ll never ever be really really fit, because that’s just not my body type right?’). Veronica, Brigitta and Stella all consider working out as a way to becoming in shape and experience guilt for their resistance. Malia, while recognizing the desire to ‘look good’ seems to lack the element of guilt felt in the other women.

Jenny, 21 (average, slightly in shape) believes that the media has a direct affect on her friend’s self struggles to be thin:

*It’s because they, they feel like they have to fit that mould, and like, to be honest like some body types are just not meant to be that 100lbs, like **magazine type body** and like it’s hard for them to adjust to the fact that like, they’re never going to be- meet the total, like media perception of what a woman is, so like they just struggle and try to fit that mould even though they don’t so its like a constant like conflict between themselves and what society wants them to be, you know what I mean?*

Whether it is related to health or feeling attractive, all participants communicated how the thin ideal seen in the media lays a backdrop to how they see their bodies and lifestyles.

### ***“Does this make my butt look fat?”: The Normalcy of Negative Body Discourse Among Girlfriends***

During university, having good girl friends is an important part of finding your way in young adulthood. We support each other and listen to each other’s concerns while at the same time trying to navigate our own way in the world. With an array of images in the media of what an ideal woman *should* be, young women often discuss their favourite celebrity beauties and who they think is unattractive or fat.

One of the most judgement inducing television shows is *America's Next Top Model*, where women compete to 'be on top' of the fashion, ideal-body-producing industry. Last semester in my household Wednesday nights became ANTM night. My friends and I would curl up on the couch and blatantly critique the contestants, yelling at the screen in approval, amusement or often disgust. "I like her, I like her she is so pretty." "Ha-ha! Look at her hair!" "Ew! She is heinous."

Being a self-proclaimed feminist, I was always aware these nights were not positive for any of our self-image, but I have to admit, judging is fun. However, a show based on a competition for the most beautiful woman was often found to be subjective all of us having different favourite contestants. There was sometimes upset in the room if we believed a contestant to be at polar opposites of the beauty scale. Why are we so threatened by our friend's opinions?

Beyond the judgement of the strangers on TV, there lies girlfriend's curiosity to where they stand in their friends' eyes. As many young woman cannot find representations of their body on the TV screen, it seems that women ask friends to exercise their judging muscles all in hopes of validation. Finnigan (fit, athletic, thin) explains how opinion of girlfriends in outfit choice, hairstyle and makeup is a key element to finding our confidence:

*With girls your body image is a part of your relationship with your girlfriends. Do I look good in this? Does this make my butt look fat? **Are all questions that we rely on our friends to answer honestly but when girls have a negative body image and are constantly feeling insecure and are constantly relying on their friends to compliment them** again and again it can become exasperating. You just wish they could see their beauty like you see it.*

Finnigan, an Idealized Woman, has a body, which is often represented as beautiful in the media. Tall and thin, she is aware of this advantage, but sees changing nature of this validation:

*I feel like girls are envying my body type it just makes me mad because their bodies are beautiful just the way they are, and **just because at this point in time my body type is what is shown all over the media, it doesn't mean anything.** Because years ago when Marilyn Monroe had the ideal body type I would have been screwed.*

Finnigan's ability to see the social context of her validation is important in recognizing other women's bodies as valid, and consequently supporting her friends.

Lindsay,<sup>21</sup> (thin, toned) , also an Idealized Woman, feels that negative girl talk is something she cannot partake in her friendships:

*DM: okay so did you find a lot of negative body talk?*

*Yes! With girls...and in a weird way I could never really, participate in it. and that was kind of a weird thing in like high school and just in life, cause like I never, cause like "oh I hate the way my...this looks" or I hate- ya....they were usually commenting on how, fat they were. So I was like, like in my mind I knew the reality of my body, I know I'm not fat that's not, an issue for me. So for me to start saying those things, would, would be dumb.*

While Finnigan attempts to support her friends through compliments, Lindsay approaches negative body image from a more health centred approach. When her friend's ask for help, as a science student Lindsay suggests lifestyle changes to fix the body as a route to positive body image:

*...When they address me then I'll be honest with them, like okay you shouldn't be eating that stuff, like it's unhealthy, I'm pretty sure your arteries don't appreciate it. But I try to stay away from, like body image, more like as a health concern... I guess when I would be talking to them it would be more like, okay you don't like your body image, because your lifestyle has been*

*unhealthy so we'll try to figure something to live a healthier lifestyle But that would only be like, new years resolutions, they didn't really...*

*DM: it didn't last?*

*GW: ya. And then you would just have the same discussion again. And the same discussion again.*

Both idealized women felt they could not crack their friend's negative body image; no amount of compliments from Finnigan or lifestyle tips from Lindsay seem to halt the negative discourse they hear amongst their friends, leaving them feeling frustrated.

However, in her follow up questionnaire Malia, 21 (curvy) feels that the discussions with friends *are* helpful in relieving negative body thoughts, as well as compliments from her boyfriend:

*-talking with friends, having curvy women in the media.*

*-I think as pathetic as it sounds having compliments from guys helps a lot (having a boyfriend often tell me he likes my body)*

Likewise, Brigitta, 18 (average, curvy) expressed that her friends 'down to earth' nature helped her dispel superficial goals to lose weight, and focus on healthy living.

As positive discussions and reinforcements are helpful to Malia and Brigitta, those participants who lack positive support in their friendships feel the absence:

*I feel like, I don't know, amongst my friends and amongst women in general its not- it's considered rude to be like say 'oh I like this', you know, like we never really- it's mostly like, especially with my friends, like, always like 'oh my god, my ass is fat' or whatever [laughing] its not really like, ever like 'oh my god, I look so good in this' and that's hard! When you think about that, it's not really right, but, it's really, I don't know **I'm not really used to saying things that are good about myself.**- Veronica, 21 (average)*

*... I said like you know, like I would kinda like, a working out partner and she was like "okay! I can work out with you" but then...the first thing she said to*

*me was "don't worry I don't judge people on how they look." And I was just like THANKS! I never thought of that until you said it [laughing], until you pointed it out to me! [laughing]! So...ya we have yet to go to the gym together, so [laughing]*

*DM: oh no! [laughing] so it brought attention to like differences? she was trying to say it in a way like don't worry but I know her mind she was thinking it, though, you know?" - Star, 24 (voluptuous, fat)*

Star, 24 (voluptuous, fat) also does not receive compliments or reassurance from friends hindering her ability to see her body in a positive light.

Hence, I would argue that although the Idealized Women feel their attempts are going nowhere, female encouragement amongst friends, and a focus away from body change and criticisms can be a positive support for young women in overcoming negative body image.

### ***Family Influences: Support vs. Facilitation***

Another social support system that was found to influence positive or negative body image in participants was their families. All the Everyday Women (Brigitta, Jenny, Malia) and Idealized Women (Lindsay and Finnigan) expressed positive family ties contributing to their (mostly) positive body image:

*DM: How has your family influenced your body image?*

*In a positive way. We are always full of compliments for one another." - Finnigan, 21 (fit/athletic/thin)*

*My mom's really good at like, influencing me in a positive way, like your ski[nny]- you're pretty, you're gorgeous, you look nice today, that kind of thing, you know, just supporting me that way... they're fine with what I look like, they appreciate whatever shape form, whatever I am- Jenny, 21 (average, slightly in shape)*

*One particular friend whose mom is really nit picky and its almost just like difficult to go to her house and like watch 'cause like my friend's beautiful*



*and you can really see like how its effected her... I've always been really glad my mom's not like that... it's not that judging critique you see a lot- not like a lot but like my friend's mom... And I know my dad too, tries to throw in like healthy medical tips,[laughing] like, you know? 'keep up that exercise', you know? So I think its like a, healthy, like relationship that we have. <DM: okay, yep. So it doesn't like make you feel bad, you just take it as advice?> ya, like love.- Brigitta, 18 (average, curvy)*

Conversely, the Struggling Women (Stella and Veronica) felt as though their mothers had a role in their negative body image, and felt they received little support from their families in this regard. The 'nit picky' mom that Brigitta mentioned can be seen in Stella's narrative:

*More recently over Christmas we were down at my grandma's house and she um, she was like "oh I shouldn't have eaten that much" blah blah blah, going on about it, and then um, we were looking in the mirror and my grandma came in too and was like oh I have such a belly, and then it was just like that whole family thing-< DM: ya. Ya.> and then, my mom picked up my hair straightener and there was like the cord for the plug and she, wrapped it around her thigh, and then measured with her finger where it was, on her thigh, and then she wrapped it around mine to measure whose thighs were smaller...she did that and it was just really weird. And mine were smaller and she's like "oh, maybe I should go for a run." So I think that my mom's isn't positive either and it definitely affected me.- Stella, 18*

Stella's mother's negative body image has been a strong force in her own disordered eating behaviours, as she would restrict food weeks before visiting home in fear of judgement:

*I would feel pressure from her, since I went to boarding school I'd come home on the breaks- and I'd always, it's stupid, I remember skipping meals before break because I didn't want my mom saying something seeing me as it had been a month. so I would always feel this pressure as if she would say something to me if I looked different. Or she would be like "oh, do I need to take you shopping?" Like "you're clothes don't fit you anymore." And I don't know how she meant it...*

Stella associates gaining weight as a negative, stemming from her mother's fear of gaining weight (displayed in the Christmas story). Stella may not have felt offended by the offer to go shopping for bigger clothes if she felt weight gain was not a central part of gaining her mother's approval.

Contrasting with Jenny's narrative expressing compliments from her parents, Struggling Woman Veronica, 21 (average) expresses a lack of validation and support:

*My parents, um, I don't know, because like, when I was younger, like when I got made fun of and stuff, my mom would not really, she would obviously comfort me, but like, she would say I was pretty and everything but I don't think she was ever like "you're not fat", like I don't know what you could really do, but I think it may go back...my dad never really says anything he never says like "you look pretty", you know and so that's kind of always, kind of always been something that if I get really dressed up or something he's never like "oh you look nice" you know, but we have that kind of relationship where it's just kind of like, you know, I don't know.*

The Fluctuating Women (Star, Annie) did not express particularly negative relationships with their families, though they did not emphasize their family's role in supporting them either.

An important pattern found was that the Everyday Women (Malia, Jenny, Brigitta) and the Idealized Women (Finnigan, Lindsay) all felt as though they had an overall positive family support in regard to maintaining a positive body image. The Fluctuating Women did not receive as much support from family members in terms of separating body from self worth, while not being blatantly judged for their weight either.

The Struggling Women's (Stella, Veronica) experiences with eating disorders were somewhat taboo subjects in their families, as they feel unable to discuss their concerns openly:

*I think my parents I guess it's been, kind of hard, 'cause, we don't really talk about it, but like I know it's always been, they know that like, you know when I didn't feel that way and when I don't, you know, **I don't feel like we really talk about, we don't really go there, at all...** and that's kind of a touchy issue, and that's kind of, a problem, ya. - Veronica (average)*

*I tried to talk to my mom about my concerns with my eating habits and it did not go over well at all and it definitely like **she ignored it and just pushed it aside and she hasn't talked to me about it since.** And, I told her, obviously I'm concerned about this if I brought it up and all she said to me was "well you're a smart girl, if you need to eat more, then eat more." And that was her response, so I think that that kind of, like my relationship with her kinda got a little, dampened from that, it was just like, it didn't work the way I wanted it to...- Stella, 18 (fit, athletic)*

The Struggling Women both felt their concerns were being ignored from their parents suggesting a correlation between lacking social supports and struggling with a negative body image.

### ***Along comes Stress: A Pinnacle Point for Body Obsession, Modification and Depression***

*"I think people are unequipped, to deal with the power of suggestion."-  
Annie,22*

One of the most interesting findings in these interviews was the relation of stress and lack of social support to one's negative self-image. Methods of controlling the body in times of hopelessness or overwhelming circumstance often led to an attempt to change the body, or punish it:

*I think it's the fact that, especially with school, it's something that I can't control the fact that I have an assignment due, or the fact that I have to go to class and I'm exhausted. Stuff like that I can't control it, and that makes me really irritated that I cant- that I don't have control over my own life. So I think that, in that way I start to think about my body and oh, I can control this, so I should. And that's something that I'm able to control, and then, I start to think in that way. On those stressful days... I go into cycles with that too where I am obsessed with eating healthy and then I'll just crash and eat*

*the crappiest ...[laughing] <DM: okay, yeah. [laughing] >...just anything [laughing]"*  
- Stella, 18 (fit, athletic)

Stella, 18 (fit, athletic) confessed in her interview that she has dealt with disordered eating and exercising patterns by skipping meals, keeping busy or going to sleep to avoid eating and obsessive exercise. According to BMI standards Stella (5'8, 125lbs) is considered on the low end of a healthy body size, bordering on underweight. She does not feel thin though logically she knows she is not overweight. Her body image goes up and down depending on life events, ultimately affected her turn to controlling behaviours.

Similarly, Star, 24 deals with emotional eating and depression, using food as a control to reduce stress:

*First year [of university] I lost 30 pounds in 2 months, then I was stable for six months, until I couldn't do the crazy diet anymore, started craving foods so little by little I gained. By the summer I gained back the thirty pounds, then since then I kept going up and up. Then I'd get depressed that I couldn't control it.*

*DM: How do your weight changes make you feel?*

*I feel guilt, and frustration, because I can't do much about it even if I try, because it always comes back.*

Whether it is restrictive eating or overeating, food is associated with body weight and the fuel that changes our shape. Both Stella and Star attempted to lose weight as a means of gaining esteem through pursuing the ideal body type. Yet, eventually, these habits 'crash' or craving sets in. Realistically, these diets do not work, and this only perpetuates feelings of failure, as seen in Annie's story earlier.

Not only does the failure create more stress, but the obsession itself, even if successful can be consuming:

*I'll start to realize that I'm being ridiculous, like I need to just, like focus on what I need to focus on but its, it's also...**it just stresses me out more because I already have all this work that I need to do and it's so time consuming** and that's definitely how it effects my life...the time just thinking about it. It's usually when I'm, It's usually when I'm busy just I'll forget to eat or something and I'll be like oh why did I do that? Then I'll just start analysing why I didn't eat and so, stuff like that." –Stella*

The solutions sought are clearly not permanent ones as weight loss does not solve the problem of school deadlines or feeling overwhelmed.

During the down period of the cycle, where one gives up on themselves, some punishing behaviours can ensue:

*It's actually weird because on the weeks where I have poor body image, I don't have a healthy diet, and you think that it would be the opposite because you'd think, oh, I feel crappy about myself, I'm gonna go eat some veggies and I'll feel better but no, I'll go get a huge bag of chips [laughing] or something like that.- Stella, 18*

***I pushed myself out social scenes so much because I was so self conscious of my body...**when you're around a lot of other people who are a lot of different sizes, and you are always on the upper scale of that, and that is fundamentally not the person that you feel that you are, it's, it's very nerve wrecking and anxiety inducing in me, I guess. So ya, social situations were hard for me.- Annie, 22*

Ironically, pushing ones self away from social support like Annie did when she was emotionally conflicted, or eating something that does not properly fuel the body and mind like Stella are ways that constrict the ability to feel good about ourselves.

The use of media images was used by Annie instead of turning to people for reassurance and validity:

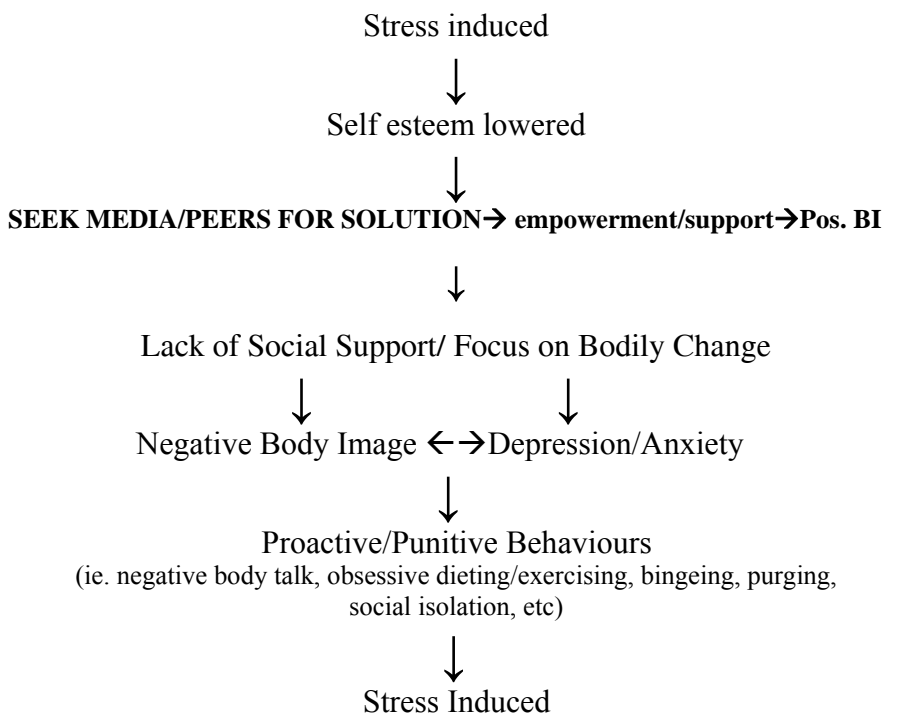
*I feel that I have personally used media images to fuel myself to get to my goal. Which is kind of sick and twisted in the context of what we're doing cause like [laughing] it's exactly the opposite of what would seem psychologically healthy, I will admit, that, you know, had this been an ideal situation I would have been strong enough not to need those things, but, I was desperate.*

The Cyclical Nature of Negative Body Image (see Figure 4) is an attempt to further break down this cycle that both Star and Stella experience. Stress, which many women in their narratives connected with inducing vulnerability, can come from any experience including school deadlines, personal relationships and busy schedules, to feeling under appreciated, misunderstood or unsuccessful in their goals. This often leads one to become emotionally deflated, lost and insecure in their self. This insecurity usually leads

to one being more open to suggestion, as Annie displayed with her reliance on the media images.

Comparing our situation with friends, family and the media is a way of seeking a road to the high esteem we feel they embody. For this reason, it is crucial what

*Figure 4. Cyclical Nature of Negative Body Image*



type of messages we perceive from the media/friends/peers.

If the media, friends and/or peers give support or induce empowerment our confidence increases, followed by a positive body image. Conversely, If we absorb messages about body change being a route to esteem (i.e. Weight loss ads promising new lives) rather than rely on support and validation, we internalize these messages.

This leads to feeling that our bodies should change in order to regain control and empowerment, which is often done through punitive behaviours (bingeing, purging, social isolation) and/or proactive behaviours (dieting, over-exercise). Even proactive changes are meant to increase our esteem, but when done obsessively only recreate stress when we do not have time to keep up with exercise, or we want to eat pizza with friends on the weekend.

Likewise, punitive behaviours create feelings of hopelessness, as one is no closer to reaching the perceived solution to low esteem (ie. thinness). Results from these behaviours cannot bring fulfillment or perfection, so self-esteem is lowered, and the cycle continues.

This cycle is not fixed in one's experience. Its power lies in one's ability to get out of the cycle, as well as easily into it. In one situation where one may receive support and feel empowered, at sometime or another, when defences are down, women fall subject to negative body image. Throughout all the women's experiences, from the Idealized woman to the Fluctuating Woman there is a constant logical process of resistance embedded "in the back of [their] mind." It seems to take women more courage, time and

energy to love of our bodies than it does to feel inadequacy. As Malia, 21 (curvy) says  
"we are our own worst critic."

### ***Attracting Love: Hunger for Validation through Relationships***

*"Everyone's insecure. And how do we find our identity? The media tells us where you find your identity, is in, how you look."*

- Lindsay, 21 (thin, toned)

So why does loving our bodies matter so much? I found I asked myself this question over and over throughout the research project. Why am I doing this? After reading over the transcribed interviews again and again, I finally got it: all of these women just want to be understood, validated and ultimately loved:

*"For some reason it's always in the back of your head, will they like me for who I am? Or are they going to, you know, reject the way I look." -Jenny, 22 on being intimate with a new boyfriend*

*"I would never want somebody like, guys, left, right and centre being like 'Damn! Check her out!' you know? It's more or less you would want...positive reaction from somebody that you care about, right?-Brigitta, 18 on how men react to her body*

In these cases, both Jenny and Brigitta consider their bodies in terms of attracting the opposite sex. Jenny's initial thought when first being with a boyfriend is the fear that he will no longer want her after seeing her body. Brigitta's quote speaks to the difference



between being recognized by a stranger as attractive, and sees gaining validation from someone you care about as more important.

Feeling judgement from her mother about her weight, Stella's feelings of about her weight shows why she is 'obsessed' with her body:

*DM: ya, ya. So it's almost like... it's about being loved? You're not loveable if you're not attractive or something, is that right, or?*

*Ya. Ya. No I think it is. Because like with family, obviously your searching for love in your family unless they outwardly show it already. So you're searching for that and in relationships with other people, you want a long lasting relationship, so ya, it's definitely a factor. - Stella, 18 on why she obsesses over her body*

During times of insecurity and feeling 'fat' some women expressed an association with being unlovable:

*...for [my boyfriend], when I wasn't feeling attractive, obviously, our relationship was a lot different, a lot different because I just didn't feel like I could be, show him, like love... I didn't feel like being around- like I would get depressed, and feel like, '**I don't know why you like me**', that kind of thing.- Veronica, 21 on how her body image affects her relationships*

*...because I was still thinking of myself as a bigger girl, I just, I couldn't understand- **there had to be some ulterior motive, there is no way that they just liked me for me, because you know?** ...There are situations; I know I sabotaged them because of how I felt about my body. So there are a couple guys who I know that, had I been in this place then, it would have happened, it would have been great, because it was all there. But I was the one who ruined it. And I know that...I didn't give certain people a chance because of how close I knew they could get to me and how close I didn't want them to get to me.- Annie, 22 on resisting intimacy due to negative body image*

When feeling overweight or fat, both Veronica (average, curvy) and Annie (average, pear shaped) feel they are not worthy of being loved by men as fat is associated with negativity and ugliness (all women when asked about 'fat' mentioned it as a negative,

undesirable state, see Appendix I). However, in her follow up questionnaire when asked if weight gain would affect her ability to attract men, Veronica did recognize the agency she has over accepting love:

*DM: if you gained weight while maintaining a healthy lifestyle, do you think it would affect your ability to attract men? Please Explain.*

*I think if you let it. I think men are attracted to women who are confident in who they are and comfortable in their skin. I think if you maintained these qualities even if you put on weight then you would still be attractive to men.*

Another interesting aspect was in hearing the Idealized Women (Finnigan, Lindsay) speak about men's reactions to their body. Being the prototype of the accepted body, these women received attention from men and women allowing them to feel validated. However, Finnigan recognizes the meaninglessness of this type of superficial admiration:

*He kept talking about my body and how good it was and was like how often do you go to the gym, blah blah blah and in my mind I was just like are a joke?...really all you are saying that means to me is it that you wouldn't like me if I was bigger than I am?... who wants to be with someone when it's so conditional on your body shape?- Finnigan, 21 (fit, athletic, thin)*

Likewise, Lindsay, an Idealized Woman, sees the limitations in focusing on judgement or feeling better than others based on appearance:

*I'm trying to change the way I look at other people because it doesn't matter to be honest, like people say that to you in like high school that it doesn't matter but really, like it doesn't matter!*

...

*Usually what I think are like prideful thoughts, like "Oh! I'm healthier than them! Oh look at them, they're just pigging out! I have more self control!" and it's just like who am I to judge them, to degrade them with my own thoughts?...I don't like that about myself. It's disgusting...it's dehumanizing people...and that like prohibits- like pride prohibits people from loving other people.- Lindsay, 21 on comparing herself to other women*

## **SUMMARY/CONCLUSION**

In all of these women's narratives, the common theme is the search for human connection. We all want it. We all strive for it. We can see how the surveillance other bodies can lead to the prideful thoughts Lindsay describes, blocking our ability to give love. We hear how Annie and Veronica's self doubts acted as a wall to receiving love. It is clear that internalization that a woman's image is her self worth is limiting to building friendships and opening oneself up to empowerment which happens through human connection. It is in this element where we find the answer to slowly detangling ourselves from the discursive web of judgement. Whether it be of ourselves or of others, we must challenge ourselves to take agency, and look past the surface.

Whether it be standards set by the media or negative feelings induced by comparisons with peers, having knowledge of the productive process of images and being able to separation of self worth from body size were determinant of feeling good about their size. Social support from family and friends proved to be one way of the women seeing through the superficiality of body obsession and the media discourse on beauty.

Negative body talk amongst girlfriends can be seen as another arena for women to doubt themselves rather than feel supported and worthy as they are.

Those who experienced depression, weight fluctuations and negative body images showed to have an overall lack of support and therefore were unable to fight the constructed realities before them. The cyclical nature of negative body image shows that those most prone to enacting punitive/proactive behaviours toward the body were those

unable to deal with stress. As Lindsay mentions: "When I'm stressed out I'll tend to pick on little things, maybe, like your body is the first thing that you see in the mirror."

When searching for esteem and empowerment, it is much easier to look in the mirror and choose to improve ourselves. The media images and admiration for 'fit' or 'thin' people around us provides a quick band-aid approach to feeling better about our *selves*. Yet, just as beauty is more than skin deep, so are the paths to achieving it. In order to hold a positive body image and believe one is physically attractive is to realize that one is worthy, intelligent, a loveable person. Validity in the media of our bodies would be helpful, though only if it truly shows all shapes and sizes with all types of personalities attached to it. It seems that the media, being a seller of products, will never be able to give us the satisfaction that we are more than our image. The presentation of outer appearance is linked to lifestyles that are more often than not superficial in nature. Hence, as we cannot always buy our way to self-confidence, showing women of all bodily forms in the media has limited benefits.

The gendered aspect of body image can be seen in the interviewees feelings of what men want in women and the idea that their bodies are routes to finding love or attracting men. It would be beneficial to further discuss the male perspective in this regard and illuminate the superficial, conditional attraction women *believe* men maintain. I would assume that we would see that this discourse of the judgemental, visual-driven male would become more humanized through discussion and research.

Among the women I interviewed, not all of them felt secure all the time. From the Everyday Woman to those struggling with negative, hateful thoughts about themselves,

all had to fight against the discourse in their heads. As much as they reasoned, there was often the feeling of social messages lurking 'in the back of [their] mind' (Malia, Jenny, Lindsay).

Throughout this research project, I have realized that having a positive body image is really to see beyond the societal discourse of the body. Many participants felt that realizing what is 'real' and what is 'fake' allows them to let go of negative thoughts and embrace their body identity as a whole rather than a tool or a project. Annie explains her weight loss goal as a sort of 'body image religion' she has decided to join wholeheartedly. This dedication is helpful in her reaching a personal goal, though speaks to the greater social messages all women are hearing and misinterpreting time and time again. We continue to play the game with ourselves: our logic does not buy into bodily religion, though our emotions remain invested in its homilies. As Caroline Knapp writes:

Self-contempt of this sort has a deep, visceral, almost subterranean quality- it seems lodged in a woman's soul somehow, its voice of admonishment as real and core as conscience-but it also has a more diffuse character, as though it lives in the air beyond consciousness and intellect, a kind of emotional radon that leaks its poison perpetually but invisibly. I can reason with the beast, I can temporarily defuse it, but I can't seem to kill it." (Knapp, 2003: p88)

How then, can we beat this beast? It is very much in our own hands. It takes courage, time and effort to love your self more so than to despise yourself. It is in this, that I think we find the social problem.

The playing field in which we are living is at odds with our wants and desires. However, it is us who play the game and maintain it as viable. Maybe we need to move

to a new field, but someone has to speak up. Otherwise, we will remain on the same game always following the rules or feeling guilty for ignoring them.

It is in individual resistance that brings attention to the normalcy of hating our bodies. By resistance I don't suggest going out of ones way to overeat or become 'lazy' (whatever you may think that is). In other words, resistance is not to think about how to prove yourself through not caring about your health. The responsibility lies in not letting yourself be consumed by it. Listen to your desires and understand your society. Accomplish and gain empowerment through love, activity, and laughter. We are vulnerable to the discursive messages only as readily we seek superficial acceptance.

Personal connection cannot be found on an isolated treadmill, or within a below 1200 calories diet. It cannot be found in an approving glance from a passer-by or an extra chocolate éclair. Love and connection can be received only if you let go, and believe it's possible. Believe that they see beyond your exterior. What you focus on is what you will achieve, so remember this: you are more than your body. You are more than your body. You are more than your body. Life is about more than being your body; it's about *living* in it.

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## **Appendix A: Letter to Ethics Committee**

To whom this may concern:

I am writing to apply for ethics approval for my research project for Sociology 3310F/3311G, Investigating Everyday Life, with Dr. Lesley Harman.

Enclosed is a copy of my research proposal.

In accordance with the Research Ethics Guidelines for King's University College, I plan to ensure free and informed consent through the use of the attached letter to participants and informed consent form. I will ensure privacy and confidentiality by keeping all notes, tapes and transcripts of interview/focus group discussions in a safe place. Only Dr. Harman and I will have access to these. Participants in the study will have an opportunity to review their transcripts if they wish and I will make copies of my final paper available to them as well.

Finally, as there is no money involved and no one stands to gain financially from this research, there is no conflict of interest.

The following documents are attached:

1. Letter to Participants
2. Informed Consent Form
3. Interview Protocol

Most Sincerely,

**[signature]**

Diana Milanovic



## **Appendix B: Letter to Interview Participants**

Dear Participant,

This letter is to introduce myself. My name is Diana Milanovic and I am a student at King's University College at the University of Western Ontario. I am completing my undergraduate degree in Sociology. I am currently registered in Sociology 3311G with Dr. Lesley Harman. This course requires that I complete a research project using qualitative methods.

As a part of my project, I am conducting ten interviews with young women ages 18-25. I have submitted a research proposal to Dr. Harman and it has been granted ethics clearance. I will be audio taping this interview and transcribing it with the others so that I may put the information together for my final project. If not otherwise stated, all interviews will be kept anonymous and confidential. I will be happy to supply you with a copy of the final paper, if you provide your address below.

The purpose of my research is to explore young women's conceptualizations of the body and how these cognitions affect their overall life satisfaction. Amongst other things I plan to explore the relation of post-secondary education, family and peers to women's body image. According to the ethical guidelines, I am asking you to sign the accompanying informed consent form. This will confirm that you understand the purpose and methods involved in this research and that there is no intent of deception or harm to you. I will keep the informed consent form; in turn I would like you to keep this letter, so that you may contact Dr. Harman or myself if you have any subsequent questions.

My contact information is: [dmilanov@uwo.ca](mailto:dmilanov@uwo.ca) or 519-851-6280

You may reach Dr. Harman at [harman@uwo.ca](mailto:harman@uwo.ca) or (519) 433-3491 x 4351

Thank you for participating in this project.

Sincerely,

**[signature]**

Diana Milanovic

Optional address if you wish to receive the completed project:

### **Appendix C: Informed Consent for Focus Group**

Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

I have read the attached letter and consent to participate in a research study involving a focus group lead by Diana Milanovic, a student of Dr. Lesley D. Harman of the Sociology Department at King's University College, at the University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario. This research study has received ethics approval by the Research Ethics Review Committee of King's University College.

I understand that this focus group is to be video recorded, but that my name and any other identifying information will be kept entirely confidential unless I agree, in writing, to have them released.

I understand that the researcher is ethically bound to protect my interests, feelings and safety and that she will not knowingly say or do anything that might violate them. Because my identity is being kept totally confidential, the only possible risk that might come of this interview is that I might feel uncomfortable discussing certain topics or answering certain questions. If at any time I feel uncomfortable during the interview, I understand that I may leave the focus group, request that my comments not be used for the study, or refuse to answer certain questions, without any jeopardy to current or future relationships. I understand that it is not the intention of the interviewer to make me feel uncomfortable.

I understand that Diana will prepare an essay, as partial completion of her course requirements, resulting from the focus group that she is conducting. I understand that my participation will be part of this larger collection, and that my anonymity will be preserved.

I understand that Diana may request additional, follow-up focus groups, in which the same conditions will apply.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix D: *Facebook* Group: “Interviews for Qualitative Research on Body Image”**

Applications

Diana Milanovic Settings Log out

Search

### Interviews for Qualitative Research on Body Image

UWO

#### Basic Info

Type:  
Description:

Student Groups - Academic Groups

I am doing a qualitative research project on the effects of body image on women's self esteem and quality of life. My goal is to tap into the effects that social discourse (the way we talk about things) has on individual experience of being in a woman's body. Please note that this project has been reviewed and approved by the ethics committee; at the interview/focus group I will be handing out briefing letters and confidentiality contracts explaining everything in much greater detail. This research is being conducted for professional purposes and is supervised by Dr. Lesley Hartman. Interviews are limited to around 10 people but participation in the focus group can be split and therefore everyone can participate if they want!

This group will allow me to keep in contact with participants as well as receive feed back and facilitate discussions outside of the face to face meeting.

Feel free to invite anyone into the group who you think would be interested in participating. I will be approving them first as I need to have consistent participants who are willing to contribute throughout the process.

This group is closed and not open to public scrutiny. As with the personal interviews/focus group meetings the discussions/comments within this group are confidential.

Any questions/opinions you have are welcome! Please inquire if you have any doubts.

As women's issues are close to my heart I want to stress that my research is only to better the understanding of women's experience in their bodies. I hope this research will show that the personal experiences are as unique as they are common- the personal is indeed political! Thanks for your time :) take care

#### Contact Details

Email: [dmi1anov@uwo.ca](mailto:dmi1anov@uwo.ca)  
Office: Location to be determined by you (My house, Kings conference room, etc)  
Location: St. James Street  
London, ON

#### Recent News

At this point I am preparing to conduct research. The interviews/groups will most likely be in January/February- I will contact you shortly about a meeting time!

#### Members

Displaying 8 of 9 members

[See All](#)



#### Discussion Board

There are no discussions.  
[Start the first topic.](#)

#### The Wall

Displaying the only Wall post

[See All](#)

Write something...



- Message All Members
- Promote Group with an Advert
- Edit Group
- Edit Members
- Invite People to Join
- Create Related Event
- Leave Group

[Share](#)

#### Group Type

This is a secret group. It will not show up in your Profile, and only admins can invite members.

#### Admins

- Diana Milanovic (creator)

#### Events

There are no events.  
[Create Events](#)

#### Advertise

##### Love Sunglasses?



Become a fan click here.

##### Win a \$100 to Lululemon



We are giving away \$100 Lululemon gift cards. Enter our draw right now for your chance to win!

##### Costa Rica Surf Camps



We specialize in Costa Rican Surf Camps, for both beginner and advanced surfers. Come live and surf in paradise. 13 Days for \$1550.

[More Ads](#)

## **Appendix E: Cast of Characters**

### ***Malia***

Age:21  
Race: Caucasian  
Height: 5'5  
Weight: 130lbs  
BMI: 'healthy'  
Describes body as: curvy  
Year of Study: fourth year  
Narrative Style: Academic, Relaxed  
My Typology: Everyday Woman (Type A)

### ***Brigitta***

Age: 18  
Race: Caucasian  
Year of Study: first year  
Height: 5'5/5'6  
Weight: 132lbs  
BMI: 'healthy'  
Describes body as: Average, Curvy  
Narrative Style: Storyteller  
My Typology: Everyday Woman (Type A)

### ***Jenny***

Age: 22  
Race: Caucasian  
Year of Study: third year  
Height: 5'7  
Weight: 146lbs  
BMI: 'healthy'  
Describes body as: average, slightly in shape  
Narrative Style: Casual  
My Typology: Everyday Woman (Type A)

### ***Stella***

Age:18  
Race: Caucasian  
Year of Study: first year  
Height: 5'8  
Weight: 125lbs (  
BMI: ' healthy bordering underweight'  
Describes body as: fit, athletic, average  
Narrative Style: Storyteller  
My Typology: Struggling Woman (Type B)  
\* Experiences depression

**Veronica**

Age: 21  
Race: Caucasian  
Year of Study: fourth year  
Height: 5'6  
Weight: -  
Describes body as: -  
Narrative Style: Reserved  
My Typology: Struggling Woman (Type B)  
\*Experiences depression

**Star**

Age: 24  
Race: Asian  
Year of Study: fourth year  
Height: 5'2  
Weight: 150lbs  
BMI: 'overweight'  
Describes body as: voluptuous, fat  
Narrative Style: Storyteller  
My Typology: Fluctuating Woman (Type C)  
\* Experiences depression

**Annie**

Age: 22,  
Race: European  
Year of Study: year off, two years completed  
Height: 5'7  
Weight: 158lbs  
BMI: 'healthy bordering overweight'  
Describes body as: average, pear shaped  
Narrative Style: Academic  
My Typology: Fluctuating Woman (Type C)  
\* Experiences social anxiety

**Finnigan**

Age:21  
Race: Caucasian  
Year of Study: fourth year  
Height: 5'7  
Weight: 120lbs  
BMI: 'healthy bordering underweight'  
Describes body as: thin, fit, athletic, sexy

Narrative Style: Casual  
My Typology: Idealized Woman (Type D)

**Lindsay**

Age: 21  
Race: Asian  
Year of Study: fourth year  
Height: 5'3  
Weight: 100lbs  
BMI: 'underweight'  
Describes body as: thin, toned  
Narrative Style: Reserved  
My Typology: Idealized Woman (Type D)

**Appendix F: Interview Questions**

1. How would you define a 'positive' body image?
2. Would you say that you have a positive body image?
  - a. If not, why do you think you have trouble accepting yourself as is?

*Everyday Life:*

3. What do you do for exercise?
4. Would you say you practice a healthy diet?
5. How does maintaining your body shape effect your life? (time, effort, stress)
6. Have you used any other means to control your weight? Please Explain.
7. Are you a healthy person? Why or why not?

*Family/Social context:*

8. Do you have any siblings?
  - a. How do you think your sibling(s) feel about their bodies?
9. How has your family influenced your body image?
10. How have your friends influenced your body image?
11. Do you see body image as a gendered issue in society? If so, how?
12. Why do you think women have such a hard time with their body?

13. Do you ever feel pressure from the media to change your body? Please Explain.

14. Has your body image ever affected your relationships with others? Please Explain.

*Modeling/Comparison:*

15. Do you compare your body to other men? Please Explain.

a. If yes, how does it make you feel about yourself afterwards?

16. Do you hold different standards for your body than for others? Why or why not?

17. When are you the most conscious of your body? Least conscious?

*Social Surveillance:*

18. Do you ever feel uncomfortable eating in front of others? Working out?

19. How do you think others react to your body? Men? Women?

a. Is this how you want them to react?

20. Are there any areas in life where you feel your body type restricts you from living how you want to live? (Modes of dress, participation in sports, eat certain foods)

*Internalization/Self-Objectification:*

21. What does your body say about you who you are (if anything)?

a. Is this what you want it to express?

*Education:*

22. Has being a (*area of study*) student affected your thoughts on body image? If so, how?

23. Do you see the university culture (social and academic) as a positive or negative influence (or both) on students? Please Explain.

*Thoughts about yourself:*





4. Did you find the interview process helpful in discovering your own thoughts on body image? Please explain:

Age:

Place of Birth:

Year of Study:

- First year
- Second year
- Third year
- Fourth year
- Other (please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

Area of Concentration: \_\_\_\_\_

Name:

\*please **also** choose a pseudonym to be identified as in the written report:

\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for participating in this research project. ☺

## **Appendix H: Follow Up Questions on Body Image**

**If certain questions are not applicable, just write N/A.**

**All questions are up to interpretation- write WHATEVER comes to mind! 😊**

1. Do you think your experience in residence affects/affected your body image (i.e. competition with peers, images, discussions, eating patterns, etc)?
2. How does/did living at home affect your body image?
3. Do you think you are 'fat' or 'overweight'? Why or why not? Please explain.
4. What do you think of when you hear 'fat'? If helpful, use key words or images of things/people.
5. What do you think of people who are 'fat' or overweight?

6. Do you ever *fear* fat? Why or why not?
7. Do you ever have 'fat days'? How do they differ from other days?
8. What do you think of people who have the ideal body?
9. Have you ever had eating and/or exercising habits that you feel were/are 'disordered' or unhealthy? Please Explain.
  - a. What were/are troublesome about them to you? (ie. obsession, guilt, mentally or physically harmful, etc)
  - b. If you have not, have you ever *thought* about experimenting with disordered habits (ie. Purging, bingeing, skipping meals, exercising more than usual for a period of time) ? why or why not?
10. What have you found helpful in letting go of negative body thoughts (ie. Positive body talk amongst friends, TV shows which various body shapes, receiving compliments/reassurance, accomplishing something, reading books on the subject, etc)? Please Explain.
11. Hypothetically, if you reached an undesirable weight (overweight or lost muscle), do you think it would affect your ability to attract men? Why or why not?
12. Give a story about negative body speak you've heard. How did it affect you? (i.e. angry, sad, annoyed, agreeable)

13. What is an example of the perfect body to you? (attach a Google image, or give me the name of a known figure you admire)
- Why is this person's body perfect to you?
14. What is your weight/height?
- Height:
- Weight:
- \*\*If you don't know your weight, state a general weight range you believe you fall in. This is so I can give the reader an idea of where your body lies in comparison to your perceptions. A reminder that your real name will not be used in the study!**
15. Do you fluctuate in weight?
- If so, please explain how drastically (range of weight gain/loss) and how often (weeks, months, seasons, years)
  - How do your weight changes make you feel?
16. Describe your body shape using one or more descriptive words: ( i.e. average, thin, skinny, fit, overweight, larger, curvy, voluptuous, sexy, athletic etc. )
17. Do you deal with/have you ever dealt with anxiety/depression?
- If so, do you think it is connected with your weight? If so, how?
18. Do you feel like you have support in stressful times? Please explain.

**THANK YOU SO MUCH LADIES!**  
**Remember: you are beautiful- pass it on ☺**

## **Appendix I: Journal Entries**

*February 5, 2009*

### Notes taken after Malia's Interview

- ❑ I felt nervous when beginning the interview- unsure of what to expect
- ❑ I felt my questions somewhat jumped from one topic to another at first, but then flowed naturally.
- ❑ Was curious what Malia thought when done the interview- hope I wasn't probing inappropriately or guiding in anyway! Apparently I was not making her feel this way.
- ❑ I was excited to hear Malia's comments and she was very open about it
- ❑ Interviewed in my kitchen, at the table.

*February 9, 2009*

### Reflection after Brigitta's Interview

I found that I was a lot more comfortable than my first interview. Brigitta was very open and honest and relaxed the atmosphere. Being my second interview, there were a lot of themes I could recognize already...the use of the word obviously was consistent with both Malia and Brigitta. There seems to be the notion that having insecurities with your body is 'obvious'.

Differences I found were the way my questions were understood. I may have to revise the way I ask questions, or go back and ask Malia questions I did not get to. Being semi structured, Brigitta and I went in a different direction than with Malia. Brigitta focused on exercise as something she related to health, where Malia was more interested in the social context of body image.

Both Brigitta and Malia found that family and friends were secure and helpful in knowing who they were. They were both proud of their relationships.

Malia seemed to be very comparative, while Brigitta was more internal with her insecurity, putting pressure on herself to work out.

Both girls had families who made comments to them regularly at dinner... this is a theme I would like to further explore. Maybe ask specifically how they find mealtime? Stressful? Etc...

Brigitta thought her family's comments were only out of love and didn't feel that they were displaced or harmful. She had the attitude that it was to be expected, and it was appropriate.

Malia thought her parents were more observant. They never directly commented that she needed to lose weight, but would bring attention to it in a more indirect way. Once again, Malia compared herself to her parents, and they seem to compare themselves to her.

Brigitta made interesting comments about the school atmosphere and how she hears more harmful things around her in university than at home. This may affect things...living at home as compared to residence.

Maybe ask Malia about her residence experience?

Star and Stella are both tomorrow- Stella lives in residence, Star on her own. It will be interesting to hear.

Male experience in contrast- should I do 5 male interviews? Do my questions apply to them? Just as a comparison.

3 guys if I were to include men in my study I think I would have to alter the questions

#### *Reflection after Annie's Interview*

I felt like I got a lot of new information- as she was someone who just recently lost a lot of weight I could see the shift of identity from being a "large person" to an average body and the responses she got from this. Family was of little consequence, and she distanced herself from friends who would be critical. What seemed to be the biggest influence on her weight loss was her self image- she did not see herself as a "fat person" and also tried to get out of her food addiction.

Maybe do a chart of BMI, and then below it how it is not associated with weight- so like thin → 'overweight' and then a separate chart of positive body image → negative body image to show it doesn't correlate

#### *Thoughts about Jenny's Interview*

Jenny's interview got me really thinking about consumerism and the role of the over all image for women. The objectification was something Jenny was aware of. She seemed to have less of an emotional connection to her answers, and it was fairly easy for her to discuss when I asked the questions. Other participants like Star and Stella were really affected by the questions and brought in a lot of stories.

Thoughts on Title- consciousness of the body more than ever before, but there is an unconscious of why it is so. 'out of body' experience explains how we are being viewed, and we view ourselves as others see us- from outside. We are less connected

March 27, 2009

#### *Reflection on the Research Process*

Even sitting here going over my transcribed interviews, I hear girls talking: 'I feel like I'm eating so much today' "I'm eating a lot of carbs"

Yesterday two women in line at Chapters were discussing what they could have on their weight watchers diet. I rolled my eyes, I couldn't help it. I actually felt really angry. I felt like I couldn't escape the perpetual self-critiques, the monitoring. I think the one lady must have caught my distaste as she looked over and quickly changed the subject. Could it be that she knew it was petty?

I come home to a television and see the show *How to Look Good Naked*. It lifts my spirits a bit. It actually allowed me to get off the couch that morning and go about my day. I realized that, yes, I might have gained weight recently, but I could still look good. I could own my shape and wear clothes that make me feel good and do what I have to do. Yet, why did I need this show to tell me it's okay to be larger? It troubled me that I received validation so readily from a box. If I can feel better about myself so quickly, it goes to show how much power these images hold.

I looked in the mirror, and saw that yes, I am acceptable. I am worthy. But why does social acceptance of my body mean my ability to participate in society? I seem to continue to struggle with associating self worth with body weight.

It's hard for me to write this project when I realize I am very much in the grips of self doubt myself. I am a product of all the analysing I have done, I am as much a part of the social manifestation as I am the critique. I continue to play the game with myself where my logic does not buy into bodily perfection, though my emotions remain invested in it's homilies. How then, can we beat this beast? It is very much in my own hands. It takes courage, time and effort to love your self more so than to despise yourself. It is in this, that I think we find the problem.

The playing field in which I am living is at odds with my wants and desires. However, it is us who play the game, maintains it as viable. Maybe we need to move to a new field, but someone has to speak up. Otherwise, we will remain on the same game, always following the rules, or being guilty for ignoring them.

It is in individual resistance that brings attention to the normalcy of hating our bodies. By resistance I don't mean to go out of ones way to resist thinness. It is not to think about how to prove yourself through not caring about your health. It is in, simply, not letting yourself think about it. Don't analyse it so much. Eat when you are hungry, and exercise in ways that make you feel good. Listen to your desires and understand your society. Accomplish and gain empowerment through love, activity, and laughter. We are vulnerable to the messages as we seek acceptance. Are we loveable? Personal connection cannot be found on an isolated treadmill, or within a below 1200 calories diet. It cannot be found in an approving glance from a passer-by or a chocolate éclair. Love and connection can be received only if you let go, and believe it's possible. Believe that they see beyond your exterior. What you focus on others will too. You are more than your body. You are more than your body. You are more than your body. People want more than your body, they want you.