RESILIENT WOMEN:
RESISTING THE PRESSURE TO BE THIN

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore protective factors that help women resist societal pressures for thinness. The present study used a qualitative life history methodology to examine the experiences of women who identified themselves as resilient to pressures to be thin and as liking their bodies regardless of size. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 women, ages 18 to 25, representing diverse social and ethno-cultural backgrounds and body physiques. In the interviews, the participants were inquired about their experiences related to anything they felt was helpful for them in developing a positive body image from childhood, adolescence, and to present day. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed for themes using constructivist grounded theory methodology. Data analysis was informed by the feminist theoretical approach, with attention paid to social and contextual factors. Three core categories emerged from the analysis, which included protective factors associated with participants’ experiences of identity, ways of inhabiting their bodies, and the nature of social influences in their lives. This research highlighted the women’s active role in maintaining a resilient stance in the face of pressures for thinness as well as the importance of social factors that assist them in this process.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Having spent a significant amount of time examining the context in the lives of my study participants, I would now like to take a moment to acknowledge the social context, and more specifically, the people in my life, whose guidance, support, and kindness have been instrumental in helping me complete this dissertation.

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Thank you to my family, my husband Vlad and my parents, Alexey and Yelena. I am at a loss for words in expressing my gratitude to you for believing in me, for picking me up during my times of uncertainty, for bearing with my repeated bouts of brainstorming-out-loud, and most of all, for your love, the tangible presence of which is always with me.

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And last but not least, I would like to thank the fourteen wonderful resilient young women for making this dissertation possible by sharing their insightful and inspirational stories with me. Your strong voices permeate this work with hope for more resilient girls and women of tomorrow.
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother, Yelena Mizevich.

No one has affected the way I live in my body more than you have. Thank you for being you.
INTRODUCTION

Body dissatisfaction is so common among girls and women in the Western culture that the literature on the topic suggests that body discontent has become the norm and not the exception (e.g., Coughlin & Kalodner, 2006). Body dissatisfaction, which has been found to increase the risk for eating pathology, is thought to arise primarily from sociocultural pressures for thinness that exist in all facets of the social environment, including the mass media, parents, siblings, peers, and romantic partners (Stice & Shaw, 2002). However, while all the women in the Western culture are exposed to pressures for thinness, not all women develop disordered eating and body dissatisfaction. To date, the majority of the research on the topic has focused on risk factors and there is very limited literature available about the factors that protect young women from body weight-related pressures. In addition, most of the research that has been conducted on protective factors used quantitative methods, leaving questions about what makes these factors ‘protective’ unanswered. There is a dearth of qualitative studies that have explored young women’s own understanding of what has protected them from pressures for thinness throughout their lives. Such research can help to uncover protective factors not previously identified in the literature and the processes that may make them protective, as well as guide preventative interventions of eating disorders. The present study aimed to address this gap in the current knowledge on protective factors against pressures for thinness by utilizing an emergent methodology. It used the life history approach (Cole & Knowles, 2001) in order to identify factors that have protected women throughout their lives, the meaning women ascribe to these protective factors, as well as the context to the development of these protective factors. The present study also applied feminist research principles, both throughout data collection and analysis, by attending to the social, cultural, and contextual factors in participants’ lives.
Grounded theory was used for data analysis, using the constructivist approach, as outlined by Charmaz (2002, 2005, 2006).

The thesis manuscript begins with the literature review, which summarizes existing research as well as discussion papers on protective factors against pressures for thinness. It is followed by a description of the methodology used for data collection and analysis. The results of the study are described next, divided into three sections, in line with the three core categories that have emerged in the study: identity, ways of inhabiting the body, and protective social influences. Finally, the discussion chapter addresses the study findings in relation to existing literature, highlighting study contributions as well as strengths, limitations, and implications of the study.
CHAPTER ONE
LITERATURE REVIEW

Eating Disorders as a Cultural Phenomenon

Traditional approaches to eating disorders view their etiology as multidimensional, emphasizing the contribution of biological factors, social pressures, psychological tendencies, and developmental processes in the development of eating disorders (Steiger, Bruce, & Israël, 2003). Within these approaches, eating disorders are viewed as psychopathological and as defined by maladaptive attitudes and behaviours around eating, weight, and body image (Steiger et al., 2003). On the other hand, feminist perspectives on eating disorders state that while eating disorders are indeed multidimensional, this does not imply that all dimensions play an equal role in their development (Bordo, 1993). They highlight the causal, as opposed to triggering, role of culture in the development of eating disorders and question the designation of eating disorders as psychopathology, reassigning the factors that are viewed as individual dysfunction to social factors (Bordo, 1993). The social contextualization of women’s body weight and shape preoccupation normalizes this reaction and makes it more understandable (Brown, 1993).

Brown (1993) argued against the separation of eating disorders from the social obsession with thinness, pointing out that most women have difficulty accepting their bodies and that eating disorders are more extreme forms of that widespread experience. She objected to praising and rewarding dieting and weight preoccupation, while at the same time labelling more extreme forms of that same behaviour as psychopathological or diseased, stating that presenting such a detached and pathologizing view of women’s experiences, as is done in the traditional frameworks, silences women. Moreover, with the current emphasis on fitness it is not always easy to decipher the reason for engaging in exercising – what is being done for physical health
rather than being done in compliance with the feminine ideal (Bartky, 1998). Bordo (1993) argued that the ‘distorted’ attitudes of women suffering from eating disorders are quite accurate representations of the attitudes held in our society towards thinness and that eating disorders are in agreement with the experience of being a woman in our culture. In this way, distinguishing women who have developed eating disorders from those who managed to avoid them does not make sense; instead, most women can be seen as exhibiting different degrees of the disorder, and while some function better than others, women’s full potential is undermined in all cases (Bordo, 1993).

Brown and Jasper (1993) argued that the idealized female body reflects contradictory expectations that women face in our society, where the achievement of greater equality co-exists with their continued oppression. They pointed out that while the thin body is associated with mobility, independence, sexuality, and freedom, it, at the same time, signifies diminutiveness, dependence, and vulnerability, therefore reflecting ambivalence towards women’s power by incorporating both patriarchal oppression of women and women’s resistance to patriarchy. Similarly, Bordo (1993) discussed the paradoxical nature of the contemporary obsession with slenderness, in which women are spending time and energy pursuing the boyish body ideal because it implies freedom and independence, instead of spending those same resources on their inner development and social achievement. Brown and Jasper (1993) argued that women are trying to gain self-esteem and a sense of power and control over their lives by exerting control over their bodies, while by doing that, they displace their discontent onto the body and become distracted from the actual sources of their dissatisfaction. In this way, a socially and politically generated problem becomes the problem of the individual. By uncovering these layers of
meaning, one can see that the situation is more complicated than it is presented in models that emphasize individual pathology without examining the cultural context critically.

Bordo (1993) asserted that the social manipulation of the female body has emerged as a central strategy for maintaining power relations between the sexes. Similarly, Wolf (1991) interpreted the cultural fixation on female thinness as a direct solution to the dangers posed by the women’s movement and by women’s economic and reproductive freedom. She argued that the traits that result from prolonged and periodic caloric restriction, which include passivity, anxiety, and emotionality, are what the dominant culture is interested in creating in women in order to cancel out the dangers of their liberation. The absence of an easily identifiable top-down power structure responsible for the feminine bodily discipline masks the extent to which the pressure to be ‘feminine’ serves the interest of the current power structure (Bartky, 1998).

Bartky (1998) argued that despite the lack of formal public sanctions, women who are unable or unwilling to ‘discipline’ their bodies face the refusal of male patronage, which is a very severe sanction in a male-dominated world. These women may also face their own feelings of shame that reflect their internalization of patriarchal standards.

One of the social theories that link the current power structure and the social manipulation of the female body to the development of disordered eating is objectification theory. The theory has been proposed to explain the adverse impact of internalization of the patriarchal gaze on women’s body and self image. Objectification theory states that when individuals are repeatedly viewed by others in sexually objectifying ways, they eventually come to internalize an observer’s perspective on self, which is called self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Since girls and women in the Western culture are constantly objectified by others, they eventually adopt that perspective and begin to treat themselves as objects to be
looked at and evaluated, which in turn contributes to the development of depression, sexual
dysfunction, and eating disorders in women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In agreement with
objectification theory, Piran and Cormier (2005) found that a greater tendency in women to
objectify their bodies, which reflected the internalization of the objectified gaze, predicted
disrupted eating patterns and body weight and shape preoccupation. They argued that different
gender-based systems of social constructions might be related to the development of disordered
eating, and that disordered eating is only one way in which social discourses affect women’s
practices toward their bodies.

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argued that comparing one’s body to cultural ideals and
knowing that it will also be evaluated in this way by others is fundamental to women’s
experience. Objectification theory proposes that when a woman compares her actual body to the
cultural ultra-thin ideal she experiences a feeling of shame about her body, which places her at
and found support for a mediational model in which the emotion of body shame mediates the
relationship between self-objectification and disordered eating. They also found that self
objectification could affect disordered eating directly by motivating women who are satisfied
with their weight to engage in disordered eating in order to maintain that satisfaction and to
avoid the experience of body shame. They emphasized that the construct of self-objectification
helps to shift the focus from the individual or the family toward cultural practices of sexually
objectifying the female body.

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) stated that the extent to which objectification affects any
particular woman depends in part on the degree to which she has internalized an observer’s
perspective, on the social context in which the woman lives, as well as on such factors as the
woman’s class, ethno-cultural group membership, age, sexual orientation, personal history, and physical attributes. In this way, despite the fact that all women in this culture are exposed to some extent to sexual objectification and other risk factors, they react differently depending on their personal characteristics and life circumstances. In addition, the potency of different risk factors varies over time (Shisslak & Crago, 2001). The following section briefly reviews the findings on risk factors that make women more likely to develop disordered eating.

**Risk Factors**

The spectrum of disordered eating behaviours consists of negative body image, binge eating and unhealthy forms of weight management, which can include restrictive dieting, self-induced vomiting, abuse of laxatives, diuretics, and diet pills, as well as excessive exercising and excessive eating (Levine, Piran, & Irving, 2003). While the spectrum involves different combinations and degrees of disordered eating behaviours, the extreme end of the spectrum includes symptoms that are associated with eating disorders, Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa (Levine et al., 2003). Research has pointed out the flaws in our current classification of eating disorders, emphasizing that most individuals who engage in disordered eating behaviours do not meet criteria for Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia Nervosa and instead fall under the residual category of Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (Striegel-Moore & Bulik, 2002).

To date, most research on the development of disordered eating has focused on risk factors. As risk factors in the development of disordered eating are not the focus of the present investigation, this section will instead provide an overview of research on this topic using comprehensive reviews.

In their chapter, Shisslak and Crago (2001) reviewed the literature on risk and protective factors in the development of eating disorders. They found that in general, low self esteem, body
dissatisfaction, weight-related teasing by family or friends, a desire to be thinner, a higher body mass index (BMI), negative affect, and media influences are important risk factors for the development of eating disorders. Specifically reviewing longitudinal research on the topic, they found that low self esteem, weight concerns, dietary restraint, body dissatisfaction, negative emotionality, early maturation, and being overweight were identified as risk factors in more than one study.

Stice (2002) conducted a meta-analytic review of prospective and experimental studies on the risk and maintenance factors for eating pathology. He found that elevated body mass is a risk factor for perceived pressure to be thin, body dissatisfaction, and dieting. He also found that direct modeling of body image and eating disturbances by family members and peers is a risk factor for bulimic pathology. Negative affect, perfectionism, impulsivity, and substance use were found to be risk factors for eating pathology, while negative affect was also found to be a causal factor for body dissatisfaction and increased caloric intake as well as a causal maintenance factor for binge eating. Stice (2002) found that perceived pressure to be thin and thin-ideal internalization are causal risk factors for body dissatisfaction, dieting, negative affect, and eating pathology. Thin-ideal internalization, body dissatisfaction, and perfectionism were found to be maintenance factors for bulimic pathology. While dieting was not found to be a risk factor for eating pathology, it attenuated overeating tendencies. Finally, perceived pressure to be thin, thin-ideal internalization, and body dissatisfaction were found to amplify the effects of other risk factors. In addition, Stice and Shaw (2002) synthesized and critically evaluated prospective and experimental research findings related to the origins and consequences of body dissatisfaction. They found that body dissatisfaction increased the risk for subsequent eating pathology and that
the relationship between body dissatisfaction and eating pathology was mediated by increases in dieting and negative affect.

Wertheim, Paxton, and Blaney (2004) reviewed risk factors in the development of body image disturbances. They found evidence for biological, sociocultural, developmental, and individual risk factors. Biological risk factors included the person’s actual body size and shape, which could influence the individual’s body ideals and body perception. Sociocultural risk factors included the standards of beauty within the person’s culture, direct communications from parents about the child’s body, parental modeling of obvious weight loss behaviours, and peer environment, while the studies testing media influences showed inconsistent results. Wertheim et al. (2004) also found that multiple sociocultural risk factors might have an additive effect. Developmental risk factors included puberty and pregnancy, while studies examining menopause and older age had mixed results. Individual risk factors included gender, internalization of the thin ideal, and a tendency to compare one’s body to others, while findings related to sexual orientation showed mixed results.

While risk factor research provides useful information for identifying the potential causes of eating disorders and individuals who are at high risk for developing disordered eating, it does not explain the variation in the way different women can respond to the same risk factor. Choate (2005) stated that while all girls and women in the Western culture are exposed to the pressure to be thin, some are able to resist those pressures and develop a positive body image. The concept of resilience helps to explain this difference.

Resilience and Protective Factors

Resilience is the ability to maintain adaptive functioning despite serious risk (Rutter, 1990). In other words, it is the ability to recover from significant stress or adversity or to
successfully cope with it (Crago, Shisslak, & Ruble, 2001). Crago et al. (2001) stated that people’s resilience varies depending on their age and life circumstances as well as on the risk and protective factors that are affecting their lives at that moment. In this way, resilience is concerned with individual variations in response to risk factors and the reasons some individuals maintain high self-esteem and self-efficacy despite facing the same adversities that make others give up hope (Rutter, 1990). Applying the concept of resilience to the experience of pressure to be thin, the question becomes, why do some women develop disordered eating while other women are better able to resist this pressure, despite the fact that all women in the Western culture encounter this pressure to some extent?

While traditional research on eating disorders has focused primarily on identifying risk factors, it has been argued that despite its intuitive appeal of trying to fix what is wrong, this approach neglects the flip side of what is right (Steck, Abrams, & Phelps, 2004). Steck et al. (2004) also argued that protective characteristics are separate and distinct from the simple absence of risk factors. When the focus of the preventive intervention is on enhancement of protective factors, it is less likely to lead to stigmatization of participants than when the focus is on specific risk factors, such as excessive dieting (Crago et al., 2001). Strengthening protective factors can also increase the likelihood of behaviours that compete with disordered eating (Shisslak & Crago, 2001). In addition, understanding the experiences of women who develop a positive body image can lead to more effective prevention and counselling interventions of counsellors working to enhance protective factors in all girls and women (Choate, 2005). Choate (2005) argued that valuable information about protective factors that can buffer women against the pressure to be thin can be obtained by examining the perceptions and experiences of women who do not develop negative body image.
Crago et al. (2001) summarized the general individual, family, and community-related protective factors that have been identified in resilience literature, which are common to a variety of emotional and behavioural problems. Individual factors include “above-average intelligence, internal locus of control, positive self-esteem, easygoing temperament, problem-solving abilities, social skills, optimism, academic competence, spirituality, and creativity” (Crago et al., 2001, p. 77). Family protective factors include having a good relationship with one’s parents, having rules and responsibilities within the household, prosocial family values, supportive extended family network, positive role models, and low family stress. Community protective factors include positive school experiences and peer friendship networks, responsibilities outside one’s home; involvement in extracurricular activities; and positive relationships with adults outside one’s family. While not all these factors might protect people from the development of disordered eating, it is helpful to keep them in mind when examining the specific factors that might be protective.

More than fifteen years ago it was stated that research on protective factors has been virtually nonexistent in the study of eating disorders (Rodin, Striegel-Moore, & Silberstein, 1990). Although some research has been done on the topic since then, most of the literature is still pathology-oriented and there is a dearth of studies examining factors that protect women from the development of body image concerns (Choate, 2005). The following sections address factors that have been found in the literature to be protective against pressures for thinness.

**Self Experiences and Characteristics**

Protective factors found in the research to date included self experiences and characteristics, family environment, and peer group and partnership relationships. In addition,
factors that emerged from eating disorder prevention program research included knowledge about eating disorders, critical thinking, relational context, and life skills.

**Having a strong sense of self.** Bartky (1998) anticipated that resistance to the pressures imposed on the female body might be met with reluctance from women to let go of the rewards of compliance and of the aesthetic that defines what they have accepted to be beautiful. Moreover, she suggested that disciplining the body may provide them with a sense of mastery and a secure sense of identity. However, Brown (1993) argued that while it is not easy to overcome weight preoccupation, give up dieting, or accept one’s body as it is, it is the only way for women to reject and rebel against the idealization of thinness.

In their longitudinal qualitative study, Hesse-Biber, Marino, and Watts-Roy (1999) assessed changes in the eating patterns of 21 women who exhibited eating disordered behaviour across a six-year period, from their sophomore year in college to two years after their graduation from college. They found that women who stopped exhibiting disordered eating by two years post-college had a much stronger sense of self-confidence and self-esteem as compared to the group that continued to struggle with disordered eating, who tended to express far more insecurities. In agreement with these findings, Paquette and Raine (2004) in their qualitative study, which examined the impact of the sociocultural context on women’s body image found that predominantly self-confident women, as compared with predominantly self-critical women, were more aware of and reflective about external context, appeared to be less vulnerable to unattainable standards and images, and relied on a strong sense of self to maintain positive feelings and assessments about their bodies. In another qualitative study, which examined sociocultural pressures to be thin by analyzing semi-structured interviews of adolescent girls, Wertheim, Paxton, Schutz, and Muir (1997) found that self-acceptance protected girls against
weight overconcern. In their study, girls who were non-dieters and non-weight-watchers stated that they accepted who they were. In addition, in a large quantitative study on risk and protective factors related to disordered eating among adolescents, Croll, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, and Ireland’s (2002) found positive self esteem and emotional well being to be protective.

Women who refuse to conform to the norms might be more protected than women who conform. Twamley and Davis (1999) examined the effects of personal attributes and family environment on eating pathology in a sample of undergraduate women. They found that among women in their study who conformed less to conventions and group norms, awareness of thinness norms was less likely to be associated with the internalization of the thin ideal. Similarly, Paquette and Raine (2004) found that women in their study who were aware of, and refused to participate in, the ‘fashion game’, achieved a greater sense of agency, which in turn gave them the strength to resist sociocultural pressures. In addition, Pelletier, Dion, and Levesque (2004), examined whether self-determination can buffer the effect of sociocultural pressures and reduce the risk of bulimic symptoms in 300 female university students. They found that women in their study who were more self-determined in their lives, perceived fewer sociocultural pressures about body image. They suggested that for women who are self-determined in all areas of their lives, messages about body image may represent information to be evaluated in light of their own values and when inconsistent with their values, to be disregarded. Self-determination was also found to be protective against the negative impact of ‘thin-ideal’ media exposure in a quantitative study with 99 female undergraduate students (Mask & Blanchard, 2010). The authors concluded that the more women engage in activities with a sense of autonomy and volition, as opposed to feeling coerced and controlled in their behaviour, the more protected they are from the negative influences resulting from societal beauty ideals. In
agreement with these findings, in their review of the literature on risk and protective factors for bulimia nervosa, Rodin et al. (1990) suggested that having little need for approval and being self-directed and assertive would likely serve a protective function.

**Having a voice.** Having a strong voice might also serve a protective function.

Transition to adolescence was recognized as a critical moment for the onset of self-silencing among girls (Gilligan, 1994). Brown (1991) argued that for a girl at the onset of puberty to speak honestly and openly about her experiences means risking to be without a story, since her narrative would not fit the conventional story of what it is like to be a woman. Piran and Cormier (2005) found that self-silencing of one’s needs and voice predicted disrupted eating patterns as well as body weight and shape preoccupation. Similarly, Zaitsoff, Geller, and Srikameswaran (2002) found that adolescent girls from a non-clinical sample who reported higher levels of eating disorders symptoms also scored higher on the Silencing the Self Scale. Specifically, they were more likely to inhibit their expression of negative feelings, judge themselves by external standards, and present their outer self as compliant while their inner self grew angry and hostile.

Feminist researchers suggested several strategies for the girls to be able to preserve their voice, including recognizing the silencing pressures, recognizing the girls as the experts of their own experience, and offering them genuine relationships. Spinazzola, Wilson and Stocking (2002) emphasized the need to recognize the variety of silencing pressures and their impact on the girls’ ideation, behaviour, and relationships to their bodies in order to help girls resist these pressures. They also argued for the need to draw upon and enhance girls’ innate and learned strategies for resistance. Brown (1991) claimed that for a girl to be an authority on her experience requires an acknowledgement from another person that the girl is an expert on her
experience. She argued that for a girl to tell a genuine story of her rich experiences and to stay with the knowledge despite the pressure to not know is to engage in an act of resistance.

Similarly, Brown and Gilligan (1992) following their five-year qualitative study with one hundred girls argued that by offering girls validating relationships as they move from childhood through adolescence, women can help the girls reclaim their lost voices and to strengthen them. They argued that such relationships are crucial for girls’ development and for women’s psychological health, as well as for bringing women’s voices fully into the world to make the social construction of reality resonant for both women and men.

**Awareness.** Based on her qualitative study with adolescent girls, Gilligan (1994) argued that during puberty girls are faced with both internal and external pressures to modulate their knowledge to get it to fit with the socially accepted view. She stated that during that time, girls’ healthy resistance, which involves insisting on knowing what ones knows and being willing to speak about it, turns into reluctance to know what one knows out of fear of endangering relationships if one decides to speak up about one’s experiences. She went on to say that the danger of having that ‘correction’ is that the cultural framework becomes invisible and the girls lose their voice and their perspective. The girls then stop knowing what they know, adopting the socially constructed reality as their own and becoming detached from their feelings, their bodies, and their selves (Gilligan, 1994).

For women, awareness of cultural messages, which they might have internalized, might serve a protective function against the negative effects of these messages. Bordo (1993) stated that while feminist cultural criticism, which offers an understanding of the cultural beauty ideals and their effects on women, cannot make women immune to those ideals, it can help to protect women from becoming too comfortable with them and to maintain a healthy scepticism about the
pleasures and powers that the culture offers. Likewise, Bartky (1998) argued that change can be made only when women learn to read the cultural messages that they themselves inscribe on their bodies. Similarly, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) emphasized the need to make girls and women aware of the adverse psychological effects that the objectifying images in the visual media and being treated in an objectifying way by others can have on them. They argued that such awareness can help girls and women resist the negative effects and begin to experience their bodies in more positive ways. While increasing critical awareness of individual women about weight-related pressures might help them resist these pressures, Jasper (1993a) emphasized the importance of also addressing and changing the broader social context. She argued for the need to publicly challenge the pressures that are transmitted by the media in order to raise consciousness at a social level.

**Ethno-cultural group membership.** Several studies found that ethnicity can function as a protective factor against internalization of the thin ideal, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating, although the evidence is mixed. In their meta-analytic review, Wildes, Emery, and Simons (2001) examined the role of ethnicity and culture in the development of eating disturbance and body dissatisfaction. They found that, overall, Black women reported significantly fewer symptoms of eating-related psychopathology compared with White women, while Asian women reported more eating disturbance and body dissatisfaction than White women for the majority of studies. In their study examining gender, racial, and age differences in weight management and concern among third, fifth, eighth, and eleventh graders, Thompson, Rafiroiu, and Sargent (2003) found similar results. In their sample, Black girls, as compared to White girls, were less likely to believe that they were overweight, had less weight concerns, perceived their family and friends to be less concerned about their weight, and were less likely to
try to lose weight. Wardle and Marsland (1990) surveyed 11 to 18 year old children from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds with respect to their body size, body image, weight concerns, and weight control. Similarly to Thompson et al. (2003), they found that fewer Black girls were feeling fat, wanted to lose weight, and thought that specific parts of their bodies were ‘too fat’ than White or Asian girls. However, contrary to the findings of Wildes et al. (2001) meta-analysis, they also found that Asian girls were not as inclined as White girls to think of themselves as ‘too fat’, although they were more inclined to think that than Black girls.

More recent studies suggest that the relationship between ethnicity and body image is more complex than was previously suggested. In their meta-analytic review of research on body dissatisfaction of Black and White women, Roberts, Cash, Feingold, and Johnson (2006) found that Black females were significantly more satisfied with their bodies than White females and that the greatest differences occurred among women in their early 20s, nearly disappearing around age 40. They noted that the decrease in ethnic differences could be due either to Black women becoming less satisfied with their bodies or to White women adopting healthier attitudes toward their bodies. In agreement with this, in their review of ethnic differences in dieting, binge eating, and purging behaviours among American females, Crago and Shisslak (2003) found that overall, dieting is more prevalent among White than among minority females, but that binge eating as well as purging behaviours are just as common among minority females as they are among White females. On the other hand, in their quantitative study, Shuttlesworth and Zotter (2011) found that for African American women, high levels of ethnic identity were associated with lower levels of binge eating pathology and lower rates of bulimic pathology, while for Caucasian women, higher levels of ethnic identity were associated with higher levels of binge eating and global eating pathology.
Unlike most studies, which examined the differences between Black, White, and Asian females, Warren, Gleaves, Cepeda-Benito, Carmen Fernandez, and Rodriguez-Ruiz (2005) compared European American, Spanish, and Mexican American groups of women. They found that the European American group had more overall body dissatisfaction than the Spanish and Mexican American groups. They also found that the Mexican American group was less aware of a thin ideal than the Spanish and the European American groups, and that the European American group had significantly higher internalization of the thin ideal than the Mexican American group, while the Mexican American group had higher internalization than the Spanish group. They suggested that Western culture needs to denounce the ultra-thin ideal while implementing a healthier and more realistic female physical ideal, as well as de-emphasize appearance as a determinant of female value, while stressing other indicators of worth, in order to prevent the development of body dissatisfaction. While the authors raised important issues, they did not offer practical suggestions as to how it could be accomplished. Moreover, the findings of this quantitative study on group differences could not guide intervention strategies.

In another study, highlighting the fact that protective factors might differ among different ethnic groups, Croll et al. (2002) looked at groups of White, Asian, Black, Hispanic, and American Indian adolescents. The authors found that emotional well being was protective against disordered eating for all groups, except for American Indian females, where instead, family connectedness was a protective factor. In addition, self esteem was a protective factor for Hispanic and Asian females, but not for Black or American Indian females. Croll et al. (2002) suggested that by exploring the differences in cultural messages, interventions can draw on the wisdom and apparent protective effects of these messages.
Findings from qualitative research parallel those drawn from quantitative research. Parker, Nichter, Nichter, Vuckovic, Sims, and Ritenbaugh (1995) examined body image ideals and dieting behaviours among African American and White adolescent girls. In their study, 70% of the Black girls reported either being satisfied or very satisfied with their weight, while 90% of White girls expressed some negative concern about their body shape, although both Black and White girls reported engaging in similar dieting practices. While White girls described the ‘ideal girl’ as a living manifestation of the Barbie doll, Black girls described her in terms of personality traits as opposed to physical attributes and expressed greater acceptance of their bodies than did White girls. Similarly, in her examination of the impact of beauty images in the mass media on self-concepts of grade 9 and 10 Black and White girls, Milkie (1999) found that, despite seeing the girls in the magazines as unrealistic and unattainable, many White girls reported wanting to look like them and believed that they were evaluated on the basis of the ideal portrayed in the media. In contrast, Black girls tended to compare themselves more favourably with the images in the media and believed that others rejected these images as well. Milkie (1999) concluded that Black girls were more immune to unfavourable comparisons with media images than White girls. In another study, Rubin, Fitts, and Becker (2003) examined the relationship between ethnicity, self-representation, and body aesthetic ideals in the narratives of African American and Latina women. The authors found that participants contested thinness and whiteness as inherently beautiful and adopted an attitude of acceptance and nurturance towards their bodies, rejecting cultural pressures to reshape the body to approximate the mainstream ideal. In this way, both quantitative and qualitative studies point to the fact that being a member of certain ethno-cultural groups may act as a protective factor in the development of disordered eating.
Appearance. Since women face pressures to look a certain way, appearance that approximates that ideal might serve as a protective factor against dissatisfaction with one’s body. In agreement with this suggestion, in discussing why women might expose themselves to media images, Polivy and Herman (2004) argued that instead of being distressing, media images of the thin ideal can be inspirational if they are seen as attainable and one can have a pleasurable experience of fantasizing about looking like the model in the media. Approximating the thin ideal might also protect against development of disordered eating, as was suggested by the finding that girls from public middle and senior high schools in ethnically and socioeconomically diverse communities in urban and suburban school districts, who had lower BMI were less likely to engage in unhealthy weight control behaviours than girls with higher BMI (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, Story & Perry, 2005).

However, it appears that it is often not the appearance in itself that is protective for women, but the meaning they assign to it, including the way they perceive their own bodies. Twamley and Davis (1999) found that perceived body shape, as opposed to actual weight or shape, modified the relation between thin-ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction and concluded that perception of the body as thin enough might be more protective than having a thin body. Similarly, in their longitudinal quantitative study on risk and protective factors for disturbed eating in adolescent girls, Gustafsson, Edlund, Kjellin and Norring (2009) found a low BMI, a more accepting attitude towards body size, and a more positive self-evaluation, especially towards physical and psychological traits, to be protective. The authors emphasized self-evaluation as an important factor in promoting healthy eating habits. In addition, Paquette and Raine (2004) found that body image of the women in their qualitative study was influenced more by their interpretation of the meaning of others’ comments than by the nature of these comments.
They found that some women in their study reinterpreted others’ comments in a positive context, which might have provided them with an opportunity to develop a sense of agency and resist negative messages.

Placing low importance on physical appearance or seeing the mainstream beauty ideal as irrelevant to one’s reference group was also found to be protective. McVey, Pepler, Davis, Flett, and Abdolell (2002), examined risk and protective factors associated with disordered eating in middle-level school girls. They found that for those who scored low on competence for physical appearance, low levels of importance of physical appearance were associated with lower risk of disordered eating. Similarly, seeing the images in the media as irrelevant might protect the girls from unfavourable comparisons to these images. Milkie (1999) found that Black girls, who showed a more positive body image than White girls in her study, perceived magazines as largely for White girls and defined them as irrelevant to their reference group, while for White girls media images acted as role models to which they compared themselves and on the basis of which they perceived themselves to be judged negatively.

Moreover, having a slim body physique might not always be protective, since women who are satisfied with their weight and appearance, but who self-objectify, might nevertheless engage in disordered eating in order to maintain satisfaction with their appearance (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998). For such women, changing their appearance in a way that makes one less prone to sexual objectification can serve a protective function. For example, wearing loose-fitting clothes and comfortable shoes, not removing ‘unwanted’ body hair, and not wearing cosmetics can help women resist and subvert the culture’s practices of objectification of the female body and thereby enhance women’s psychological well-being (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Although this strategy shifts the focus from the culture to the individual, it can serve as a
practical strategy for protecting women from sexual objectification in day-to-day life and can become a starting point for cultural change.

**Physical activity.** Several studies looked at physical activity as a protective factor in the development of disordered eating. In their meta-analysis of studies that examined the impact of exercise on body image, Hausenblas and Fallon (2006) found that participants reported a more positive body image following exercise interventions and an improved body image from the beginning to the end of the exercise programs, compared to the non-exercising control groups. They also found that exercisers had a better body image than non-exercisers. Similarly, Henry, Anshel, and Michael (2006) evaluated the effect of aerobic and interval circuit training on fitness and body image among college women. They found that the interval circuit training program that involved a combination of aerobic, anaerobic, and strength intervals led to greater improvement in appearance evaluation, health/fitness evaluation, health/fitness influence, and reduced negative affect. The authors concluded that exercise has a positive effect on body image and physical fitness of college women. However, it is unclear whether the positive effect would have been maintained if the participants also encountered negative experiences, such as receiving negative comments from others, in the process of their engagement in physical activities.

In addition, it appears that it is not the participation in sports in itself that is protective, but the type of sport one participates in, as suggested by a meta-analysis conducted by Smolak, Murnen, and Ruble (2000). They examined the relationship between athletic participation and eating problems and found that participation in elite sports or in sports that emphasize thinness, such as dance, increases the risk of eating problems, while participation in non-elite and non-lean sports, especially in high school, is associated with having fewer eating problems than non-athlete controls. Similarly, Zucker, Womble, Williamson, and Perrin (1999) made a distinction
between judged sports, in which physical appearance influences performance evaluation, and refereed sports, in which physical appearance has no such influence. In their quantitative study they found that participants in refereed sports, as compared to those in judged sports or non-athletes, scored lower on measures of body concern and dissatisfaction. In addition, in their discussion chapter, Smolak and Murnen (2001) argued that facilitating girls’ participation in activities that shift the focus off thin appearance may provide girls with a place or a means of expressing themselves and help them reduce eating problems.

Participation in sports was also found to be associated with higher self-esteem. In a study that aimed to situate adolescent girls’ body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, and self-esteem in the context of their life concerns and leisure activities, Tiggemann (2001) found that a greater emphasis on sports was associated with lower body dissatisfaction and participation in organized sports was correlated with higher self-esteem. She argued that playing sports might lead to a sense of body competence, in which bodies are seen as having a function other than simply being objects to be looked at, therefore protecting the girls from self-objectification. However, it appears to be the case that short-term participation in sports might not be sufficient for producing a long-lasting positive effect. In a study that evaluated the effects of an aerobic dance intervention on adolescent girls, Burgess, Grogan, and Burwitz (2006) found that participation in 6 weeks of aerobic dance enhanced body attitudes and physical self-perceptions, but that these positive effects were not sustained when the intervention ended.

**Family Environment**

It was found that family meals can serve as a protective factor in the development of disordered eating. Ackard and Neumark-Sztainer (2001) examined the association between bulimia nervosa and family meals in a sample of college women. They found that participants
who reported eating dinner with their family five or more times per week scored significantly lower on two measures of bulimia. They suggested that family meals serve as a protective factor for disordered eating and provide an opportunity to model appropriate nutritional intake and eating behaviour. Similarly, Neumark-Sztainer, Wall, Story, and Fulkerson (2004) developed the Project EAT (Eating Among Teens), a comprehensive study of adolescent nutrition and obesity, as part of which they examined the association between family meal patterns and disordered eating in adolescent girls and boys. They found that more frequent family meals, high priority of family meals, a positive atmosphere during the meals, and a more structured meal environment was associated with a decreased risk for engaging in unhealthy weight control behaviours and chronic dieting. Neumark-Sztainer et al. (2004) suggested that regular family meals provide an opportunity for role modeling of healthy eating practices and for monitoring the adolescent’s eating patterns, which may help to protect the adolescent from engaging in disordered eating. They also suggested that it may be that a cohesive family environment leads to positive family meal patterns, which in turn serves a protective function.

Two meta-analyses are consistent with these findings. In their meta-analysis of shared risk and protective factors for overweight and disordered eating in adolescents, Neumark-Sztainer, Wall, Haines, Story, Sherwood, and van den Berg (2007) found that positive atmosphere at family meals and frequent lunch intake emerged as protective factors against binge eating, extreme weight control behaviours, and increases in these behaviours over time. Frequent family meals also emerged as protective, although association were not always consistent. Similarly, in a recent meta-analysis examining the relationship between frequency of shared family meals and nutritional health, Hammons and Fiese (2011) found that children and adolescents, who ate meals with their families three or more times per week, were more likely to
have healthier eating patterns and were less likely to engage in disordered eating. The authors suggested that mealtimes may provide a setting, where parents can recognize early signs of disordered eating and that family meals may be predictive of family connectedness, which may encourage adolescents to talk to families about such issues.

In their discussion paper, Rodin et al. (1990) stated that parental comments about their own and other people’s weight can influence children’s attitudes about appearance. They argued that having parents who have resolved their own weight issues or who are aware that our society’s attractiveness bias can have a harmful influence may serve as a protective factor.

Similarly, in their review of parental influences on healthy and unhealthy eating practices and attitudes, Graber and Brooks-Gunn (1996) argued that parents need to be included as participants, together with their adolescent daughters, in eating disorder prevention and intervention programs. They emphasized the need to address the parents’ feelings about themselves, how they may transmit their unhealthy concerns, and how they may be influenced by cultural norms. They also stated that parents need to be given accurate information about such puberty-related changes as normative weight gain, about healthy nutritional practices and about the importance of monitoring their child’s eating behaviours.

In addition, low family pressure to control weight was found to be associated with lower levels of thin-ideal internalization. Stice, Spangler, and Agras (2001) conducted a longitudinal study in which they assigned adolescent girls to a 15-month fashion magazine subscription or a no-subscription condition. They found that media exposure led to increased negative affect only for those girls who had initial elevations in the pressure to be thin from family and peers, but not for the girls who experienced no such pressure. In their quantitative study, Cordero and Israel (2012) examined parental influences on eating problems among college-aged daughters and
found that lower levels of messages about body weight and shape from mothers and fathers were related to lower levels of unhealthy eating. In addition, Tester and Gleaves (2005) examined the effects of family environment on the internalization of the thin ideal and found that women who reported low as opposed to high past family influences to control weight were less likely to internalize the thin ideal. They suggested that family may serve to magnify the value of broader societal messages related to thinness. Similarly, Twamley and Davis (1999) found that among participants who showed low awareness of the sociocultural thinness norms, those participants who reported low past family pressure to control weight were less likely to internalize the thin ideal.

Having a positive relationship with both mother and father was found to be associated with healthier eating. In their quantitative longitudinal study, Swarr and Richards (1996) examined how adolescent girls’ pubertal development, perceptions of their pubertal timing, and their subjective experiences with their parents related to the emergence of eating problems two years later. They found that girls who felt closer to their mothers and spent more time with them reported fewer current weight and eating concerns as well as fewer eating problems two years later. In addition, they found that girls who spent more time with their fathers had healthier eating scores, particularly for those girls who perceived their pubertal timing as early. They also found that perceived friendliness of the father buffered the effects of breast development on eating attitudes. In another quantitative longitudinal study, Croll et al. (2002) found family connectedness to be protective against disordered eating. Similarly, in a study examining risk and protective factors associated with disordered eating in early adolescence, McVey et al. (2002) found that among girls who experienced high as opposed to low levels of school-related stress, high level of support from the father was found to be a protective factor in relation to
disordered eating. Moreover, in a longitudinal qualitative study that followed a group of women who exhibited a distorted body image and disordered eating in college, women in the group that got better reported that both their mothers and their fathers affirmed their achievements and relational abilities (Hesse-Biber et al., 1999).

**Peer Group and Partnership Relationships**

In their literature review of studies discussing children’s body image concerns and eating disturbance, Ricciardelli and McCabe (2001) stated that peers have been shown to significantly influence body image concerns. While the majority of the literature examines the factors that lead to poor body image and body dissatisfaction, there is also evidence suggesting that relationships with peers and romantic partners may serve a protective function. Paxton (1996) argued that while some friendship networks are highly invested in weight and shape, which might provide a dangerous environment for a girl who is vulnerable to the development of an eating disorder, other networks that are less invested in weight and shape might provide a protective environment for a vulnerable girl. In agreement with these findings, in their qualitative study Wertheim et al. (1997) found that positive peer influences may protect girls against weight concern, as several girls in their study described instances in which girls began vomiting, fasting, dieting or using diet pills, and their friends tried to convince them to stop engaging in those behaviours. In another qualitative study, Hesse-Biber et al. (1999) found that all women in the group that got better following their struggle with disordered eating in college described having satisfying friendships and intimate relationships with men, while women who remained at risk reported dissatisfaction with friendships and intimate relationships with men. In addition, Rodin et al. (1990) argued that friends or romantic partners who have well-regulated eating habits and are not concerned about weight-related issues may provide a buffer against
some of the factors that increase risk. They also argued that successful interpersonal relationship satisfy needs that might otherwise be displaced onto food.

Brown (1991) talked about the onset of puberty as a time when girls shift from being able to speak openly about their thoughts and feelings to a struggle to hold on to their knowledge, once they see that expressing strong feelings can have severe consequences, such as being excluded. Consequently, girls attempt to replace their authentic relationships with artificial yet idealized ones. Some characteristics of these idealized relationships include covering over conflict and disagreements for the sake of kindness and niceness; in other words, abandoning one’s true feelings for the sake of being liked and accepted. As the concept of idealized relationships makes its way into the girls’ lives in early adolescence, the girls experience an inconsistency between what they know through their experience and what is socially constructed as reality (Gilligan, 1994). On the other hand, having genuine and supportive relationships with peers might serve a protective function. Similarly, Brown and Gilligan (1992) argued that girls’ and women’s resistance to giving up genuine relationships for the sake of idealized ones holds the potential for cultural and societal change.

**Eating Disorder Prevention Programs**

Another source of information about protective factors is eating disorder prevention programs. Levine and Piran (2004) outlined three prevention models of eating disorders, which are the social cognitive model (SCM), the non-specific vulnerability-stressor model (NSVS), and the critical social perspectives model (CSP). SCM programs aim to decrease risk factors associated with eating disorders and to increase healthy attitudes and behaviours related to body image, healthy eating, and exercising. NSVS programs help to develop general life skills, such as stress management, decision-making, and communications skills and to integrate social skills
with a positive self of the self. CSP programs emphasize and encourage critical voices, contextualized knowledge, agency and empowerment, relational context of the groups, as well as changing social systems and the experience of the body. In addition, Levine and Smolak (2006) outlined the feminist-empowerment-relational (FER) model of prevention developed by Piran (1999a, 2001), which creates opportunities for positive experiences in one’s body, the establishment of voice, acting assertively in the world irrespective of appearance, and forming equitable relational dialogues and forums. Identifying the key elements that lead to positive changes in the successful eating disorder prevention programs might help to identify factors that foster resilience in women and prevent them from internalizing the thin ideal and developing disordered eating. Four factors that repeatedly emerge when examining eating disorder prevention research are knowledge about the dangers of engaging in disordered eating, critical thinking, relational context, and life skills.

Knowledge. Rodin et al. (1990) argued that educating about the ineffectiveness of dieting as a means of weight control and about its destructive side effects would serve as a protective strategy, although they also anticipated that the multi-billion-dollar diet industry would pose an obstacle, stating that consumers will continue to be tempted to use dieting products as long as they are marketed. On the other hand, in discussing information-based approach to the primary prevention of eating disorders, O’Dea and Abraham (2000) stated that increasing participants’ knowledge about eating disorders may be harmful as it can lead to the glamorization and normalization of eating disorders and might also teach young people about dangerous methods of weight control. They stated that, while an information-based approach is likely to improve the participants’ knowledge, it is unlikely to affect their beliefs, attitudes, intent, and behaviours associated with the development of eating disorders.
Counteracting the claim about the potential harmful effects of increasing the participants’ knowledge about eating disorders, in a meta-analysis of eating-disorder prevention research, Fingeret, Warren, Cepeda-Benito, and Gleaves (2006) found no evidence to support such concerns, as the results showed no harmful overall effects regardless of whether or not an intervention included eating disorder-related information. On the other hand, they also found that eating disorder prevention programs had the largest positive effects on the acquisition of knowledge, while the effects for reducing eating disorder-related attitudes and behaviours were small, which is consistent with O’Dea and Abraham’s (2000) second argument. Conversely, it has been argued that although lasting improvement in attitudes and behaviours are the goal, increases in relevant knowledge should not be dismissed and may provide the basis for behavioural and attitudinal changes at a later time or lead to a stronger outcome in a future intervention (Neumark-Sztainer, Levine, Paxton, Smolak, Piran, & Wertheim, 2006).

As an example of a program that aimed to increase the participants’ knowledge, Smolak and Levine (2001) implemented a primary prevention program for negative body image and unhealthy weight regulation called Eating Smart, Eating for Me (ESEM), which was aimed at fourth and fifth grade children, ages nine to eleven. The program’s goal was to increase resilience in the short run, partly by increasing knowledge, in order to prevent problem behaviours in the long run. At the two-year follow-up of the program they found that the children who participated in the program were less likely to diet and had better body esteem than did children who were in schools where the program was not offered, which suggests a possible prevention effect. They also found that control children who had been in the experimental schools fell between the curricular children and the control children from schools where the curriculum was not offered, which the researchers explained as being due to the curricular effect.
having spilled into the non-curricular classrooms. In addition, they found that more knowledge about nutrition, dieting, and body fat was related to positive body esteem, less frequent use of weight loss techniques, and lower scores on the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire. The results of this program suggest that increases in knowledge about nutrition, dieting, and body fat can serve a long term preventive function.

**Critical thinking.** Shisslak and Crago (1994) asserted that within a feminist eating disorder prevention program one needs to teach young girls to critically examine role prescriptions, their consequences, as well as the unattainability and harmfulness of the ideal image promoted in the media. Supporting this assertion, in reviewing eating disorder prevention work, Piran (2010) found a tendency for greater sustainable changes in programs that enhance the development of a critical stance in the participants. However, she also emphasized that while holding a critical perspective can be protective, it is difficult to hold on to a place of resistance without any changes in one’s social environment. In addition, in discussing individual differences in using and responding to media, Berel and Irving (1998) stated that girls and women might actively select what they attend to, and how they interpret and respond to media, which implies that internalization of the thin body ideal and body dissatisfaction are not inevitable. They suggested that girls and women can learn to make different media choices and to process what they see in the media more critically, which would reduce the risk of internalization of the thin ideal and disordered eating.

One approach that used this principle is media literacy, which teaches individuals to evaluate media critically and consequently reduce the credibility and persuasiveness of media messages (Irving & Berel, 2001). In their media literacy program that was designed to strengthen college women’s resistance to media images, all three intervention conditions were
effective at reducing participants’ perception of fashion models as realistic and similar to themselves. In addition, participants who received the externally oriented intervention, which focused on teaching them to think critically about beauty-related advertisements, expressed reduced desirability to look like a fashion model. In another program, Acknowledging and Rejecting the Media’s influence on Eating and body image Disturbance (ARMED), college women who were at high risk for eating disorders participated in a two-session media literacy intervention with cognitive-behavioural features that was designed to reduce internalization of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction (Coughlin & Kalodner, 2006). Following participation in the program the women reported significant reductions in body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, feelings of ineffectiveness, and internalization of societal standards of beauty.

In addition to critically examining messages in the media, it is important for the girls to critically examine the issue of gender inequity in order to counter body-related pressures, as emphasized by Piran (2001), who argued that the social theory of eating disorders that is based on media-generated “pressures for thinness” is strikingly different from the interpretive understanding of the girls and young women, who perceived that their increased preoccupation with body weight and shape was related to the intensification of expressions of inequity in the body domain during puberty. In her program implemented at an elite ballet school, where she met with girls and young women in focus groups, she found that through the process of reflection and action the participants arrived at their own understanding of their body weight and shape concerns and used this critical consciousness to transform all facets of the school environment (Piran, 2001). Some examples of this transformation included changes in the school curriculum, more responsibility on the part of male dance partners, and a creation of a more equitable social system where girls held social power and their voices were heard.
The program at the ballet school was also supported by a quantitative outcome evaluation that was based on three all-school surveys that compared the baseline cohort and two later cohorts, four and nine years later (Piran, 1999b). For students in grades seven to nine, Piran found significant reductions in restrained eating and in disturbed attitudes about eating and weight between the baseline cohort and the cohorts four years and nine years following the implementation of the program. There were also reductions in the presence of eating symptomatology and extremely disturbed attitudes about eating and weight, although the consistent reductions were not statistically significant. For students in grades 10 to 12, over the study period there was a significant reduction in disturbed attitudes and behaviours towards eating, less disordered eating symptomatology, and a more realistic assessment of their body shape, although there was only a nonsignificant reduction in body weight and shape preoccupation. The study suggested that it is possible to create a supportive subculture that can prevent potentially self-destructive patterns of behaviour even in a general environment of harsh external pressures about body weight and shape. Piran also emphasized the importance of also targeting the larger social issue of the harsh pressures for thinness in the world of ballet.

Another type of program that encourages participants to take a critical stance is the dissonance-based eating disorder prevention, which is based on Festinger’s (1957) cognitive dissonance theory. The theory proposes that inconsistent cognitions lead to psychological discomfort, which motivates people to change their cognitions in a way that would restore consistency (Festinger, 1957). In one such program, Stice, Shaw, Burton, and Wade (2006) designed an intervention in which all the activities were meant to be counterattitudinal for individuals who have internalized the thin ideal, such as writing an essay about the costs associated with pursuit of the thin ideal and engaging in a role-play to dissuade facilitators from
pursuing the thin ideal. They compared the cognitive dissonance condition to three other conditions: healthy weight management, expressive writing, and assessment only. They found that participants in the dissonance condition showed significantly greater decreases in eating disorder risk factors such as thin ideal internalization, body dissatisfaction, dieting, and negative affect, and in bulimic symptoms than either control condition. In explaining their findings, they suggested that voluntarily critiquing the thin ideal resulted in cognitive dissonance, which in turn motivated participants to become less attached to the thin ideal, consequently reducing their body dissatisfaction, dieting, negative affect, and bulimic symptoms (Stice et al., 2006).

Two studies with sorority members by Becker, Smith, and Ciao (2005, 2006) further confirmed the effectiveness of cognitive dissonance in reducing eating pathology. In one of the studies they found that both the cognitive dissonance group and the more passive media psychoeducation group were successful at reducing the participants’ dietary restraint, body dissatisfaction, and eating disorder pathology. However, only the cognitive dissonance group reduced thin-ideal internalization as compared to the wait-list group (Becker et al., 2005). In the other study they found that peer facilitated cognitive dissonance group resulted in reductions in restraint, eating pathology, thin-ideal internalization, and body dissatisfaction at 8-month follow up (Becker et al., 2006). Findings from the dissonance-based programs underscore the importance and power of taking a critical stance when examining the thin ideal.

In discussing primary prevention programs for body image dissatisfaction and eating disturbance in adolescent girls, Paxton (1996) argued that students could be taught to identify the sources and triggers of body image concerns, such as weight and dieting-related discussions with friends, and then to reframe these as ‘fat talk’ or as friends’ concerns without personal implications for the students themselves. Paxton (1996) stated that understanding the social role
of ‘fat talk’ may diminish the anxiety it evokes. She also argued for the inclusion of a cognitive coping skills component in prevention programs, which would involve teaching participants to recognize when they compare their bodies to others, see the emotional and behavioural consequences of such body comparative thoughts, and replace them with more adaptive thoughts.

Relational context. The relational context that is provided by some eating disorder prevention programs might be another protective factor. In discussing the implications for prevention of critical social perspectives on body image, Levine and Piran (2004) argued that groups have the potential of becoming “places of connection where alternative norms of discourse and of being together are practiced” (p. 65), therefore providing a relational space that can offset oppressive systems. Similarly, Piran (1996) argued that a prevention program for body weight and shape preoccupation that helps women reclaim the quality of their relationships would lead to the development of resistance in these women. Within her program implemented at a dance school, Piran (1996) found that older girls in the school became advocates of younger girls and tried to protect them from adverse experiences. In addition, in a meta-analytic review of eating disorder prevention programs, Stice and Shaw (2004) found that interactive programs had larger intervention effects than didactic programs. Finally, when discussing the development of a feminist eating disorder prevention program, Shisslak and Crago (1994) argued for the need to modify socialization processes that teach women to ignore their personal needs, to serve others, and to think that in order for them to pursue higher education or careers they need to sacrifice relationships.

Friendship groups are an important subcultural unit to be considered when designing eating disorder prevention programs (Paxton, 1996). In her discussion paper, Paxton (1996)
argued that conducting activities at the friendship-group level so that friends could work together to explore healthy approaches to eating and to their bodies is likely to make the prevention program more powerful in bringing about individual as well as subcultural change. She stated that the positive and supportive nature of adolescent friendships could be beneficial in encouraging the girls to replace joint dieting with mutually supportive attempts to improve body image, eating habits, and self-esteem. Similarly, Jasper (1993b) suggested that body image groups allow women to create a counterculture, which does not equate beauty with thinness, where weight prejudice is challenged, and where competitiveness around body size and shape is discouraged. She argued that such groups can help women to see the cultural messages they have internalized and how they can become more empathic and take better care of their bodies.

These suggestions were supported by Girl Talk school-based peer support groups implemented by McVey, Lieberman, Voorberg, Wardrope, and Blackmore (2003). Girls in grades seven and eight, who were attending middle level school, participated in the 10-session peer support groups that were designed to improve body esteem and global self-esteem as well as reduce negative eating attitudes and behaviours (McVey et al., 2003). The peers support groups focused on media literacy and promotion of life skills, such as strategies to enhance self-esteem and peer relational skills that were aimed at increasing girls’ resiliency. McVey et al. (2003) found a significant increase in weight-related esteem and a decrease in dieting among program participants, which were maintained throughout the 3-month follow up period, while control participants showed no change in weight esteem or dieting. McVey et al. (2003) emphasized peer support group model as an important component to be included in school-based approaches designed to promote positive body image.
Life skills. The findings of the McVey et al. (2003) study outlined above also suggest that teaching girls life skills promotion strategies might be an important component to include in eating disorder prevention programs. In reviewing protective factors to the development of eating disorders Crago et al. (2001) concluded that life skills training may have protective effects. They emphasized the importance of capturing and strengthening as many protective factors as possible when designing life skills programs; for example, they suggested strengthening individuals’ problem-solving skills in order to address inconsistent and stereotypical messages in the media and the community (Crago et al., 2001). Life skills component was included in several recent prevention programs (ex. McVey & Davis, 2002; McVey, Davis, Tweed & Shaw, 2004; O’Dea & Abraham, 2000).

In their study aimed at improving body image and eating attitudes and behaviours by improving both male and female participants’ self esteem, O’Dea and Abraham (2000) implemented a program that focused on dealing with stress, positive sense of self and self evaluation, societal stereotypes, involving significant others, and building relationship and communication skills. They found that participation in the program significantly improved body satisfaction, physical appearance ratings, current weight loss behaviours, as well as attitudes and perception of aspects of the participants’ self concept. These changes remained present after 12 months (O’Dea & Abraham, 2000).

In their study aimed to promote positive body image, McVey and Davis (2002) used a life skills promotion approach with grade six girls, including self-esteem enhancement strategies and ways to cope with normative stressors in an assertive way. There was no program effect as participants in both prevention and control groups showed significant increases in body image satisfaction and decreases in eating problem scores (McVey & Davis, 2002). McVey et al.
(2004) replicated the study in order to determine if inclusion of outcome measures evaluating such resiliency factors as global self-esteem, body image satisfaction, and feelings of perfectionism might better assess the changes facilitated by a life-skills promotion program. They found a significant and short term increases in the girls’ body image satisfaction and global self-esteem scores, and a significant decrease in negative eating attitudes and behavior scores (McVey et al., 2004).

Building on the existing research, McVey, Tweed, and Blackmore (2007) evaluated a longer and more intensive and comprehensive eight-month intervention program entitled Healthy Schools-Healthy Kids (HS-HK). HS-HK is a universal-selective intervention program aimed at improving body satisfaction and size acceptance as well as reducing the internalization of media ideals, weight-based teasing, disordered eating, weight-loss, and muscle-gaining behaviours (McVey et al., 2007). The program included multiple components, including workshops for the teachers, teacher-led curriculum, peer-support groups, a one-session focus group, and additional school-wide activities such as a play performance, video presentations, and posters promoting healthy eating, fitness, and size acceptance. McVey et al. (2007) used a randomized controlled trial to test the effectiveness of the program conducted with a large and multi-cultural sample of male and female students from grades six and seven. They found that the HS-HK intervention reduced the scores of both male and female students on the internalization of media ideals and reduced disordered eating scores among female students, more so among female students in the higher risk category. They also found a decrease over time in the number of both male and female students who were currently trying to lose weight, although the effect was not maintained at the 6-month follow up.
Despite the existence of literature outlining and evaluating a variety of eating disorder prevention programs, there is very limited knowledge about the active ingredients of prevention, about the essential program components that induce attitudinal and behavioural change, and about the mediating variable in the process of change (Levine & Piran, 2004). Levine and Piran (2004) emphasized the importance of this information for enhancing the effectiveness of prevention. In addition, in a recent meta-analysis of eating-disorder prevention research, Fingeret et al. (2006) found that overall prevention interventions showed only small net effects of reducing maladaptive eating behaviours and attitudes. Given the limited state of knowledge about the “active ingredients” of prevention, Levine and Piran (2004) suggested that exploratory qualitative inquiries exploring what the program participants found helpful may be useful.

Present Inquiry

This literature review has examined protective factors that were identified in the literature on disordered eating. The examination has revealed that research on protective factors in the development of disordered eating is scarce as most of the literature on this topic is dealing with risk factors and is pathology oriented. While there is a multitude of studies looking specifically at risk factors in the development of disordered eating as well as several reviews (ex. Ghaderi, 2001; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001; Stice, 2002; Striegel-Moore & Bulik, 2007; Wertheim et al., 2004), there is only a limited number of studies specifically examining protective factors and only one review dedicated entirely to this topic (Crago et al., 2001). It is usually the case that when protective factors are examined, they tend to be looked at in conjunction with risk factors (McVey et al., 2002; Shisslak & Crago, 2001).

Most of the protective factors identified in the literature were generated by theories and tested using quantitative methods. Protective factors emerging from such studies are not well
understood in that it is usually not clear what it is about them that protects women. For instance, although Tiggemann (2001) found that a greater emphasis on sports was associated with lower body dissatisfaction and higher self esteem, it is not clear what it is about engagement in sports that positively affects young women. Although the researcher hypothesized that playing sports might lead to a sense of body competence where bodily functions as opposed to its appearance are emphasized (Tiggemann, 2001), it might also be the case that playing sports kept the girls’ bodies thin and in this way protected them from becoming dissatisfied with their bodies. On the other hand, treating study participants as experts by asking them directly what they believed it was about their participation in sports that protected them against body dissatisfaction and engaging in a discussion on this topic, might have led to emergence of new knowledge not previously identified in the literature. In addition, studies to date tended to look at individual protective factors, such as self determination (e.g., Pelletier et al., 2004), rather than looking at the additive impact of different factors.

In terms of qualitative research, there is a dearth of qualitative studies that focus specifically on protective factors related to the pressure to be thin. The few qualitative studies that explore this had a broader focus, for example, inquiring about the sociocultural context of women’s body image (Paquette & Raine, 2004) or about sociocultural pressures to be thin (Wertheim et al., 1997). Other qualitative studies exploring this topic had other foci, for example, examining the impact of mass media on the self concepts of Black and White girls (Milkie, 1999) or factors influencing women’s recovery from disordered eating during postcollege years (Hesse-Biber et al., 1999). There is a dearth of qualitative studies explicitly asking young women what it is that helped them resist the pressure to adhere to the thin ideal. Such research can be beneficial for enriching the literature on prevention of disordered eating by
discovering protective factors not previously identified as well as explanations as to why these factors are in fact protective, which can in turn help to guide eating disorder prevention programs.

For some of the protective factors that emerged from the literature, it is not clear how to develop or strengthen them. For example, while having a strong sense of self, such as having a high self esteem, being confident, and refusing to conform to the norms, was associated with more positive body image and reduced risk of developing disordered eating (Hesse-Biber et al., 1999; Paquette & Raine, 2004), the authors did not make suggestions about how to strengthen one’s sense of self. When suggestions were made in the literature as to what would help to protect women from the development of disordered eating, they were often theoretical and did not offer practical solutions. For instance, Warren et al. (2005) argued that the Western culture needs to denounce the ultra-thin ideal and to place less emphasis on appearance as a determinant of a woman’s value, yet offered no practical suggestions as to how to bring about such cultural change. The authors also did not propose any practical strategies that women could use in day-to-day life when confronted with the pressure to adhere to the ‘thin ideal’.

Eating disorder prevention research has also provided only limited insight into what it is about the programs that prevents women from engaging in disordered eating. For example, a meta-analysis of eating disorder prevention research found that skills-based and psychoeducation-based intervention strategies can be equally effective and there were no significant effects for intervention strategy (Fingeret et al., 2006). There is little information about what constitutes the “active ingredients” of prevention and exploratory qualitative inquiries may prove useful in clarifying them (Levine & Piran, 2004).
It appears that the full range of factors that protect women from the development of disordered eating has not yet been explored. In addition, practical suggestions that women could use in everyday life or that could be used to bring about cultural change are, for the major part, absent from the literature. The present investigation is a qualitative inquiry that focuses on young women’s perceptions of protective factors against pressures for thinness. It aims to fill in the gap in the literature by interviewing young women who identify themselves as more resilient than others and inquiring what they believe protected them from pressures for thinness. Women ages 18 to 25 were interviewed for this inquiry as it was found that body dissatisfaction, chronic dieting, and eating disorder symptoms generally diminish in the 10 years following college (Heatherton, Mahamedi, Striepe, Field, & Keel, 1997). It was suggested that maturing into adulthood as well as getting away from social influences that emphasize thinness helps most women to stop engaging in disordered eating (Heatherton et al., 1997). Although their accounts are retrospective, women in their early adulthood are likely to be more aware of what has helped them throughout adolescence, than adolescents who are still experiencing the pressures and turmoil of this phase, and for whom it might be more difficult to reflect upon what is currently helping them. On the other hand, women who are in their mid 20s to early 30s might be protected by additional factors, not available to girls or younger women, such as having a successful career or being in a long term supportive romantic relationship. Therefore, women who are 18 to 25 seem to be the ideal age group to meaningfully examine the range of protective factors that could be relevant to girls and young women who are at the highest risk for disordered eating.

It is unfortunately the case that all women encounter to some extent the pressure to adhere to the thin ideal, the harmful influence of which is apparent from the alarmingly high
prevalence of disordered eating among young women. For example, in a large Canadian sample of girls ages 12 to 18, disordered eating attitudes and behaviours were present in over 27% of the girls, and were found to increase gradually throughout adolescence (Jones, Bennett, Olmsted, Lawson, & Rodin, 2001). The present investigation focused on resilience in young women to attain a better understanding of what allowed them to continue loving their bodies the way they are despite being exposed to the thin ideal. The aim of the present investigation was to engage young women, who self-identified as resilient, in a dialogue that would lead to identification of practical strategies that women could use in everyday life to counter pressures for thinness. It was also hoped that the knowledge derived from these dialogues could be used in clinical practice as well as for eating disorder prevention.
CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

Feminism-Informed Research

The present inquiry was informed by feminist research principles. One of the principles underlying feminist research is that women’s lives are important and that women are interesting as individuals as well as a social category (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). Feminist research attempts to capture women’s lived experiences in a respectful manner by accepting the stories of their lives as legitimate sources of knowledge (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). It challenges the structures and ideologies that oppress women by highlighting gender-based stereotypes and biases, uncovering women’s subjugated knowledge, and documenting their lives, experiences, and concerns (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). It also recognizes diversity among groups of women as well as diversity among individual women in terms of their ethno-cultural group membership, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation, and emphasizes the need to take into account the context of their lives (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). The goals of feminist research are to empower and to emancipate women and other marginalized groups as well as to apply the research findings in a way that promotes social change and social justice (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). One of the ways feminist research achieves this aim is by challenging the supposed neutrality of mainstream social science by means of exposing the under-representation of women’s experiences within it and highlighting the way in which women’s experiences often contradict mainstream research findings (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007).

Most feminist researchers do not adhere to the positivist paradigm and question the viability and utility of value-free research methods and objective researchers as well as the notion that there exists an unchanging social reality to be discovered (Hesse-Biber & Leavy,
Instead, they incorporate interpretation, subjectivity, and emotion into the knowledge-building process in order to illuminate potential new sources of knowledge and understanding within the lived experiences of women (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). Feminist researchers use a multiplicity of research methods and reach across disciplinary boundaries (Crawford & Kimmel, 1999; Reinharz & Davidman, 1992).

According to Reinharz and Davidman (1992), personal experience is considered relevant in feminist research as it is thought to repair the pseudo-objectivity of the research. The researchers are encouraged to acknowledge and to draw from their own perspectives in the course of their research projects (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). They also must be attuned to the feelings of their research participants as well as their own feelings (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). In that sense, in feminist research both the researchers and the respondents may become tools for knowledge building and rich understanding (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). Self reflexivity allows researcher to examine how their own identities influence their work, and how their work influences their identities (Crawford & Kimmel, 1999). It requires that the researchers be aware of, and be critically reflective throughout the research process about, the ways in which their own positionality may either hinder or assist the achieving of knowledge (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). Feminist researchers argue that political commitment to research for women, which precludes claims to neutrality, does not preclude any claim to valid knowledge (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002).

Another principle that is common in feminist research methods is its social change orientation with the ultimate aim of contributing to a transformation of gender relations and other systems of oppression (Crawford & Kimmel, 1999). Feminist research aims to produce knowledge that could be used to effectively transform gendered and other injustices and
subordination (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002). Feminist researchers typically make explicit policy recommendations and might conclude their projects with suggestions about how their readers can use the findings (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). Reinharz and Davidman (1992) stated that feminist research is concerned with the dual responsibility of contributing to the welfare of women as well as contributing to knowledge.

**Subjectivity of the Researcher**

One of the distinguishing principles of feminist research is the utilization of the researchers’ personal experiences in their research projects, in that the researchers often begin their project by examining their own personal location and interest related to the issue to be studied and use this reflection to define and enrich the research process (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). In line with that principle, it is important for me as a researcher to be transparent about my own possible biases and assumptions that I bring into this inquiry.

My interest in resilience and body image and specifically, in resistance to the thin ideal, was motivated in part by my curiosity about the discrepancy between the value placed on thinness in the North American culture and the vision of the curvy women as attractive and feminine in the two cultures which surrounded me until my mid-adolescence, the Ukrainian and the Israeli cultures. Also, due to my slimmer physique, throughout my life I have been repeatedly told by family members that I needed to gain weight, which has fuelled my curiosity about familial influences on women’s perception of their bodies. In addition, my research project was influenced by my feminist theoretical orientation, which, in conjunction with the literature review, shaped some of my interview probes. For example, I asked the participants who they believed benefited from having women struggle with the thin ideal. My feminist theoretical orientation has also shaped my analysis of the data by making me especially attentive
to such issues as ethno-cultural and social influences that affected the way the women described living in their bodies. Despite certain pre-existing thoughts and expectations, I believe that being conscious of these interests allowed me to be open to other aspects of participants’ experiences.

**Life History Approach to Qualitative Research**

Qualitative approaches to research are concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, or produced (Mason, 1996). The purpose of qualitative research is to generate knowledge by exploring the meaning of social events and processes as well as people’s interactions with and interpretation of each other and the world (Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2005). By reflecting on and describing their experiences, feelings, and the events, participants discover deeper meaning in their lives (Atkinson, 1998). Atkinson (1998) argued that there might not be a better way to understand how people get from where they started to where they are now in life than through their life stories. Since no known research studies exist that have investigated the experiences of young women who identify themselves as resilient to thinness-related pressures in order to examine what helped them develop and maintain this resilience, a qualitative inquiry is warranted.

The present inquiry used the life history approach, which is one of the approaches used in qualitative research that allows participants to actively reconstruct their lives by sharing their stories with the researcher, who guides them by prompting their memories and encouraging their reflections, interpretations, and insights (Haglund, 2004). This approach gathers, analyzes, and interprets the stories that people tell about their lives (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Life history approach facilitates the study of psychosocial phenomena that develop over time in response to a wide variety of influences by allowing the researcher to obtain lifelong data to examine experiences, relationships, and changes that take place over time (Haglund, 2004).
Within the life history interview, the participant is the narrator of the story being told, whereas the researcher is a guide in this process, while the two of them work together to construct a story that the participant can identify with (Atkinson, 1998). Life history researchers try to create a conversational space where the phenomenon under study can be discussed and try to figure out together with the participants how this process should unfold (Cole & Knowles, 2001). The participant and the researcher are viewed as collaborative partners, who are involved in exploration, discovery, and understanding (Haglund, 2004). The researcher is seeking the insider’s viewpoint on the life being lived and the participant is considered the expert and the authority on his or her life (Atkinson, 1998). In that way, this approach challenges the traditional notions of hierarchy and power in research and gives voice to the research participants, which is consistent with feminist research principles.

According to Cole and Knowles (2001), life history approach is based on the assumption that the general can be understood by analyzing the particular, meaning that by understanding the experiences of one person the researcher gains insight into the lives of other people within that community. It provides insight into the way people learn to meet society’s normative expectations, such as those related to gender, social class, and age, as well as the way people create meaning within the culture (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In this way, by exploring the way individual women learn to resist the pressure to be thin, one may come to understand what might protect other women who are exposed to similar pressures.

Context is repeatedly emphasized in life history approach. Ulin et al. (2005) argued that a social phenomenon could never be understood outside of its context, which includes the physical setting, the historical, social, and political climates, as well as the organizational or individual characteristics influencing the phenomenon under study. This is in line with feminist
research principles that also highlight the need to take into account the specific historical and cultural context within which the research is located (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). Similarly, Cole and Knowles (2001) stress the importance of in-depth understanding of context in life history research, highlighting the fact that people’s lives are never lived in complete isolation from it. Huglund (2004) supports that claim, arguing that context is critical to understanding a person’s life, because it influences how that person’s life is lived and interpreted, which in turn filters and assigns meaning to events, thoughts, experiences, and relationships of that person.

**Grounded Theory Method**

Grounded theory method was initially developed by Glaser and Strauss. Their initial grounded theory draws upon objectivist assumptions founded in positivism and assumes that data represent objective facts about a knowable world (Charmaz, 2006). According to the objectivist grounded theory, external reality is awaiting discovery and a researcher, who is viewed as an unbiased observer separate and distant from the data, finds it and records facts about it (Charmaz, 2002). This view, therefore, argues for a strict adherence to and a careful application of the ground theory methods in order to produce theoretical understanding. Objectivist grounded theory also erases the social context from which the data emerges as well as the influence of the researcher on the data and the interactions between the researcher and the participants (Charmaz, 2006).

In contrast, constructivist grounded theory emphasizes the importance of locating the data in its context, which can include the context of the interview, the context of the participant’s life, as well as the broader social and historical context (Charmaz, 2002). This approach does not view researchers as impartial observers and believes instead in their need to take a reflexive stance toward the research process and locate themselves within the realities they are studying.
(Charmaz, 2005). Constructivist grounded theorists acknowledge that what they see and do not see rests on their values and they attempt to become aware of their own assumptions and how these might affect the research (Charmaz, 2006). In addition, in a constructivist approach, the researcher and the participants co-construct meaning and the developing theory is grounded in both the participants’ and the researcher’s experiences (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006a). This approach also analyzes the power imbalance between the researcher and the participants and attempts to modify them.

Such an emphasis in the constructivist grounded theory on co-creation of meaning and on modifying the power imbalance between the investigator and the participants is in line with feminist research principles, which also challenge traditional notions of power in the research process as well as with the life history approach, which views the researcher and the participants as collaborative partners. Similarly, the emphasis on context in the constructivist approach is in line with both the life history approach and feminism-informed research. In addition, just as the constructivist approach, feminist research rejects the objectivity of research and encourages the investigators to be attuned to themselves and reflective in the research process.

**Participants**

Fourteen women, ages 18 to 25, were interviewed for the study. Three of the participants identified their socioeconomic status as lower, two identified it as lower-middle to middle, five identified it as middle class, and four identified it as middle to upper-middle. Ten of the participants were born in Canada, two were born in Eastern Europe, one was born in South America and one was born in Asia. Seven participants identified their heritage as European, two participants as South American, four participants as Asian, and one participant identified it as half Asian and half European. With regards to their education, all fourteen participants either
completed or were enrolled in a postsecondary institution, or were in the process of applying. Four participants were either applying to or were about to start university, six participants were currently enrolled in an undergraduate program at a university, three participants were graduate students, and one participant held a Master’s degree and was in the process of applying to Law School. All the participants identified themselves as heterosexual. With regards to their physique, in their interviews eight of the participants made references to their body weight as being “average” or “normal”, four participants spoke about being “overweight” or “heavier”, one participant called herself “thin”, and one participant stated she was “a little underweight”.

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited through advertisements (see Appendix A) posted in a variety of urban and suburban setting, including community centres, libraries, post-secondary institutions, athletic facilities, as well as via a classifieds website “Craigslist”, where an ad was placed under the category ‘volunteers’. Inclusion criteria were clearly outlined in the advertisement, which involved being between the ages of 18 to 25, liking one’s body regardless of its size, feeling comfortable eating anything she wants, and resisting being affected by the ‘thin ideal’. Exclusion criteria were also outlined and included having ever received a diagnosis of or treatment for eating disorders, or having had severe eating problems. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were confirmed when potential participants contacted the researcher by phone or e-mail. Data collection was guided by theoretical sampling, in that data was sought to elaborate and refine the emerging categories and to develop their properties until the categories were saturated and no new properties emerged (Charmaz, 2006).

Participants were interviewed in a pre-booked office at a local university. At the beginning of the interview, participants reviewed and signed the informed consent form (see
Appendix B), and were given an opportunity to ask questions about the consent form and the research. They were also asked to come up with a pseudonym of their choice. All the interviews were tape recorded. Upon completion of the interview the participants received a $15 gift card to a local music/book store as a token of appreciation for taking part in this study. The participants were also notified that a summary of their interview will be created and asked about their preferred way of receiving it.

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Identifying information was removed from the transcripts and each woman’s name was replaced with a pseudonym of her choice in order to protect her confidentiality. The researcher then created a thorough summary of each interview, which was e-mailed to the participant, along with a note thanking them for their participation and encouraging them to provide feedback if they felt the summary did not reflect their experiences. While several participants responded to the e-mail thanking for the summary, none of the participants requested any revisions.

**The Interview**

The interviews ranged in length from 90 minutes to 150 minutes. The interviews began with the researcher inquiring what made the participants interested in taking a part in the study, followed by demographic questions. The central question of the study was then presented to the participants by asking what they think has protected them from the pressure to be thin. Participants were asked to reflect on what was helpful to them throughout their lives as well as on their current sources of strength, consistently with the life history approach (Cole & Knowles, 2001). These experiences were then explored in detail using broad, open-ended questions in order to encourage unanticipated stories to emerge, in line with the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006).
In addition to exploring each of the factors introduced by the participants in response to the central open-ended question of the study, the interview was guided through open ended probes (see Appendix C). The probes were created based on the literature review of protective factors for disordered eating and were used to query about issues not addressed by the participants. Key areas focused on in the interview included participants’ awareness and perception of societal messages, experiences with significant others, experiences related to food and eating, extracurricular activities, the media, personal characteristics, as well as moments of difficulty and change. In each of these areas, protective factors were explored in the context of the pressures for thinness, with specific attention paid to the influence of social context, gender, and ethno-cultural group membership.

Data Analysis

Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, the researcher kept notes about her observations, thoughts, and ideas about the data, including hypotheses about how different segments of data might be related conceptually, a process referred to as ‘memo writing’ in grounded theory (Charmaz, 1994, 2002, 2006). For example, memos noting participants’ deliberate avoidance of activities that make them self-conscious about their appearance was helpful in developing the major category, ‘Emotional Self Care’. Memos were also used for outlining the researcher’s preconceived assumptions, such as the assumption that participants’ parents likely did not make negative comments about their bodies. While it was frequently the case, making this assumption explicit was beneficial for noticing several exceptions, which included negative parental comments about the bodies of participants’ siblings, where in two cases the siblings struggled with eating problems.
In addition, throughout the data analysis, an attempt was made to develop and maintain theoretical sensitivity through theorizing by stopping to reflect and to rethink about the data anew (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical sensitivity has been described as the researcher’s ability to have insight into the data, to reconstruct meaning from the data generated with the participant and to be attuned to the complexity of the participant’s narratives (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006b). This was accomplished by trying to establish connections in the data through the constant comparative method as well as by use of questioning in order to remain grounded in the data. Charmaz (1990) suggested that the researchers continually raise questions such as, “How do people construct beliefs?” and “Why do they think, feel, and act the way that they do?” (p. 1165). In reflecting on such questions throughout the analysis, it became apparent, for example, that the family played an integral role in helping the participants develop resistant beliefs about pressures for thinness.

After the interviews were transcribed, the transcripts were reviewed in detail and initial coding was completed by assigning brief descriptive labels or codes to small segments of data, in line with the grounded theory method, as outlined by Charmaz (2006). This process allowed the researcher to create initial categories and generate as many themes as possible from lower level text units while staying close to the data, in an attempt to capture all the possible protective factors emerging from the data. As initial coding progressed, the constant comparative method was used, in which data segments were compared to each other in search for similarities and differences, both within the same interview and between different interviews, in order to identify patterns and processes related to the emerging categories (Charmaz, 2006). Initial lower-level themes were reviewed and validated by the thesis supervisor.
The following step involved selective or focused coding (Charmaz, 2002), in which frequently reappearing initial codes that cut across multiple interviews and represented recurrent themes were used to sort through and synthesize larger segments of data. A hierarchical coding scheme involving a tentative set of categories was created and the transcripts of the interviews were imported into QSR N6 program, which is used to organize and analyze qualitative data. All the transcripts were coded into the tentative set of categories, grouping together categorically similar units of text from all the interviews. In the process of focused coding, data segments as well as the relationships between them continued to be compared both within and between different interviews, in line with the constant comparative method, which resulted in the coding scheme being continually reevaluated and revised, based on the emerging new understandings. Memos written throughout the process were also used to assist in defining the properties of each category and its relationship with other categories. In the final stage of analysis, each of the coded categories was reviewed in detail and refined by examining all the data it covered as well as variations from it. This process resulted in the breaking up of several categories into subcategories and the integration of several other categories, in a way that best represented the core categories, major categories, and themes related to protective factors against pressures for thinness.

The final hierarchical structure that resulted from the analysis contained three higher-level dimensions, or core categories: Identity, Body, and Social Influences, which are presented in turn in the following chapters. The third chapter will discuss protective factors related to experiences of identity, the fourth chapter will focus on protective factors related to ways of inhabiting the body, and the fifth chapter will examine protective factors related to social influences.
CHAPTER THREE

IDENTITY

Analysis of themes revealed that the protective factors that emerged from the interviews were generally divided into three core categories: factors related to the participants’ identities, factors related to their bodies, and factors related to social influences. This chapter examines the first of these three core categories; namely, identity-related protective factors. Identity-related factors included such things as participants’ choices about how to live their lives, the way they viewed, treated and felt about themselves, as well as the way they felt about and dealt with different expectations placed upon them.

Identity protective factors were divided into two major categories, which dealt with ways of addressing different norms and expectations associated with being a woman in North America. The first major category, entitled ‘Rejecting Conventional Ways of Being’, included themes related to the participants’ rejection of such mainstream norms and expectations (see Figure 1). The themes in this category included critical thinking, rejection of social constructions of gender, and rejection of peer norms. The participants looked at the world with a critical lens, through which they analyzed and evaluated thinness-related messages rather than accepting them at face value. They rejected the traditional appearance-based femininity as part of which the thin ideal was discussed in the interviews. They also rejected the norms of their peers, who have adopted the mainstream society’s view.

The second major category, entitled ‘Adopting Alternative Ways of Being’, included four themes related to the participants’ adoption of alternative norms (see Figure 1). The first theme included narratives related to the way the participants viewed themselves in the present and in the future as well as the things they prioritized for themselves instead of body weight and
appearance. The second theme dealt with identification with alternative groups unrelated to those traditionally associated with femininity. The third theme included negative labels the participants attached to themselves, which paradoxically allowed them to live more freely. Finally, the fourth theme included ways the participants treated themselves and their emotions, namely, with care and acceptance.

A diagram illustrating the major categories and the themes that fall under them can be seen in Figure 1. A number of themes represented in this Figure are further divided into subthemes, which are described in the text.

![Core Category of 'Identity', Major Categories, and Themes.](image)

**Rejecting Conventional Ways of Being**

Participants’ narratives contained numerous examples of their refusal to live according to conventional norms and expectations related to their gender. Rather than accepting the
traditional social identity, the participants thought critically about what they saw around themselves and rejected mainstream appearance-based social and peer norms of being a woman.

**Critical Thinking**

Throughout their interviews, all the participants expressed an ability to critically evaluate the thinness-related messages they encountered, rather than accepting them at face value. They talked about asking questions and analyzing what they saw and heard as well as researching something before accepting it as true.

> Usually, everything that I hear on TV or I see, I usually, I take it with a grain of salt. I kind of don’t always believe it, or I don’t know, I guess if I see something I’ll research it more or find out what really is happening. (Stephanie)

> You have to be able to think critically about these things and think like, oh, maybe that doesn’t make sense for me, you know, because my body’s like this. Just like when you look in the magazines and you see those girls who are very, very thin and they have that boxy-boy figure. Well not, a lot of girls aren’t going to look like that, because women aren’t all made like that. Some girls have like, are born with bigger hips. Some girls are born with bigger shoulders. I don’t know, I think you have to be critical about the way you look at those things and be realistic, and be like, yeah, she looks really great in what she’s wearing, but I don’t, that’s not my shape and that’s not the way my body looks. (Heather)
I analyze stuff a little bit more. Think what’s, what’s really behind something. I take a moment to look at what’s underneath the surface, because . . . you gotta keep it real. Try to realize that some stuff maybe not as feasible in real life as it should be or some stuff is not right for a person at the current stage in their life. And yeah, that’s pretty much, have your own mental anchor. (Charlie)

The participants expressed scepticism with regards to the idealized images they saw in the media, speaking of them as superficial, unreal, and unattainable, sometimes supporting their statements with statistical information and facts. Several participants also pointed out that it is part of the model’s or the actresses’ job to attain and keep that image.

I read in a magazine article recently that only something like four to five percent of the general North American population is actually underweight . . . but in Hollywood, or in the movie industry, that thirty three to thirty five percent of the actresses are underweight facts like that empower you to realize that, you know what, these images that I’m seeing, they’re the images that are not normal. It’s not me who’s not normal, that’s not normal. . . . When you know those things, you can be more resilient, you can resist the temptations and you don’t fall into this, almost like hypnotic of following everything that you see and everything that you’re told is the norm. (Amani)

I don't pay very much attention to the media. If they keep saying you have to lose weight, I don't really pay attention to that. I guess, the main thing is magazines, because
a lot of young girls I think read magazines and when you’re a teenager that can really affect you. But right now I can see a magazine and see pictures and I know it’s not real. Like, I know that they have airbrushed the photos and they have trainers and it’s a full-time job to look like that. (Sarah)

Several participants spoke about separating themselves from the images they saw in the media and seeing them as not applicable to their own lives.

(How do you manage to see something like America’s Next Top Model and still kind of keep yourself at the side and just watch it for pure entertainment?) I guess it is, I keep my distance from it, I see it as, it’s not really something I want myself to become, I guess. I don’t really want to be a model. . . . I watched it and I saw it as separate from my life. It wasn’t really anything that could have brought itself into my life so much. (Lucy)

I always saw Hollywood as, more like a fantasy world and not reality. So when I read or when I look at the magazines, I see it as acting and, you know, it’s not really who the person is. It’s kinda like in the movies and all that, it’s not real, versus I see my life as reality. It’s not as glamorous, like, no one looks perfect, you know, no one is perfect. Yeah, I think that’s how I was able to differentiate the two. (Anna)

I don't have to envy those people I see on TV or in ads, because they had a little help as well, right? It’s a lot of make up and it’s professional make up too, right? Somebody else working on you from the outside, so it’s like, and the hair and everything else, they
are professionals, right? So you know, it actually really helped me kind of understand that it's not something that I can do by myself and I shouldn't. . . . I don't have to be like them. (Kelly)

Several participants also alluded to the fact that critical thinking was interrelated with acceptance.

I think one of the main things is to realize that the images that we see, the media that we see, they’re not real. Once you know that and once you accept that, then you’re a lot more likely to focus more on yourself instead of trying to be somebody else. (Amani)

I had my moments last year where I was insecure . . . and then all of a sudden I realized, I’m like, I just have to accept that like that’s not who I am anymore. . . . Took a lot of stress off it and I felt like I could think a lot more clearly about other things. So as far as my issues with kind of like where I was at as far as like my fitness, I was like, I accepted it. It was like, in that moment that I accepted it. And that’s when I started looking at magazines and stuff and thinking, like actually really thinking for the first time, I’m like, I don’t even want to look at this. These girls are disgusting.
Rejecting Social Constructions of Gender

This theme had four subthemes: ‘Beyond appearance’, ‘Femininity’, ‘Attractiveness’, and ‘Ideal woman’. The participants questioned the mainstream views of women in the Western society and rejected several traditional labels and their associated characteristics.

**Beyond appearance.** In their interviews, the participants spoke about having difficulty understanding how the thin ideal came to be, comparing it to the more voluptuous ideal of the past, which they viewed as a more natural look for women.

Back in like the Renaissance days and that, women who were larger were seen as more, they were wealthy, they were more attractive . . . (The ideal changed over time.) Yeah, somehow, I don’t know even know what happened . . . . You see like the paintings from those eras and they’re all, you know, full figured women and that kind of thing was much more attractive then and now that’s been so twisted into this really strange ideal that is hardly possible. (Lucy)

I don’t know where it came from . . . . You see it in the magazines, like, tabloids there’s just like, this celebrity is fat and that celebrity is fat and, like, you know, and they’re accusing people of being fat and I’m just like, they look normal, okay? You know, they don’t look sick. I don’t know why it is. It’s just kind of like things have just slowly morphed into this new generation. ‘Cause like, women never used to be like that. The whole ideal woman used to be, like, curvy, you know? And looked good, you know? Looked feminine. (Heather)
The participants were asked who in their opinion benefits from having women struggle with the thin ideal. The participants unanimously stated that women do not benefit from it and connected the thin ideal to the industries which benefit from its existence financially, such as the dieting and the cosmetic industries. Three participants also connected the thin ideal and its benefits to power.

(Who do you think benefits from having women struggle with the thin ideal?) Women don’t benefit, because they’re torturing themselves. The media I guess benefits, because in essence they’re selling something. It’s not an object, but they’re selling an ideal and women are buying into it. So they benefit, they’re selling those diet pills that make a lot of money. (Amani)

(Who do you think benefits the most from having women struggle with the thin ideal?) The people who sell that. Like, I mean, if we didn't have this thin ideal, all the diet companies would be out of business. A lot of the fitness centres for women would be out of business. Most of the cosmetics companies would be out of business. Cosmetic surgeons would be out of business. . . . There's just something about . . . a whole bunch of companies that are owned by men that are telling women what women are supposed to buy. And there's something weird about that to me. (Tamera)

The participants were also inquired whether they believed there is anything women cannot or should not do. The majority of the participants believed there is nothing women
cannot or should not do, although several participants stated that women should not stand in their own way and should instead pursue what they want.

(Is there anything that women shouldn’t do?) Well, not to get too caught up in their personal appearance, I guess. Not to compare themselves to these unattainable, you know, all the media we see, that’s just unrealistic. . . . We should really realize that and just go for what we want to do. (Lucy)

(Is there anything women shouldn't do?) I don’t think they should do things against their will, in the sense that like, I don’t think they should behave or dress or choose a career just because other people say it fits more to a woman. I think they should just do what they want to do, as opposed to try to please others around them, if it's not what they actually want to do, right? (Kelly)

(Is there anything that women can’t do?) I don’t think they let themselves try things. I think women can accomplish really honestly anything. I’m trying to think of like, driving a tank to firing a gun to assassinating, you know what I mean, super masculine, very like, emotionless kind of acts. But I think women can do that, I just don’t think we allow ourselves to do it. (Patricia)

Femininity. The participants’ understanding of femininity differed from the mainstream societal view. While the participants were aware of what is generally viewed as ‘feminine’, the
majority either disagreed or only partially agreed with that view and had their own definition of what being feminine means.

Femininity, I just say you’d have to be comfortable with yourself. . . . All these different ideas of what it should be, it’s really just based on the idea of fertility and being able to bear children. Beyond that, I don’t think there’s really any definition for what women should be.  (So to you femininity is equated with fertility?) Well, that’s a definition for me, but I think all that’s important is just being comfortable with who you are.  (Carol)

What it means to be feminine, probably being able to multitask, I think that’s a feminine trait. I think being very well-rounded, because I think women want to be good at a lot of things, we are very much like gung-ho on reaching that ideal. So I think being feminine means trying to do a lot of things at once and being very good at it, whether it’s baking or sports or something like that. I think it’s very feminine. And just like, I don’t know, throwing on the high heels and jeans and going out. Just having that charm I think is very feminine.  (Patricia)

(What does it mean to you to be feminine?) I guess, well, ultra-feminine would be basically wearing a tonne of make up, doing their hair for like an hour in the morning and trying to look as perfect as they can with all these expensive clothes and all that. It’s not really my thing. I don’t know. I have like the feminine side, but I don’t really embody it in my physical appearance. I don’t really try to, anyway.  (Lucy)
As can be seen from Lucy’s quote, the participants’ definitions of femininity also tended to be reflected in the way they viewed themselves. The majority of the participants did not view themselves as traditionally feminine or could only relate to particular aspects of it.

I don't think of myself as particularly feminine in the societal way . . . I don't shave my legs that much, as you may have noticed. But I don't think it makes you less feminine per se to not shave your legs a lot or to not wax stuff . . . I think I'm not feminine in the way that it’s generally thought of to be feminine, because I don't own any perfume or I don't like to wear make up and stuff like that, so I'm not feminine in the sense that I don't really act as I’m expected to. (Grace)

I am feminine, but I wouldn't see myself as traditionally feminine. Because I really like to do things that are like, “guy stuff”, quote unquote. I have a very like, I have a sense of humour that a lot of guys tend to appreciate and girls don't really understand . . . , I’m pretty assertive and a lot of people don't see that as being feminine. . . . Sometimes it infuriates me, because I have to categorize myself as something that's not really valid anymore. (Kelly)

**Attractiveness.** As with ‘femininity’, when talking about what makes a woman attractive, the majority of the participants had their own definition of attractiveness, which did not coincide with the traditional view focused on appearance. About half of the participants stated that confidence is what makes a woman attractive. Other frequently named qualities
included a woman’s personality and how she feels inside. Several participants also named being overly involved with one’s appearance as something that makes a woman unattractive.

(What makes a woman attractive?) I think confidence is what makes people attractive. I remember I was talking to my boyfriend about that, I’m like, “what makes a girl attractive?” ‘cause I always thought guys saw women as attractive through their beauty, but he told me it’s really their confidence. . . . I really agree with that, I think it’s about your self esteem and how you view yourself. (Anna)

(What makes a woman attractive?) Well, personality mostly. If she’s a vain prima donna I wouldn’t even be a friend with her. . . . Maybe it’s a little bit different for guys, but I wouldn’t be friends with a woman who wouldn’t stop talking about how, oh, she’s suffering and how her hair is a messy state today and how . . . her nail broke and stuff. (Charlie)

‘Ideal woman’. To get a better understanding of what the participants’ feel the society values in women, in their interviews they were asked to describe an ‘ideal woman’. All the participants were easily able to describe an ‘ideal woman’ and their descriptions tended to be very similar, suggesting that they were all aware of what is idealized by others in women.

The ideal woman is size zero, she has no hips, she’s like, I don’t know, really thin, flat stomach. (Heather)
I guess the blonde hair, blue-eyed, usually long hair, full lips, small nose, fairly large eyes, wide eyes, ample bosom, . . . thin body, flat stomach and then just like toned legs or whatever. (Lucy)

The Western ideal girl is tall, very thin, with long legs, but they still expect her to have a big bust and a small waistline. (Amani)

I think that girl is very thin, who works out a lot. Someone who has a really flat stomach and someone who wears a lot of very nice clothes and like, shows it off to the world, pretty much. I think that’s the ideal girl, you know, someone who really has perfect hair, perfect face, you know, no pores. (Anna)

It is noteworthy that while there were some variations with regards to the height and hair colour of the ‘ideal woman’ in the participants’ descriptions, there were absolutely no variations with regards to her body weight, as all participants stated that an ‘ideal woman’ has to be thin. It is also noteworthy that while several participants stated that the ‘ideal woman’ could have any skin colour, in their descriptions they more frequently mentioned blue eyes and blonde hair, suggesting that their generic ‘ideal woman’ is Caucasian. In addition, several participants mentioned designer clothes, suggesting that in order to fit the ideal, a woman also needs to be of a higher socioeconomic status.

Although all the participants were aware of what features tend to be idealized in women, the majority of the participants rejected that ideal, either stating that it would be unrealistic for anyone to achieve it or that women who look like the ideal lack something in other areas.
I don’t think anyone could ever be that and it’s good that no one can be like that, because I don’t know, I think people need to be a little different in order to make it more exciting. ‘cause like, I don’t know. ‘Cause if you are an ideal woman and there is another ideal woman, then there’s two of you guys and you guys are exactly the same, then it’s kinda boring. (Penelope)

They’re doing all this because they are trying to be like the ideal girl that they think about, but I guess they don’t realize that the ideal girl doesn’t exist. Or you know, the girl who they think is ideal, she’s not that in reality. It’s like, a picture or make up or you know that makes her look that way. And in reality she’s a girl just like you and me. (Samantha)

All the girls that I know that look like that aren’t that interesting. Like, a lot of the girls that are the ideal that a lot of the guys look for, a lot of the guys end up being disappointed, because those girls aren’t the ones who are, like, you know, at school or studying abroad or doing something, you know, doing something. (Heather)

Several participants also spontaneously described their own ideal, which they differentiated from the society’s ‘ideal woman’. Unlike their descriptions of the society’s ‘ideal woman’, their own ideal tended to be centered around personality traits, interests and accomplishments, rather than appearance.
In terms of appearance, I would say probably a little bit on the tall side, like, five foot seven. I don't know. And then, I suppose athletic-looking, graceful, intelligent, that’s for sure. I don't know. Caring, assertive, well accomplished in the sense that she has a career or whatever she wishes to have. And children. But that’s my, like, you know what I mean, it’s my ideal, it’s something I would want to be, right? (Kelly)

Fun, bubbly, outgoing, friendly, kind of forward, not fashion forward, but just very much like, I don’t know, forward thinking. Probably like, intelligent. I don’t know, very well-rounded, has a lot of interests, a lot of hobbies, is interested and involved in a lot of things from different kinds of sports, ideally cool sports, like surfing or snowboarding or very good at art or something like that. You know, just very good at a lot of things, very well-rounded. (Patricia)

Ideal girl, I guess, someone who’s doing what she wants to do and she’s successful at doing something she really likes doing. She’s a good role model to people. (What would the ideal girl look like?) I don’t know. I always picture someone, it could be someone young or old. I don’t know. (Is this the society’s ideal girl or your ideal girl?) I think it’s my ideal girl. (Samantha)

In this way, while the participants were aware of the society view of what constitutes an ‘ideal woman’, they were able to separate themselves from this ideal by rejecting it and by creating their own non-appearance based ideal.
Moreover, Stephanie spoke about the ways in which she herself is better than the ideal woman by virtue of being more “human”:

Obviously the ideal woman would have no flaws. She would be amazing in every way. I have flaws and there are some things that I do wrong and I make mistakes and things, but I think that makes me almost better than the ideal woman, because I’m more, like, human. . . . Who would want to be with someone who’s perfect? Isn’t that kind of weird? You know, you need mistakes, you need sadness, you need grief and stuff to make you, like, to shape you into a well-rounded person.

One of the factors that might have been helpful to the participants in developing an alternative view of what is ideal, feminine, and attractive in women, was exposure to other cultures, where a more curvaceous body type was considered more attractive for women. Several participants, who were either born or lived within a culture with a different body ideal for women, most common ones being South American and Middle Eastern cultures, spoke about this experience.

[In Israel] they pretty much, they want this, their ideal shape is a woman who wears curves pretty much, not too much, but a little bit. They are not consciously obsessed about it. (Charlie)

Brazilians’ idea, I think, of like a perfect woman is different than what an American or North American would think. I think Brazilians like more voluptuous women, not so
much like that really thin model look . . . so like, you know, big butt, big boobs, that too.

So pretty much it’s different than here. (Stephanie)

The thing is, North American, especially models, they're really thin. In Israel I think it was more acceptable to be like, average size. The fact that there are so many cultures in one country, they have different ideals. ‘Cause like, Eastern cultures and Moroccan and Persian and everything, so you know, it was more, like, flexibility in what looks beautiful and what doesn't look beautiful. Many, many ideals with that. (Kelly)

It appears that exposure to different body ideals might be protective not only for those growing up in a culture that finds a curvier body ideal more attractive, but that a briefer exposure might also have a positive effect, as suggested from Tamera’s account about her living in Israel for one year.

A really creepy man came up one day and told me that I eat a lot, and I was like, what are you talking about? And then I realized what he was saying that, like, I look well fed and that's like a standard of beauty for them, because I look like I could bear their children or something like that, but that sort of a thing. Like, curvy women who are bigger is sort of more attractive to them, because I think they seem, from what I gathered, they seem to associate very skinny people with people who can't afford to eat. So I had a lot of, a very different experience living there, understanding how much standards of beauty are so cultural as well, and being able to sort of be more comfortable with myself. (Tamera)
Rejecting Peer Norms

In addition to rejecting society’s view of what an ideal, feminine, and attractive woman is, the participants also rejected the mainstream norms of their peers, who have adopted and whose lives were affected by those societal views.

The participants were well aware that some of their peers experienced difficulties with body weight. All the participants reported they knew at least someone from their peer group who was struggling with body image issues, either being dissatisfied with their body weight or being on a diet to lose weight. The majority of the participants compared their positive body image with that of their peers or rejected their peers’ weight-related views and practices.

In high school I guess the ideal was more, you know, that kind of skinny, not ultra skinny, not anorexic skinny, but, you know, kind of what you see in magazines and on billboards and stuff. The kind of perfection that all the girls in high school would try to go for and when you go into the washrooms you’d hear girls, like, puking their brains out. I actually heard that a couple times and it was really disturbing, to be honest. (Lucy)

In the change rooms, you know, before gym or when we’re getting ready for sports practices and stuff like that, I guess a lot of girls, you know, they like to look in the mirror and like to measure themselves with other girls. So it’s always comparing with other people. (Is that something that you did as well?) No, . . . I didn’t like looking in the mirror and comparing myself with other people. (Anna)
The participants also spoke about generally placing less importance on their physical appearance than their peers did.

I don’t need to look good to other people. You know, I don’t need to wear the latest style, the latest fashion, because I’m like, you know, I don’t really, like, it’s not so much that “oh, I don’t care what anybody thinks, I see what I see”, it’s that I don’t care what their first impressions are of me. If they’re people that I would want to be friends with, then they would be the type of people that would talk to you regardless of what you’re wearing. (Stephanie)

I don’t find my clothes and my make up, my jewellery, I don’t find those things to be important, they’re not who makes me, so whether they change or not I don’t feel that I’ve changed. Just my appearance has changed for the situation. I know people who have said, “I am what I wear, my clothes make me” and I thought, that’s a very sad thing. How can your clothes make you? It’s who you are and how you act, how you treat other people, that’s who makes you, not the clothes that you put on your body. (Amani)

Several participants shared that they purposely chose not to do what everyone else was doing, because they wanted to be different than their peers.

I’m one of those people that, you know, if everybody’s doing it, I don’t want to do it. So, you know, if everybody wants to be super thin, I don’t want to be super thin. I don’t
know, I guess it’s just like this thing that I have that, like I’m against conformity.

(Stephanie)

There is this sort of dare I say lemming mentality that you have to be in the group and that’s it. You have to have this giant crowd of friends or else you’re not worth much.
And you have to follow what the herd is doing, like either lemmings or sheep. And that’s wrong. (Charlie)

I started dressing differently. . . . Everyone in my school found it very important to wear jeans all the time even though they weren't that comfortable. So I started wearing sweat pants every day. . . . I guess it's the whole kind of mentality where I didn't want to act like everyone else in my grade. (Grace)

Similar to Grace, several others participants spoke about having rejected wearing tight or overly revealing clothes, explaining they were not conducive to maintaining a positive body image.

I think it’s these girls, who try on, who wear clothes that are too small, like, obviously you’re going to feel bad about yourself, because you’re not wearing something that fits you and it’s exposing anything that makes you feel uncomfortable. So I think, and then like it develops from there. They’ve got all this insecurity and then they’re worried about it and then if someone makes a comment, then oh, that sets them off and then these girls start dieting or whatever. (Heather)
If you’re more into fashion, then you might be watching more of the fashion shows and then you see more skinny models there. There are some trends that you can’t wear if you are not a certain body type, like, I think skinny jeans, you do have to be thinner to wear those, you can’t be big. That would affect someone more, ‘cause they’d feel like they want to lose weight to be able to fit into, like, a certain pair of jeans. (Sarah)

Seeing some of their peers struggle with body weight issues made several participants more aware of the fact that they did not struggle with those issues and that they did not want to be on that same path.

Hearing what was happening on the cross country girls’ team, like, seeing how affected they were, you know, by like say, problems with food and other team members and realizing that I don’t have that same, that that’s never happened to me. . . . I was like, ‘wow, I’m much more self-assured with my body’. (How did it make you feel about yourself when you realized that?) Very happy. . . . It just made me feel a lot better and just relieved that I didn’t have to deal with that. (Patricia)

My best friend was so into body image. She, I don’t know, not that she’s never happy, it’s just when you're around people like that, even when they are happy you can tell that it’s kind of in the back of their minds. And it’s just because I was, well I am around that for so long it’s just, it’s really easy to see it and say, “I don’t want to be unhappy” or “I don’t want to turn out like that”. (Grace)
Most of the participants also spoke about wanting to help their peers who were struggling with body image issues or to serve as a good example for them.

Women are always very judgemental about themselves and so you always hear, you constantly hear comments about how they look or how much they weigh. You hear it a lot. Most of the time I end up putting down that comment, saying, you know, “you shouldn’t be saying things like that, because, you know, you look beautiful”, or “you know you’re not fat, you know, you take care of yourself”. I usually tend to reassure that person that they’re not who they say they are. (Anna)

(Did you ever have close friends who struggled with weight?) Middle school. Very worried for her at that time. . . . I managed to get her to eat a few decent meals during her lunch times, when I could. She got better eventually. (Carol)

Some of the girls that I was friends with, I know some of them did struggle with like image issues a bit. . . . Talking to them about it and trying to help them reinforced kind of you, like, you know, you practice what you preach, right? . . . ‘Cause I wanted to be a good influence on my friends, if that makes sense. (Heather)

The issue of weight-related teasing and negative comments came up in the interviews and several participants spoke about standing up to it when it was directed at them or their friends.
(What if somebody called somebody else ‘fat’, would you speak up?) If it’s like my friends then yeah, I would get in that person’s face. I would say, I would tell him to shut up quite loudly and quite frankly. (Charlie)

My roommate made a comment last year and he was like, he was like, “oh, you’re eating an awful lot there”, you know, like, making comments about how much I was eating ‘cause it’s like, buffet at the residence. And at first it really upset me, because I was like, why would you say that, you know? . . . But then I ended up confronting him on it, I’m like, “why did you say that, that’s so stupid, that’s just so thoughtless and rude to say that to someone”. And then he’s like, “oh yeah yeah, I won’t say anything” and it’s like “not a problem”. (Heather)

**Summary of ‘Rejecting Conventional Ways of Being’**

In their narratives, all the participants gave multiple examples of the ways they rejected mainstream representations of women, including the idealized thin image frequently seen in the media and the associated messages. The participants critically thought about the thin ideal, analyzing and questioning the messages they were receiving rather than passively accepting them. They rejected the idealized images as unreal and unattainable and by seeing them as inapplicable to their own lives, were able to separate themselves from them. Several participants also emphasized that critical thinking was insufficient in itself and that one also needed to be able to accept the applicability of the critical thought to oneself.

In their interviews, the participants spoke out against the way women were represented in the mainstream media, rejecting it as unnatural and highlighting the fact that it was not the
women who benefited from such beauty ideal. While the participants were able to identify what was viewed as ideal, feminine, and attractive in women in the society, they did not identify with those representations and many of the participants had their own ideas of what makes a woman ideal, feminine, or attractive, which were not appearance-focused. Exposure to different cultures, in which a more voluptuous body type was considered more attractive, appeared to facilitate this process.

While many of the participants’ peers identified with the society’s thin ideal, the participants spoke out against the different practices their peers engaged in trying to adhere to the ideal. The participants spoke about placing less emphasis on appearance than their peers and wanting to be different from others. Seeing some of their peers struggle with body weight-related insecurities emphasized for several participants that they did not want to be in their place. Several participants also spoke about wanting to help or be a positive example for their peers. In addition, weight-related teasing and negative comments were brought up in more than a third of the interviews and several participants shared instances of having stood up against it for themselves or their friends.

Overall, being critical and rejecting common expectations frequently adopted by women in Western society, allowed the participants to view the thin ideal as inapplicable to their own lives and freed them to consider alternative ways of being that were not focused on appearance.

**Adopting Alternative Ways of Being**

The alternative norms that the participants adopted for themselves became apparent in their narratives from the way they described themselves, the subcultures and the labels they identified with, as well as the way they took care of their own emotions.
Self View - Present

Participants’ descriptions of themselves tended to be divided into the way they viewed themselves in the present and what they anticipated for themselves in the future. As can be seen in Figure 2, there were four subthemes related to their present self view, including ‘Deemphasizing appearance’, ‘Contentment with oneself’, ‘Being average and normalizing weight gain’, and ‘Prioritizing education and intelligence’.

Deemphasizing appearance. To assess the way participants viewed themselves, they were asked how they would describe their appearance and if asked for clarification, were told to imagine they needed to describe themselves to a stranger they were meeting at an intersection. While several participants included such descriptive words as “petite”, “curvy”, and “athletic”, the majority of the participants did not make any weight-related references in their self descriptions. Several participants also specifically pointed out that they would not mention their body weight.

I would probably describe myself, like, ok, I’ll say I have reddish hair, brownish-reddish hair. I would describe the length of my hair. I would point out my glasses, say I have glasses. Say that, I don't know, average height kind of thing. Probably describe what I
wear, but I don't know. I wouldn’t, I don't think I would describe myself in terms of my frame, right? That just doesn't come to mind. (Kelly)

I would say (pause) well, I’m average height and I have dark brown hair and I wear glasses. My glasses are the thing that I think people would mostly identify me with, that they would most remember. That’s pretty much what I would say. I don’t think I would comment on weight or anything. I don’t think I would say, “oh, I’m average weight”. I don’t think I would say that. I don’t think it would occur to me to say that. (Stephanie)

In addition to describing themselves in a way that was not centered on body weight, most participants stated that they generally placed little value on their appearance or that they viewed their appearance as less important than their values or their personality.

I was never the type to, you know, always like looking in the mirror. I wasn’t into that. I think I’m just not as self-conscious, I guess, about how I look versus, I guess, some people are, like they’re really self-conscious about how people look at them. I guess it’s not really important to me. . . . (So what is important?) What is important? I think having strong values is really important. (Anna)

I guess I just know my value isn’t in how I look. It’s just never been that important. For me, I’ve always valued more my personality or like, things I can do, not so much how I look. (So if looks are not that important, what are the very important things for you?) I
guess my integrity. Like, I guess where my heart is. I value more about how I feel inside.  (Samantha)

**Contentment with oneself.** When talking about the way they felt about themselves, over a third of the participants stated that they were happy with the way they were.

*(How do you feel about yourself?)* I’m happy with the way I turned out. I’m really glad that I am the person I am, I guess. I’ve always been kind of really happy about that.  
(Grace)

*(How do you feel about yourself?)* I’m pretty happy with who I am. There are some things I wanna change, like I wanna improve on or do differently, but I’m pretty much, I’m pretty happy.  (Penelope)

Several participants also spoke about feeling good and proud of themselves for things they have accomplished.

I felt good, you know? Like, in all those things there’s always something you’re working towards and then, you know, and you achieve it. If you achieve it you feel really good about that. And singing was really like that, you know, it was always like, you know, I was in competitions and doing exams, like doing the Royal Conservatory Exams. Same with baton, you know, there’s competitions and I think it was like really like the achievement factor.  (Heather)
I'm really proud of myself for my, you know, what I've achieved so far, because I go to school and I do well. I work and I’m able to afford my own place and everything, right? So I'm proud of my accomplishments. I try not to really look on the other side, what I haven't accomplished yet, because I know that I will be able to do it when time comes. (Kelly)

**Being average and normalizing weight gain.** While all the participants stated they were content with their own appearance, it should be noted that eight of the participants had an average body type, one participant stated she was thin and one participant stated she was “a little underweight”. In their interviews, several participants made a connection between their body type and their resilience, stating that not having a bigger body type might have been protective for them with regards to the pressure to become slimmer.

I've always, I guess, been a normal body weight. I haven't ever been, like, very skinny. I guess when I was little I was kind of very skinny and my parents kept telling me to eat, eat. But I've never been very big, so I've never felt pressured to lose weight. (Sarah)

I think I’ve been blessed with pretty good genetics from my mom and my dad so I’ve never really had a problem like with weight. So I did a lot of sports and things like that, so it never came up that I was ever that concerned about it, my weight, because it never really fluctuated as I grew, I think. (Heather)

In terms of, you know, my body type, I don’t really complain, ‘cause I guess just really, I
can’t complain, ‘cause you know, I’m thin already and so there’s nothing to complain about.  (So you’re happy about the way you look?)  Yeah, I’m happy and if I gain weight I’m even happier.  (Anna)

On the other hand, similarly to Anna’s comment, several participants spoke about wanting to gain weight, suggesting that they did not view extreme thinness as an asset.

(What do you think happened if you gained some weight now?)  I don’t know.  I kinda wanna gain weight, seriously, because I think that I’m a little underweight.  ‘Cause you see those doctor charts and you know how they have the lipid median thing and I’m under and it’s just like, “Why?!  I wanna be normal!”  (Penelope)

I was very skinny when I was running, like, you know, doing the long distance run, but I think that just comes with running, right?  All marathon runners are really lean. . . .  But I have to say, I don’t think I felt very comfortable when I was that skinny, because I felt really weak, kind of.  Right now is like my usual weight, so like, I feel really healthy when I’m like this.  But I remember in high school when I used to do that cross-country training, yeah, I think I was too skinny for my taste.  (Samantha)

Several other participants shared that they were not overly concerned when they had gained weight in the past, which they viewed as a normal experience.
I gained a bit about three years ago. Well, back in high school was actually when I noticed that I was getting a bit of a belly and a bigger butt (laughter). So I would, like, notice I was going up a bit and tried to regulate my diet a more, but it just kind of happened and I didn’t really try to stop it so much, really. I thought it was just normal growing up and that. (Lucy)

I think if I was overweight to the point where it affected my health that would probably make me feel very bad, but I've had times where I've gained weight and I've lost weight and it hasn't fluctuated a lot, but I'll lose three pounds and gain five pounds and just stuff like that. So I don't really think, as long as I'm still healthy I don't think it would affect me that much. (Grace)

**Prioritizing education and intelligence.** Throughout the interviews, there was also a strong emphasis on education and intelligence in the participants’ self descriptions. The participants spoke about the importance of education in their lives and several participants spoke about prioritizing intelligence and education over appearance.

[High school] was divided by importance of intelligence over looks. There is the popular people who place stuff on the superficiality and then there’s the kinda groups I was with, who were really into intelligence, who read this, who read that, who watched this on Discovery Channel. We would sit around the lunch table discussing that documentary the whole lunch hour. And it was always a heated debate. So, and again, it was in
whether you focused on the inside or on the outside, that was the main division right there. (Charlie)

I have always gotten good grades. I believe that knowledge is power. And so I think just by always feeling like I was smart, I always knew a lot of things, I was always just a generally intelligent student, that I always felt good. I always just felt more confident. I don’t know, I just, I felt more powerful because I had all this knowledge and I think that made me feel good . . . because I put importance on, like, school work and things like that, that I put importance on that and I took away the focus from appearance.

(Stephanie)

Just as Stephanie, several other participants spoke about seeing their intelligence as an important part of who they were and gaining confidence from their intellectual achievements.

I think it was when I first went to college, when I started really feeling comfortable with myself, when I realized how much I have to offer, that I could be popular without being the prettiest girl in the class. Or I could be well-liked and smart and just that I have other qualities aside from my appearance. . . . When I started getting back my assignments and I started getting really good grades, I started to feel a lot better about myself. It was an ego booster. I realized, okay, you know, I’m smart. (Amani)
When I went to school, when I started school I actually did a lot of my homework by myself. [My mom] just left me alone and I just did it, so like yeah. There was this, like, I guess, I don't know, I guess a part of who I was at that point already. (Kelly)

Comparing themselves with other girls in their school who, unlike them, struggled with weight-related insecurities, several participants pointed out that those other girls might have been lacking something that could give them a sense of worth besides their appearance. Also, implied in the quotes was the fact that it might be possible to balance a disadvantage or difficulty with something that works well for that woman, such as intellectual achievements.

I remember there were girls in elementary school and they definitely, like, there was a few that were insecure about their weight and about maybe their appearance. And I think some of it had to do with not being, with not achieving necessarily. If one thing’s lacking, then it emphasizes other things, right? So if you feel upset about something then it emphasizes everything else like it, everything else that’s maybe not the way you want it to be feels a lot worse. So I was very lucky I think as a kid to just, to do really well, so it . . . kind of fuelled into other parts of my life. (Heather)

(How is it that you are different from other girls who get those same messages, that health is more important than appearance, for example, but don’t listen to them?) I think it’s because those girls are suffering from other problems aside from just weight. . . . It’s how they view their own intelligence now too. If they feel that they’re not smart and then they feel that they’re fat on top of that, you know, like, they’re far more likely to fall into
the temptations than someone who says, “you know what? Maybe I’m overweight, but I’m smart and I have something going for me”. (Amani)

Supporting the importance of education and participants’ lives is the fact that all fourteen participants either completed or were enrolled in a postsecondary institution, or were in the process of applying, and four participants were either enrolled in a graduate program or already held a graduate degree.

**Self View – Future**

There were three subthemes related to the way the participants viewed themselves in the future. As can be seen in Figure 3, these included: ‘Deemphasizing appearance’, ‘Prioritizing happiness, health, and family’, and ‘Prioritizing meaningful careers and education’.

![Figure 3. Subthemes of ‘Self View – Future’](image)

**Deemphasizing appearance.** When asked about how they viewed themselves in 10 years, none of the participants spontaneously mentioned hopes or fears related to their appearance.

*(How do you see your appearance in 10 years?)* In 10 years, I guess regular aging will occur, right? And (pause) I don’t know. (Amani)
(What about in terms of appearance, how do you see yourself in 10 years?) I really don’t know. I just don’t really see a lot of change happening with that. Like, there’s going to be haircuts throughout the years and that kind of thing, but it’s not going to be anything extreme. (Lucy)

When specifically inquired about how they saw themselves in terms of appearance in the future, the majority of participants did not mention body weight. Out of those who did, two participants anticipated some weight gain and did not mind it, one stated she did not anticipate any weight gain, and two were hoping to be thinner in 10 years than they are now.

I’ll still continue to do like, to work out and just like go to the gym and stuff. So I’m hoping that way that I’ll still be, yeah. I don’t want to gain too much weight, because I know that that’s what most people do, as soon as they get married, at first they usually gain a lot of pounds, because they don’t eat as well and they gain the habits of the guy or whatever. So I hope that doesn’t happen. But I probably will gain weight, but that won’t be a bad thing that I will. (Penelope)

I think I’ll probably look the same, I mean, I’ve had the same body, like, haven’t grown taller or gained weight or lost weight since like grade 9 or grade 8, so the past five years, so I will probably be the same. (Sarah)
I would not want to gain too much weight. I would still like to maintain some sort of average frame as I grow older. Yeah, I probably would be, I wouldn't be happy if as I grew older I gained a lot of weight. (So some weight would be ok, as long as it's not too much?) Right, yeah and as long as I still look pretty average. (Kelly)

Participants’ narratives suggested that while they were currently content with their bodies and accepting of some weight gain in their future, there might be a limit to their body acceptance, such as in case their weight rises significantly above average. This emphasized that even for women who identify themselves as resilient, it might not be possible to be completely immune to weight-related pressures.

**Prioritizing happiness, health, and family.** Rather than thinking of their future selves in an appearance-focused way, the participants’ descriptions of their hopes and expectations tended to center around other things that were important to them. One such thing, which was brought up in half of the narratives, was that the participants were hoping to be or to remain happy in the future.

(How do you see yourself in 10 years?) Ten years, wow. I don’t know, happy, very happy with myself. (Patricia)

I would like to be healthy as well, that sort of thing. Sometimes it escapes my mind, because I’m so focused on other things. Yeah, just be happy, you know. (Kelly)
Just as Kelly, in describing their hopes for the future about a third of the participants stated that they would like to be healthy. Several participants also mentioned what they are planning to be doing in order to keep healthy, such as engage in physical activity and eat healthy.

I hope to have that healthy-balance-life-work type of lifestyle, make time for exercising, eat healthy. (Anna)

I just want to be healthy. If I gain a few pounds here and there it’s not a big deal. I think being healthy is the most important thing, so I hope I’m healthy. (Heather)

Hopefully I will have more time to go on some hikes, so I should be a bit healthier. Better vegetables. (Carol)

Other goals for the future that appeared in most narratives had to do with being married or in a long term romantic relationship as well as the having children, although most participants tended to phrase these goals tentatively.

Maybe a family, who knows, maybe I’ll meet that wonderful guy in university or maybe a little bit later somehow. I’m keeping my options open, I’m not shutting the door on anything. (Charlie)
I hope to have a family. Yeah, that’s what I see for now. (When you say “a family”, do you mean a partner and children?) Yeah, I would like to, because I really enjoyed growing up in my family and I think it would be nice to start my own. (Samantha)

Prioritizing meaningful careers and education. Another thing that was important to the participants, as it came up in every one of the narratives, was career-related goals.

(How do you see yourself in 10 years?) In 10 years . . . I guess I hope to be a professor by then, or to have my own lab. That might be too early, though, but yeah, that’s what I hope. (Samantha)

I hope I’m performing and touring, you know, by then, 10 years from now. I hope that I have a music career and I’m established that way. (Heather)

I guess right now I’m at that stage where I’m still figuring out what I want to do and so I’m hoping that by 10 years I would know what is truly my passion and able to work in that job where, you know, I see that job as something that I love to do and not just doing the job to get money. So you know, finding that passion. (Anna)

In line with Anna’s assertion about wanting to be passionate about her work, several other participants spoke about wanting to make a difference with what they chose to do in the future, rather than solely find a job.
I'm thinking of maybe going to school to become a rabbi... I used to want to be a professor, but then I felt like being a professor was too distant from actually helping people in the real world in my area, which is, like, Philosophy. Like, wow, you know? So, I was trying to look for a way to combine it with being there to really help other people, and have an impact on people's lives. (Tamera)

I want to be one of those people that's experienced enough to be able to go to foreign countries and help out with stuff like Darf War or with where there are really serious situations, where, I just always, I found it frustrating that I'm not, I'm obviously not capable enough to volunteer and go now, because I don't know anything about stuff like that, so if I get educated I'll know. Hopefully I'll be able to go do stuff like that when I'm older and more experienced and hopefully will help. (Grace)

Like Tamera and Grace, the majority of the participants also mentioned education-related goals when talking about how they view themselves in the future.

(How do you see yourself in the future?) I’m not sure if I want to go into grad school or ever do math anymore. Maybe I’ll do a Master’s in Philosophy. (Carol)

(How do you see yourself in 10 years?) Depending where I go, because the English degree I’m gonna get it’s probably gonna be good for a couple of things, like teaching in high school or above if I decide to get an additional degree I can teach in university or
college myself. Maybe I’m going into journalism. Basically if it’s not journalism, it’s probably, I’m kinda thinking law school. (Charlie)

**Identifying with Alternative Subcultures**

Rather than trying to find their identity in the mainstream culture, many of the participants identified with alternative subcultures or groups that carried specific labels, which tended to fall outside of those traditionally associated with femininity, such as being a girly girl.

**Tomboys.** Six out of the fourteen participants identified with the label ‘tomboy’ and three other participants stated that they were a tomboy some of the time or to some extent, most often when talking about themselves as they were growing up. Being a tomboy was associated with certain attire, such as wearing pants or loosely fitting clothing as well as with certain activities, such as sports or playing outdoors.

I was in, it was in like grade eight and nine that I was a bit of a tomboy. Yeah. I wore like the board shorts. And I went through a phase where I stretched my ears. That was like grade nine, that was grade nine and I did a lot of sports. So I was really into like the wearing the baggy shorts, you know, and like just a t-shirt. I was really into sports in grade nine. I did like five sports that year. (Heather)

I was always a big tomboy, so I was always on my own kinda thing, so I didn’t really feel the pressure to become something that wasn’t me. . . . I was like the kind of girl that climbed trees and hung out with the boys and that. I had a really like short haircut all during school . . . I just really didn’t have a lot of girls that I could relate to in school,
because I wasn’t into Barbies, I wasn’t into all the girly kind of things that they usually would be into, like talking about boys or something. So I was always, I was into video games. I got two older brothers, so that probably factored into it too. (Lucy)

I grew up with three brothers, when I was growing up I was a tomboy. I used to beg my parents to buy me boys’ clothes and when my brothers would get rid of their clothes, my older brothers, I would go into the bags that they had for Goodwill and take out the clothes that I wanted. ‘Cause I preferred the guys’ clothes . . . they fit my personality better. (What was your personality like?) Oh, I was like a tomboy. I was around my brothers all the time, horse playing, climbing trees, you know, running around. (Amani)

Several participants spoke about the tomboy subculture as a replacement for the traditional girly ways of dressing and behaving, to which the participants could not relate. Patricia spoke about being a tomboy as protective in terms of body weight-related pressures, contrasting it with the girly girl subculture:

I just did a lot of tomboyish type things, like the sports or like not caring how I looked. Like, not really being into fashion or clothing, what’s the newest thing, my whole life pretty much. . . . I wasn’t afraid to get messy. (Do you think tomboys are more protected in terms of not caring about their body weight or does that not matter?) I think so, yeah. I think they’re ok, like, they’re better off than the ones who are more into like the feminine, you know, being a girly girl. They’re probably just interested in other things
than their bodies . . . because girly girls are supposed to be more interested in fashion, cooking and baking, you know, just like more traditional female ideals.

**Male Peers.** As can be seen from Lucy’s and Amani’s narratives above, being a tomboy was generally associated with playing with brothers and male friends. Identifying with the boys’ subculture came up in the narratives of four additional participants. These participants did not identify themselves as tomboys, but they described playing with boys while growing up. Two participants stated that they presently got along better with male than with female friends.

A good portion of my friends, I guess, were boys. So I was always just kind of considered to be one of them. And yeah, and I remember, because I cut my hair for ‘Locks of Love’ in grade 8 and so I used to have really really long hair and then all of a sudden it went like this. So I remember telling my friend who was a boy that I was going to cut my hair really really really short and he was like “oh, your hair is the only thing keeping you from being a boy” and I was like, “that’s okay”. (Grace)

Most of my friends are guys right now. Just ’cause I find it more easy to deal with, especially my specific friends, they’re just very easy-going. It's hard for me to make friends with girls for a long term, because like, I don't know. Maybe it's just the girls I have been around, but they’re like, I don't know, we just don't get along as much as I do with other, like, guys. (Kelly)
**Goths.** Two participants identified with a subculture they termed ‘goth’, which was associated with wearing black and not smiling frequently. Both participants spoke about their ‘goth’ identity evoking negative reactions from others.

I was one of the creepy goth people supposedly and one of the girls actually began calling me the Ice Queen, because for me the smile was regarded as the creepiest sight in school, ‘cause I didn’t, what’s there to smile about? Yeah, I can, you have to smile to a joke when a teacher said a joke or someone said something funny, I would smile. But to have it constantly plastered all over your face, I’m sorry, that’s not my thing. (Charlie)

My mom got mad at me, she called me a witch (laughter). . . . Sometimes in high school when I was in that goth phase, she said I wore too much black and too much make up at the time, because that was just what the whole thing was about. (Lucy)

**Nerds.** Three participants identified with the label ‘nerd’ that was associated with being studious and prioritizing intelligence over appearance, which they contrasted with the subculture of the ‘popular’ or ‘cool’ girls.

We had nerd clubs, like the guys who were into science and mathematics and literature and all that stuff. When I wanted to hang out with them and talk to them I was always part of the group, one of the guys. . . . When I got my award in physics for having the highest mark in school for physics in 2005, the preps were in an uproar, “oh my god, look at that nerd, oh my god, she’s such a bookworm” and the nerd clubs were all pats on the
back, “oh, you rock” . . . having a higher IQ than them is not a threat to their IQ, it is something, the higher your IQ, the better person you are. . . . The popular girls, they pretty much go by the adage that the, it’s better to have beauty than brains, because an average guy sees better than he can think. (Charlie)

I wasn’t one of the popular girls ever, so I didn’t want to fit into this style of jeans or like, shirt. . . . I read National Geographic instead of Cosmo Girl, I don’t know. (So in a way not being one of the cool kids was protective for you?) Yeah, me and my friends were super nerdy. We didn’t really talk about our bodies or anything, we were just more concerned about our grades. I was really into, I was very kind of academic and I don’t know. It just never came up, body stuff, never. (Patricia)

Paradoxical Freedoms

In addition to identifying with particular labels, the participants sometimes used personality traits or qualities in reference to themselves, which generally carry negative connotations. These negative qualities tended to be used as an explanation or a reason for why the participants did not engage in certain behaviours they felt were expected of them.

Laziness. One such quality that three participants used in reference to themselves was ‘laziness’. The participants used that quality to explain why they have not engaged more in physical exercise, or alternatively, in other activities traditionally associated with femininity, including putting on make up and dressing up.
I'm just lazy, and I just kind of laugh at myself for it. “Yeah, I could probably lose twenty pounds if I wanted to, but do I care that much?” You know, and I just kind of remind myself of that every time I'm having a day where I'm like, “I'm fat”. And I'm like, “Okay, yeah, I'm fat, but like”, or like, “yeah, maybe I feel like I'm fat today, but do I really want to go to the gym for three hours and go on a diet or do I really wanna eat this free cheese in the fridge?” kind of a thing (laughter). (Tamera)

I don’t wear make up. I’m sure it's really not that hard to put on, so I'm sure that's not a matter of laziness. I don't know, because I don't think it’s detrimental that I don't put too much effort into getting dressed, because I'd rather not anyways . . . . It's bad and good, I guess. I'm better rested than most people, so that's positive. Yeah, I don’t know. I probably don't spend as much money as other people, because I'll be too lazy to do certain things. (Grace)

The participants touched on the issue of priorities, implying that appearance-related activities, such as losing weight and putting on make up are not tremendously important to them. It appears that using the term ‘laziness’ allowed them to give themselves permission to engage in such self-care activities as resting and eating well at the expense of activities targeted at achieving a certain beauty ideal.

**Selfishness.** Three participants spoke of ‘selfishness’ as an explanation for prioritizing things they felt were best for them, including health, comfort, and spiritual freedom.
My selfishness is that I want to be healthy. I want to live until I’m ninety nine and matron of a large family. And if that means being, exercising properly and eating right and doing all of that stuff then yeah, I’ll do it. My selfishness is that I wanna be healthy. I don’t care what body shape I am as long as I’m healthy. That’s it, I don’t have no chronic diseases, I don’t get no injuries, no nothing. That’s it. That’s my selfishness. (Charlie)

I grew up Catholic. That’s about it. We go to church, we went to church, like, a lot as children and then now it’s a couple times a month, not all the time. *(How important is religion in your life, would you say?)* It’s there (laughter). I’m not like, I don’t like, immerse myself in the Catholic faith, but I know it’s there. I kind of take it as I need it. I mean, it’s very selfish, but yeah. (Patricia)

I always just thought that everyone was uncomfortable with what they were wearing, because I always just thought how could someone be more comfortable in jeans and a really really tight shirt whereas I wore pajamas to school (laughter). . . . I probably have some kind of egoistical embedded in, I don't know, but I just felt better because I was kind of acting the way that I thought I should act and the way that I was comfortable being. So I was really happy that I was like that, I guess. (Grace)

**Being rebellious/stubborn.** In addition to ‘selfishness’, Grace also attributed her desire to wear comfortable clothes to being ‘rebellious’. This idea of being ‘rebellious’ or ‘stubborn’
was present in two other narratives, in which the participants cited these personality traits as an explanation for reason why they were not complying with the behaviour they saw in their peers.

I think I’m really impatient and I can be stubborn but at the same time I feel like all those things kind of make me who I am, so I wouldn’t want to, like, play dumb and just act like I’m compliant with everything, like, that I would just go along with everything and everything’s great when everything’s not. I think the people who challenge their lives and who deal with like ups and downs and stuff are more interesting. (Heather)

I just kind of rejected conforming. I decided to basically just be who I am and not worry about trying to look like something that I’m not. I don’t know, I just kinda didn’t let it affect me. I don’t really know. (laughter) (How did you manage to reject it?) It just happened. I guess I’m just naturally rebellious in nature like that. ‘Cause I was like just, I very uncool growing up. (Lucy)

**Shyness and modesty.** The idea of not being cool, as in Lucy’s quote, or not fitting in with one’s peers, was present in other narratives as well. Four participants spoke about not wanting to be the centre of attention or to stand out as they were growing up, identifying themselves as ‘shy’.

Before, I mean, I was so shy. I was very shy, not very cool, not very anything. (Patricia)
I didn’t like to call attention to myself, because I was very shy. So I’m like, ok, I’m gonna wear plain clothes and then, you know, it won’t be, I won’t be the centre of attention. (Stephanie)

I always became friends with the people that were off to the side, left to centre, that weren’t accepted so much. Because I can kinda, you know, I can relate to that from elementary school, being like so shy and everything that I was just out of place everywhere. (Lucy)

Similarly, two participants spoke about themselves as ‘modest’ and not wanting to reveal too much skin.

I’m very modest, so I really like the style lately, where the shirts are very long. ‘Cause what I don’t like is, you know, when you bend over and your shirt goes up and then, yeah, so that’s what I really don’t like. So I was really happy when they started selling really long shirts, because those were the kind of clothes that I usually try to look for anyways before the style came in. So yeah, those are the types I like, I don’t really know what my style is. But yeah, I don’t really like revealing too much skin. (Samantha)

I kinda tend to be mousy. My whole high school career, I never wore anything that was too provocative. I call it my cloaking device. Guys noticed me, but when I showed no interest they kinda went away. They had easier conquests in the other girls. (Charlie)
**Being plain/average.** A similar idea related to not standing out came up in relation to appearance in the narratives of two participants, who used the terms ‘plain’ and ‘average’ to describe their looks.

I think in terms of looks, I think I look pretty average. And I’m ok with that, I don't think I'm ugly or anything, I'm just average looking, but I like the way I look. (Kelly)

(What about appearance wise, how would you describe yourself?) I guess, plain. I don’t really stick out and yeah, I don’t wear a lot of make up. Occasionally I do, but not a lot and I don’t, I don’t brush my hair either, so yeah. (Sarah)

**Being weird/odd.** Other qualities that were present in seven of the narratives included such terms as ‘weird’ and ‘odd’, used in the sense of being different from others in a way that was viewed as negative. The participants used these terms in reference to their personality, their appearance, and the activities they engaged in.

I’m that odd ball, most people look at me like I’m some alien, because I have a very odd way of thinking about stuff. (Charlie)

I had jeans that were torn in so many places, so I put, I tried to keep them together with safety pins, which is not that original, I know, but still, it looked really good. And like, one day I wore all plaid. I had a plaid skirt and plaid shoes and plaid jacket. I don't know, but it was fun. Yeah, I looked weird, but it was fun. (Kelly)
The only thing, I don’t know, I was always into, like, weird things. I always, I had these wildlife things that was like this little, like, paper thing that was about one animal and I asked my parents to order it and so I have like, five hundred of these things of all different animals. (Stephanie)

It is possible that the use of such rather negative terms in reference to themselves or their activities reflected the participants’ awareness of the way they might be viewed by others. However, rather than trying to avoid being labelled ‘weird’ or ‘odd’, they embraced those terms in order to continue being the way they wanted to be. That same idea resonated in Patricia’s narrative, who shared a story of her friends from a sports team becoming empowered by embracing an offensive expression.

We actually made a group on Facebook and it’s called Thunder Thighs. It sounds bad, but it’s great. It’s just like being proud of very muscular legs. . . . It was the girls on the team, we just decided, because I guess one of the girls, she was running, she used to be a gymnast and her and her sister both are very muscular, very lean, just all muscle. So they’re very cut, but like, their legs are so muscular in the back and the hamstrings as well as like, the front. I guess she was running and some guy called her ‘thunder thighs’ while she was running. I’m like, are you kidding me? She can probably out-squat you, it’s like, ridiculous. So then we made that group. I guess it kind of like bring us all together, finding pride in things like muscular legs. (Patricia)
Emotional Self Care

Throughout their interviews, the participants spoke about a variety of ways in which they were taking care of themselves emotionally in different situations, such as when they encountered the thin ideal in the media or were faced with a situation that made them feel self-conscious.

Positive ‘self talk’. Several participants admitted to using ‘self talk’ when faced with an idealized image, internally rejecting the thin images in order to prevent being negatively affected by it.

(What happens when you see a commercial and there’s a really skinny model, for example? What happens for you?) I don’t know . . . I’ve seen their commercials for new Dove chocolates or for whenever there are commercials for food and there are models in the commercial, I always think it’s funny, because I just think to myself, “they don’t eat” or just stuff like that. (Grace)

There is such a standard with it, like, you know? Models are expected to be thin and I just, I don’t like looking through the magazines and seeing these girls and I’m like, “you look sick, you don’t look happy”. You know? (Heather)

Several participants also shared that they sometimes reassured themselves by saying positive things to themselves about their own appearance.
Once in a while you’re trying on clothes in the store, you’ll look at yourself and be like, “I have a butt, but you know what, at least I have a butt, because I’d rather have a butt than no butt”. (Patricia)

It’s like, I don’t fit this sort of myth, this model of what a beautiful woman is. But at the same time, I look at myself in the mirror and sometimes I’m like, “hey, I’m not bad looking, okay!” You know, and that sort of a thing. (Tamera)

Sometimes, it’s really stupid, but I look at myself in the mirror and I say, if I’m in a really bad mood and I’m just like, “you know you’re not ugly. You know you’re not fat. Just get over it, Stephanie, just get over it”. And then I just think, “yeah, I know I’m a good person, I know I’m funny, I know I’m attractive”. And then I just sort of like, I help myself. (Stephanie)

**Sense of humour.** Several participants spoke about their sense of humour as something that made it easier for them to not take the messages they saw in the media too seriously.

There’s a lot of people on the TV who I do not find particularly attractive and I’m just like, “really, that person is attractive?” I make fun of my brother all the time because, generally speaking, if I find someone unattractive, he finds them extremely attractive and the two of us joke around about it all the time. And it’s like, just ultimately, keeping a sense of humour about it, again. It’s just, like, a big strategy for me, I think. (Tamera)
Sometimes I just look at [magazines] to see, but then I wouldn’t actually follow it, ‘cause you can’t find the, I am not going to pay like, what, three hundred dollars for the same dress that she’s wearing there or anything. . . . I don’t really care, I look back and I was like, I had really, like, in the pictures I’m just like, “gross, why did I wear that?” But doesn’t matter, it kinda makes it funny that you had bad style when you were a kid, gives you something to laugh at. (Penelope)

**Normalizing difficult moments.** Several participants shared that they sometimes struggled with the thin ideal and spoke about normalizing those experiences for themselves.

One day I can look at it and even though I know these facts they might not come to mind and I’ll just be like, “oh, look at her and look at”, you know. But I guess in the long run it’s the choices that you make. ‘Cause feelings are natural, it’s natural to want what other people have. It’s natural to want what’s glamorous and what looks nice. Those things are natural, but then you have to come back to your own reality, your own decisions. (Amani)

I think that there's this weird dichotomy where we're like encouraged to be comfortable in our bodies . . . but at the same time, we get all these messages about, like, you know, have cosmetic surgery, it is good when you're aging and aging is bad and you should be skinny and all these things. So, but being honest about that push-and-pull and about the fact that, like, I want to be confident, but I feel like, you know, it upsets me when I go into a store and the clothes don't fit me . . . and I find that it really helps when I do it,
because it's like I'm being really honest with myself and acknowledging the fact that it's a struggle that I will probably always have. (Tamera)

**Separating themselves from others’ negative comments.** Several participants spoke about mentally separating themselves from the negative comments they heard other people make about their own bodies, such as their friends and their mothers, and seeing them as inapplicable to themselves.

Now that I’m older I’ll notice it more if [my mom]’s like, “oh, I should lose a couple of pounds”. I’ll notice it, but I know that it doesn’t mean that I have to do it. You know, that it’s her own choice sort of thing. I’m more, ‘cause, I don’t know, I guess before I kind of grew up alongside what she thought and now I’m becoming more, I’ve taken what she’s given me and made my own conclusions. (Stephanie)

In high school I did have one friend who still is very unhappy with herself . . . it’s weird, because I don’t think I was ever that affected by it. I think I just knew that, because I did sports and I was always very busy, I was okay. Yeah, I don’t know, because her comments never really bothered me, they still don’t bother me now. Maybe because she is pretty obese and it’s kinda like my mom, how she complains about her body, but it doesn’t really, I can’t apply what she complains about to me, because - two different body types. (Patricia)
Self-acceptance. Another way the participants took care of themselves emotionally was by accepting themselves the way they were. Most of the participants spoke about making an effort to accept themselves the way they were and to be content with their bodies, despite the fact they did not fit the idealized image they saw in the media.

(Any people in the media at all that you identify with, that you would like to look like, or not really?) It was always people that, like, you can say, “oh, they look nice”, but you know you are never going to look like them, unless you have surgery, so it’s not something that I, like, you can’t change yourself, so I’m pretty happy. Like, there’s nothing you can do. (Sarah)

I think of contentment where you realize that there’s so much that you can do and after that it’s all, like you can’t always, you’re not always the best and you’re not always faultless and flawless and once you accept that fact, then you’re a lot happier with what you are. (Penelope)

Just really being comfortable with understanding that I will probably, well, I know I will never fit the model. Like, I'm not physically capable of fitting that. Even when I weighed forty pounds less than I do now, I still did not fit that model. And being confident knowing that and being confident expressing myself within my own body. And I think being stuck in that sort of, knowing that I'm stuck in that and that I'm okay, and being okay with being stuck in it. (Tamera)
Several participants spoke about the importance of not relying on others for reassurance and emphasized the fact that self-acceptance had to come from within.

I don’t need feedback, I don’t need anything from anyone, really, I just kind of take care of myself… I don’t need somebody to tell me, “oh, you’re pretty” or “you look okay today”. I don’t know. I don’t feel like I need that. I mean, yeah, it’s good to hear once in a while, everyone needs it. But I feel pretty good. I feel like I could be okay without it. (Patricia)

I can’t look at, like, even now that I’m getting back into shape, I can’t look to my dad to be like, “you look great!” You know? “You are doing such a good job!” I can feel good about the fact that I’m doing such a good job on my own and just come to terms with myself, because I’ll never be happy if I’m always constantly looking at other people for gratification to like make me feel better about how I look. (Heather)

The idea of providing acceptance to themselves rather than depending on others came up especially frequently in discussing romantic partners. They spoke about looking inside oneself instead of relying on their romantic partners for acceptance and approval of their appearance.

If you're feeling insecure about things, I find for me, when I feel insecure, it's not helpful when [a boyfriend says], “it doesn't matter”. I want to hear like (pause) well, I don't think anything they could say would actually help. ‘Cause it really ultimately has to come from me. (Tamera)
I think the important thing to remember for the woman is: you were somebody before you met that person. . . . If you have a strong sense of self before you get into a relationship and you realize, well, I was somebody before I met you and I am going to continue to be that person while I’m with you. Yes, we’re going to change, we’ll probably change together a lot of things, but I am my own person. (Amani)

In line with Amani’s emphasis on having a strong sense of self, a recurrent theme across many of the narratives was related to the importance of not pretending to be someone they were not for the sake of others regardless of the people who surrounded them.

I think I’m outgoing and compassionate and generous and I love to have fun, but I definitely wouldn’t settle, you know. . . . I think I’m really impatient and I can be stubborn but at the same time I feel like all those things kind of make me who I am, so I wouldn’t want to, like, play dumb and just act like I’m compliant with everything, like, that I would just go along with everything and everything’s great when everything’s not. (Heather)

I’m . . . always trying to be who I think I am, not changing for any situation. If you’re going out somewhere, just ‘cause you’re, like, if your family is introducing you to somebody else, and just because they are introducing you to these people who are a certain way, that you should be that way as well, then I would say, “no, I am the way I am”. (Stephanie)
Summary of ‘Adopting Alternative Ways of Being’

From the participants’ self descriptions, it appeared that their self view was not centered on body weight or appearance, neither in the way they viewed themselves now nor in the future. Instead, they placed more importance on their values, personality, education, and intelligence, and their descriptions of themselves in 10 years centered around happiness, health, family, meaningful careers, and education. The participants tended to say that they were happy with themselves and their appearance, although some of them also connected their average or slimmer body physique to their resilience. At the same time, several participants spoke about wanting to gain weight and several others reported they had gained weight in the past without becoming overly concerned about it. Similarly, when describing how they saw themselves in 10 years, the majority of participants’ self descriptions were not focused on appearance.

Rather than identifying with the mainstream culture of their peers, the majority of the participants identified with alternative subcultures or groups, including tomboys, male peers, goths, and nerds. Such subcultures seemed to represent an alternative to for the traditional ‘girly girl’ subculture and therefore placed the participants outside of traditional femininity. That, in turn, made it easier for them to reject the mainstream culture with its ideals of beauty.

Similarly, participants tended to name personality traits and qualities in reference to themselves that generally carried negative connotations: they called themselves lazy, selfish, rebellious or stubborn, shy or modest, plain or average, and weird or odd. It seemed that the participants used these arguably unflattering terms as a way of explaining why they did not fit into the mainstream way of being a woman.

Throughout their interviews, the participants frequently mentioned ways in which they took care of themselves emotionally in difficult situations when they were trying to not be
negatively affected by the thin ideal. The participants reported they used positive ‘self talk’ and a sense of humour, normalized their own occasional struggle with the thin ideal, and made an effort to mentally separate themselves from negative comments others made about themselves or their bodies. In addition, the majority of the participants described that they were making an effort to accept their bodies the way they were, though they did not fit the thin ideal. They spoke about self acceptance coming from within, about the importance of reassuring themselves rather than relying on others, and about trying to remain attuned to themselves regardless of the situation.

Overall, the participants’ self view did not coincide with the way women are generally expected to be. By adopting alternative ways of being that fell outside of traditional femininity, the participants were able to prioritize things other than body weight. For example, by identifying with the subculture of ‘nerds’, the participants were able to focus on their intelligence rather than appearance. Likewise, by adopting negative qualities such as ‘lazy’ or ‘selfish’ the participants gave themselves the freedom to act the way they chose rather than the way that was expected of them. Rather than being harsh on themselves for not fitting in, the participants treated their own emotions with care and made an effort to accept themselves the way they were.

‘Identity’ Chapter Summary

The core category of ‘Identity’ included two major categories, ‘Rejecting Conventional Ways of Being’ and ‘Adopting Alternative Ways of Being’. The former major category contained three themes, which were related to critically thinking about the messages they were receiving and rejecting conventional norms associated with being a woman in the Western society, including appearance and weight-related expectations. The latter major category contained four themes, which were related to adopting different ways of living. They included
the participants’ self description in the present and in the future not focused on appearance or body weight, alternative subcultures and labels they identified with in place of those traditionally associated with femininity, as well as their emotional self care and acceptance.
CHAPTER FOUR

BODY

This chapter examines the second core category that emerged from the analysis of themes, which was comprised of protective factors related to the participants’ bodies. Body-related factors involved participants’ choices of how to engage their bodies with the outside world as well as how they chose to treat their bodies.

Body-related protective factors were divided into three major categories. The first major category, entitled ‘Meaningful Activities’, included three themes related to the different activities the participants engaged in, which were important in their lives (see Figure 4). The themes in this category were divided into introspective, creative, and physical activities. Throughout life, the participants engaged in a variety of introspective activities, which allowed them to have quiet time for self reflection, creative activities, which provided them with an outlet, and physical activities, which took their attention away from body image issues.

The second major category, entitled ‘Ways of Engagement’, included two themes related to the way the participants engaged in the different activities outlined in the first major category (see Figure 4). The first theme dealt with prioritizing competence, skill, and strength over appearance, such as focusing on one’s accomplishments outside of the area of body image. The second theme dealt with narratives related to passion and immersion in different activities, such as having fun and not thinking about one’s body in the process.

Finally, the third major category, entitled ‘Physical Self Care’, included four themes related to the participants’ treatment of their bodies (see Figure 4). The themes in this category included prioritizing comfort and freedom, prioritizing health, trusting and attending to bodily cues, and rejecting appearance-related practices. The participants chose to take care of their
bodies and to be comfortable, free and healthy over looking good in the eyes of others. They ate in a healthy yet non-restrictive way and enjoyed their food. They also avoided or minimized engagement in appearance-related bodily practices, such as weighing oneself on a scale and putting on make up.

A diagram illustrating the three major categories and their corresponding themes can be seen in Figure 4.

![Diagram](image_url)

Figure 4. Core Category of ‘Body’, Major Categories, and Themes.

**Meaningful Activities**

Throughout their narratives, the participants spoke about different activities, which were meaningful in their lives and which positively affected the way they felt about themselves and their bodies, including introspective, creative, and physical activities.
**Introspective Activities**

All the participants stated that they engaged in such introspective activities as reading, meditating, journaling, listening to music or simply thinking. Several participants stated that they preferred such activities to more extraverted ones.

I find that I have to be in a certain mood to be more social. But, I mean, I guess I prefer doing more introverted activities like reading and stuff . . . I don't stay home all the time, but I guess I prefer introverted stuff. (Grace)

I’m one of those kind of people that just sits and thinks for a long time or I like to, sometimes I’lI just lie on my bed and just think. I’m always just thinking, I don’t know. I’m one of those people. I look at a quotation and I think about it. I am always thinking. . . . I’m definitely an imagination and a thinking person, rather than a going out and adventure person. (Stephanie)

Several participants also noted that they were more mindful and introspective than people around them.

Compared to other people I notice that when I eat and when I do things, I’m more slow, like, I do things, I think about it more. I guess it’s more conscious than always in a rush and you always have to go, so. And even when I eat, I eat very slowly compared to my friends. (Sarah)
It’s really kinda what you do through high school, you just try to discover who you are, try different things out. . . . I’ve always been really introspective and not like, extroverted or something, I’ve just been more in tune with myself than a lot of my peers seemed to be. (Lucy)

The majority of the participants spoke about making an effort to find quiet time for themselves when they could reflect on things.

I just do that, I don’t know, it’s just having some quiet time to yourself. . . . It’s really busy all the time, it’s just sometimes having a little bit of time at the end of the day where it’s just, like (pause) when I walk to school it’s very, I like that a lot, it’s just like a time for you to think about everything in your life and it’s just a non- hectic kind of like time to just think and talk to yourself. (Penelope)

I think just trying to be sometimes helps. Just being, like, sitting down with myself and being like, “these are the things I like. These are the things I’m comfortable with” and that sort of a thing. (Tamera)

I take long baths, that’s my little problem, is that I can spend an hour in a bath with a book and maybe my radio, kick my feet up around the faucet, get comfortable, could sit in the tub for an hour. My mom actually complains that I do it way too much. But hey, it helps me unwind. I meditate in the bath[tub] too . . . I try to examine what’s been going
around in my life in the last couple of days to organize the mental filing around, to shuffle things. I also do some of my best thinking in the bathtub. (Charlie)

Like Charlie, about half of the participants stated that they engaged in meditation or yoga at some point in their lives, which several participants connected to their emotional well being.

I started doing yoga and then doing meditation and I feel like things like that really deepen your awareness of yourself. . . . It’s taking care of another part of your body that’s completely separate from your physical being. It’s not taking care of your brain, it’s taking care of your mind by really calming yourself and sorting through things. (Heather)

I tried meditation for a bit, actually. Like, yoga and meditation and that. . . . That was kind of interesting, it’s not really part of my life now, but I did that a couple times and it seems to bring me more in touch with my spiritual side too. (Lucy)

I used to go to yoga in the morning and just come home from yoga really relaxed. . . . My friend would come over to study for the class and make sure we had everything done and he'd always make fun of me, 'cause I'd just be, “I love everything!” . . . It was just a really good environment where everyone was just really positive. So, at the end of it I'd come out really positive. (Tamera)
Carol connected the development of her interest in meditation with growing up close to the nature:

*(What made you interested in meditation in the first place?)* Where I grew up it was a very quiet place, right? Like, lots of evergreen trees and the water is clean, the air is clean. So sometimes I started to sit down and listen. It is very easy there to find a moment of peace. That carried on, I guess.

Just as Carol, about a third of the participants spoke about spending time in the nature, engaging in such activities as going into the forest, camping, hiking, and being outdoors.

I like to go outside. . . . I used to go camping every year, this is the first summer that I haven’t gone camping. *(Do you build a tent and stay overnight?)* Yeah, and canoeing, make the fire, eat outside. *(What is it that you like about camping?)* I think it’s just relaxing and it’s different from the city, ‘cause when you live in the city all you see is buildings, whereas camping, you are outside and you can hear nature. *(Sarah)*

I’d usually go [to the forest] with my family. I was usually afraid to go in the forest, ‘cause I always heard there was coyotes all over the place. . . . I would go on a lot of bike rides on my own. *(Lucy)*
Creative Activities

In addition to being involved in a variety of introspective activities, all except one participant spoke about being involved in creative activities throughout their lives, such as painting, drawing, creative writing, singing, and writing music.

I love scrapbooking, ’cause I love pictures. I guess that reflects, like, I love people and then, so pictures of people are amazing. So I just love scrapbooking. I love music too. I play piano and I’m kind of, I kind of play guitar and I learned the drums over the summer a little bit, although I can’t really keep beat, but yeah. And I love singing. (Penelope)

My writing is usually more metaphorical, like, stuff about the universe and scientific stuff. . . . I used to keep a journal actually . . . basically just saying how I felt, what happened during the day, how I felt about things. That was also therapeutic, I guess. And the art, the kind of things I draw, I guess, all kinds of things. I do a lot of landscapes. (Lucy)

Similarly to Lucy’s assertion that her journal writing was “therapeutic”, several other participants described their engagement in creative activities as an outlet.

(You mentioned art, was it something that was important in your life as you were growing up?) Yeah, I think I did a lot of (pause) it was like my form of therapy, like my own little quiet, I’d draw a lot, like my feelings and stuff. Yeah, just kind of like express myself in a quiet way. . . . It was like a release for me, just something different to do. (Patricia)
I always have got out a lot of my feelings by writing music, so that’s been my outlet. I started very young at like the age of like fifteen and so that continued through to university and I still like writing, free writing and kind of poetry have really been my outlet. (Heather)

Me and my friends in elementary school, we were really creative. We would just like, you know, write songs or put on little shows or whatever, right? When I was in grade one or two, I don't know how it happened, but sometimes on Fridays I would bring my puppet and I would put on a show for the class for like five minutes, but it was completely improvising. . . . I guess I found an outlet for myself in those areas. (Kelly)

Likewise, Stephanie spoke about the positive effect of writing on the walls of her room:

I started writing and my friends wrote messages: “Steph, oh my god, you’re such a great friend” and little hearts and smiley faces and things like that. Then I started writing quotations from philosophers. . . . You could spend hours in my room reading the walls and just, like, it’s a good, I think it’s a good creative expression that, you know, I look at something and I’m like, “oh, I remember that day, I remember when she said that” or “I remember that joke”. And it’s a good, like, my room is my support.

Just as Kelly, about half of the participants shared that they performed in front of people at some point in their lives, by acting in plays, singing, or playing musical instruments. Several participants connected these activities with an increase in their confidence.
I started singing in music festivals when I was in grade one, so I was like, and I did baton when I was like five. . . . When you’re young, you still look at everyone the same, so I think doing those things when I was really young really made those habits, like, made that confidence thing a habit for me. So by the time I was old enough to be concerned about my image, I wasn’t as much because it was just normal for me. (Heather)

I did a lot of music shows and talent shows and that, and that really helped my confidence. I felt better about myself after, you know, going out and signing or something. It’s so crazy, because after I sang a bunch of teachers would come up to me and be like, “wow, where did that come from, I didn’t know this shy young girl could be so confident on stage” and stuff. It’s really crazy how much music brings out the confidence in me. (Lucy)

Another creative activity mentioned by several participants, which distanced them from the thin image, was altering or making their own clothes, rather than tailoring their attire to the mainstream look.

If I have like this one pair of jeans, then I can always turn it into the other pair by adding like maybe some sort of an accessory to it, like maybe a fake wallet chain or some sort of nice belt and stuff. So I don’t, I don’t feel the need to buy a new pair of jeans every, every month. (Charlie)
(How do you think creativity affected the way you feel about yourself, if at all?) I guess, I can be whatever I want and it's in my hands to change my appearance if I want to. But I don't really have to go on to losing weight to change the way I look, right? I can just, you know, do things to my hair or clothes or whatever, right? ‘Cause there is more than one way to, you know, look good, I suppose. (Kelly)

Physical Activities

All the participants stated that they engaged in physical activities at some point in their lives. While several participants played sports competitively, others engaged in it recreationally or preferred more casual forms of physical activity, such as taking walks and jogging.

I’ve been exercising a lot lately because of working at Wonderland, it’s basically running back and forth and standing around all day outside in the sun. (Lucy)

I snowboard in the winter. I skied a lot as a kid and then I switched to snowboarding. Our parents put us in a lot of sports, like, I did basketball in high school, my older sister did as well, and then volleyball too. (Patricia)

Half of the participants spontaneously mentioned engagement in physical activities while growing up that were unrelated to body image and were more frequently associated with boys, such as climbing trees, building forts, and being in the cadets.
I didn’t really watch too much TV, ‘cause I was always outside and I had trouble sitting still, so I didn’t watch too much. Yeah, because we had a very big backyard or I would just play with the neighbours. There was always, ‘cause we lived in a court, so there was always street hockey in the court. We also lived really close to the park. Or, you know, in Edmonton there’s a lot of snow, so I’d always build snowmen or build a fort.  

(Samantha)

I was always doing sports and then I was in cadets. It’s like, kind of like an army, but not really, it’s like for younger kids. Your not really in the army, it’s just like a program where they have sports and you can learn about flying planes. I was always in lots of clubs, like, we had a firemen club and I did some rowing and swimming. (Sarah)

About half of the participants also stated that they felt good or energized when they were being physically active.

(When you went to the gym a couple of times a week, did it make you feel differently about your body?) I think I felt better in general. I, like, that's what, I think I really like exercising, because I just feel better at the end. Like, healthier. . . . I really feel sort of more energized and like I have more energy when I'm working out. So I think because I was feeling like that I was just feeling generally better about everything. (Tamera)

If I were to change my lifestyle one thing, it would be that I would go to the gym or put a treadmill in my room or something just to run and be active. ‘Cause it makes me feel
good, you know. Whenever I come out of samba I feel tired, but I feel so great, to just
like, sweat and just be like, ‘yeah!’ And it gets me energized. (Stephanie)

(When you started playing sports, did it change at all the way you felt about your body?)
I think I felt good about my body in terms of I felt more active. I guess when I first
started sports I got tired easily and when I just kept doing it I guess I didn’t feel as tired
or my muscles didn’t hurt as much. I felt more alive, I guess, and it was something that I
really liked doing, so I had a lot of fun. (Anna)

Several participants touched on the issue of accessibility, speaking about things that made
it easier for them to engage in physical activity, such as parental encouragement in Patricia’s
quote above, having sports teams one could join at one’s place of study, and living close to an
area where one could take walks.

When I got into university I tried to go into more like, join more clubs, more sports and
activities. . . . I was in Dragon Boat . . . , I did softball . . . , I do tennis sometimes during
the summer and I’m trying to do that and I’m gonna join those fitness classes, maybe like
those aerobics. . . . I stopped doing, like running, after junior high, because we didn’t
really, ‘cause it was a really small school that I went to, so we didn’t really do track and
field. . . . So in high school I didn’t do as many sports and then I went to University,
that’s when I did all these group sports. (Penelope)
Where I lived [in Victoria], near where I went to university, the back of it was complete forest. But there were trails, right? And you can go to the back there. It’s the best way to pick your walks, the best way to get your walks done. (Do you walk around Toronto now as well?) It’s all flat land. Well, I do take walks, but it’s different. (Carol)

Several participants also emphasized that their engagement in sports distracted them from focusing on their appearance and provided them with more meaningful things to occupy their mind with.

You’re distracted, you’re practicing for your event and you don’t have time to think about “oh, how do I look in spandex?” when I’m throwing or jumping or, you know, running. So yeah, just like a good distraction, like, you’re focusing on something else, you know, instead of just, “how do I look in this skirt tonight?” (Patricia)

Being in shape has definitely always been important for me and not necessarily on an image level, but more on like a health factor, and because I was in sports, you know, it was good to be in shape and to be muscular. . . . But like, I never, it never really consumed me where I was like at the gym all the time, because I wanted, ‘cause I’m like, “oh! I gained like a pound!” I wasn’t concerned about it in that way. (Heather)

Just like Heather, several other participants noted that while engagement in physical activity was important for them, they did not view it as a chore that had to be completed or stated
that they were not overly hard on themselves if they were unable to exercise as much as they had planned.

I try to motivate myself to do something and then, I don't know. That's the thing, I would try exercising for a little it and then I would just drop it and then I guess I will divert my attention to something else and it's never become that big of an issue for me that I would actually stick to it. (Kelly)

I exercise a little bit on the treadmill, 40 minutes a day, that’s it, sometimes less, sometimes more, depending how much I feel. I don’t feel it’s a chore. (Charlie)

**Summary of ‘Meaningful Activities’**

In their narratives, the participants spoke about engagement in numerous meaningful activities throughout their lives. They participated in different introspective activities, such as reading, journaling, and reflecting on things, and several participants noted that they were generally more mindful than people around them. About half of the participants engaged in meditation or yoga, which they found to positively affect their emotional well being. In addition, about a third of the participants liked to spend time in the nature.

The participants also engaged in a variety of creative activities, such as painting, drawing, and creative writing, which several participants described as “therapeutic” or as an outlet. About half of the participants shared that they performed in front of others by acting in plays, singing, or playing musical instruments, which several participants connected to an increase in their confidence. Several participants also stated that they either altered or made their own clothes,
which allowed them to create their own look independent of the mainstream ideas of what it meant to look good.

In addition, the participants engaged in numerous physical activities, including soccer, snowboarding, track and field, and volleyball. Half of the participants spoke about their childhood engagement in physical activities, which were generally associated with boys, such as climbing trees, building forts, and being in the cadets. Currently, several participants played sports competitively, while others preferred more casual forms of exercise, such as taking walks and jogging. Their engagement in physical activity was sometimes dependent on its accessibility. The participants shared that physical activity made them feel good and energized and that it distracted them from focusing on their appearance. However, while engagement in sports was important for many of the participants, they also did not view it as a chore and were accepting of however much exercise they were able to complete.

**Ways of Engagement**

While the participants described a variety of different activities that were meaningful in their lives, there were several commonalities in the ways they chose to engage their bodies in those activities. The participants focused on the functionality of their bodies, prioritizing competence, skill, and strength over appearance and body weight. The participants also engaged in activities with passion and immersed themselves in what they were doing rather than focusing on what their bodies looked like in the process.

**Competence, Skill, and Strength**

When discussing their involvement in activities, the participants focused on their competence, skill, and strength, rather than their appearance, and placed an emphasis on what their bodies could do rather than what they looked like.
Sports, because you’re surrounded, you’re just, it’s not about keeping in shape or anything like that, it’s like, I don’t know, maybe because it’s more masculine, like, being athletic is more masculine, and you’re just, you become more satisfied, you become more familiar with your body, like, how it works. You appreciate the shape it’s in to accomplish something. (Patricia)

I’ve definitely never ever been able to succumb to the sexy image when I’m on stage . . . I want the focus to be on my art, about my singing. So it should enhance it, not take away from it. People shouldn’t be looking at me and being like, “ooh, she’s got nice legs”, you know? Like, or whatever, it shouldn’t be like, “oh, look it, that’s a really low cut shirt”. It shouldn’t necessarily be like that. I like to use my style to enhance my performance. (Heather)

I’ve been asked many times in high school or whatever, if I would switch my body with somebody else, say, an actress or whatever, but I would always say “no”. . . . If I can run, say, 10 kilometres, I can do that because I trained myself to do that, right? So if I was to switch my body with someone, then I might lose my ability to play basketball or run. . . . When people look at a body, they just look at how it looks. But I like to look at the function . . . I worked really hard to be able to play sports the way I do, so I wouldn’t want to give that up. (Samantha)

Several participants noted that in order to perform well, they needed to not think about what their bodies looked like in the process.
I’ve always been active and played a lot of sports, so that always helps with keeping your mind off how your body looks, I guess. You just don’t pay attention, because your body’s fine. When you play sports you have muscle and you’re more concerned about your sports performance, than how you look. (Sarah)

It’s just this feeling when you’re on stage, like everything that, you know, that’s been bothering you that day, anything you’ve been stressed out about or, you know, that fight you had with your parents, whatever, it doesn’t matter, because as soon as you step onto that stage . . . it’s like you’re in a different world while you’re performing, because you have to be in the moment in order to really perform like well, you have to let go of those things. (Heather)

You’re focusing on lifting or squatting and you’re just like, that’s all you’re doing and to get it done you can’t think about anything else. You can’t feel like, you can’t check yourself out in the mirror and be like, “oh, what am I doing, how does this t-shirt look on me or how are my thighs or my hips” or whatever. So you have to just kind of get past that, you can’t, or else you can’t do what you are supposed to do. (Patricia)

The participants brought up positive feelings in relation to the skills they were developing in areas unrelated to body image. Several participants spoke about an increase in their self confidence and self esteem.
I like to know how to dance. It makes me feel good about myself when I go out and I know how to do something. I just like to dance. (Stephanie)

When you do find that you are good at something it will help change your self concept. So all of a sudden now my life’s not just about my weight and my appearance, but hey, you know what, maybe I can sing really good, or I can play the steelpan really good, or I got a home run yesterday in that baseball game. You know, so those things contribute. (Amani)

Several participants also spoke about a sense of pride related to their accomplishments. For example, Patricia spoke about making progress in learning to play the piano, while Samantha spoke about being one of the only two girls on a boys’ sports team.

(In terms of playing piano, what was it giving you?) I don’t know, just satisfaction in being able to learn really kind of difficult pieces, I guess, and just like, accomplishing, feeling accomplishment when you do really well, like, when you place in competitions, you know, if you win second in whatever music. Or just gaining, going to the next level, then it’s like accomplishment, you know, because you see the progress . . . being able to learn cool songs, like classical songs that I always wanted to learn and when you learn it, you’re very, very proud of it. (Patricia)

At the end of each practice we’d always have to run two kilometres, I think, so [the boys on the team]’d get mad if me or my friend would beat them (laughter). Like, finish
before them. I don’t think they’d be mad, but they’d just be like, “we can’t let them ahead of us!” I guess I was very proud of myself to be able to play on the boys’ team. And I think it even motivated me to be stronger or like get better. (Samantha)

When the issue of appearance came up in several interviews, the participants stated they preferred the appearance of strength, such as muscles, to slim physique.

One of my interests recently has been to start taking some sort of martial art. . . . I would just like to have strength, just to have a toned body, in terms of appearance . . . toned arms and, you know, legs and stuff, yeah. What else? Just, I don't know, look athletic. (Kelly)

I actually really like athletes' bodies. So I love watching the Olympics or like, athletes. So I like, I guess, people who look healthy and they're fit, and they have, I guess, muscle. . . . I think it's really cool when you can tell what sport, or what a person does based on their body. Yeah, that's what I like. (Samantha)

A lot of girls were looking for like the thin, long, lean legs. But when you do a sport, any sport I think and your legs become really muscular and strong, just really strong and built, you’re like, you know what, I’m proud of these legs, they’re hard work, so I’m going to show them off. (Patricia)
Passion and Immersion

When talking about the activities they engaged in, the participants frequently mentioned feelings of enjoyment and fun, as well as other words demonstrating their passionate involvement in activities, such as “amazing” and “powerful”. Two participants also stated they had an “adrenaline rush” in the process of being engaged in an activity.

(What is it like for you to sing on stage?) It feels amazing. I really like, I definitely know that performing is what I want to do. . . . And it’s just such a rush, every time I get on stage it’s just as exciting as like the first time I got on stage. It feels like just really warm and wonderful, you know? I feel like it’s a really big stress release, so a lot of like tension that I have just kind of goes away. ‘Cause there’s a real adrenaline rush like no matter what. (Heather)

It’s really fun to be able to sing really loud . . . especially in the shower, when everything is vibrating and there is just, I don’t know. It’s just fun. (How does it make you feel when you sing?) I don’t know, it feels, it makes me feel powerful . . . it’s like you can release all these things and then especially certain songs, you know how it just sounds, like this, it just sounds so powerful and strong. (Penelope)

I’m part of the drama team. . . . Last year we had a Thanksgiving play and it was like a really big production. It was the first time we did this and so it was a lot of fun. For some reason they made me one of the main characters (laughter). I wasn’t ready for it, but it was a lot of fun. (Anna)
Resonating with Anna’s quote, several participants stated that they enjoyed certain activities even if they did not excel in them.

I did always play, but I never excelled in sports. . . . I don’t have a very competitive nature when it comes to sports, because I guess I see them more like games than sports. You can see it as a game or you can see it as a sport. When it’s a sport, it becomes competitive, when it’s a game, its fun. So, I always kind of saw sports kind of more like games. (Amani)

I kind of just like to doodle in my spare time and I always took art at school, but I don’t think I’m really that good at it, but I still just enjoy doing it. (Grace)

The participants also spoke about being immersed in different activities unrelated to body image. Several participants shared that when they were engaged in activities in such a way, they did not think about their bodies.

You need movement, like a moving distraction just to kind of, to not think about, you know. Just to be really active, to engage your whole body in something . . . if you’re sitting you’re so stationary, I feel like you’d notice if your jeans aren’t doing up all the way you might feel that a little more, right? I think if you’re moving around you just don’t have time to notice . . . you have to just be completely immersed into something. If you’re completely moving, you don’t have time to think. (Patricia)
I was very competitive in cross-country running . . . it’s long distance running. Now I still run, but not competitively. (How do you feel when you run?) I guess, with long distance sports you get a bit of an adrenaline rush and I just, like, I don't really think about my body. (Sarah)

In addition, the participants stated that for them having fun in the process was more important than the end result, such as getting in shape, and emphasized the pointlessness of engagement in activities if one does not enjoy them.

(What is the reason you were taking dance classes?) It was enjoyment, it was really enjoyment. You know, in grade seven I wasn’t really thinking about getting into shape, like, I wasn’t really thinking, oh, I should do dance, because it’s healthy. I was doing dance, because my friends were doing it and it was fun, so it wasn’t for that. (Stephanie)

I feel better when I’m active . . . just feel good, you know, you’re doing something good for your body and you have fun. . . . There is no point in doing things if you don’t enjoy it. (What type of things do you do for fun?) Well, just talking to people and hanging out and we play sports, watch movies together. (Sarah)

Summary of ‘Ways of Engagement’

There were several common themes in the participants’ descriptions of their engagement in the different activities discussed in the previous section. Narratives related to their engagement in activities tended to be characterized by focus on functionality of their bodies,
including competence, skill, and strength, rather than their appearance. Participants stated that in order to perform well, they had to stop focusing on what their bodies looked like in the process of engaging in the activity. They also stated that they preferred the appearance of strength and muscles to slimness. In addition, the participants spoke about an increase in their confidence and self esteem as well as a sense of pride about their skills and accomplishments.

Participants’ narratives also contained numerous examples of their passionate involvement in different activities, such as descriptions of enjoyment and fun, even when describing activities they did not excel in. Likewise, they spoke about being immersed when engaged in different activities and subsequently not thinking about their bodies. The participants prioritized enjoyment of activities over the end result of getting in shape and spoke about the pointlessness of engaging in activities otherwise.

**Physical Self Care**

Throughout their interviews, the participants frequently touched on the issue of physical self care as they described the choices they made in the treatment of their bodies. They focused on their self care, comfort, and health, listened to their bodies and responded to cues of hunger, and rejected excessive engagement in practices aimed at beautifying their bodies in accordance with mainstream ideals.

**Prioritizing Comfort and Freedom**

The majority of the participants spoke about prioritizing their own self care and comfort over looking good in the eyes of others.
I got tired of not being at maybe my absolute comfort level, maybe. I used to bring slippers to school, I used to. Well, I don't wear them out, but in high school I kept a pair of slippers in my locker and I wore them every day. (Grace)

A woman... if she wants to look pretty then yeah, she wants to look pretty, but that’s her choice. She can go for these make up and clothing and jewellery and all that stuff... but if being around the house in your pajamas ‘till 3pm makes you feel better, then the world should have no right in saying that’s wrong. That’s my opinion, ’cause yeah, I’m a pajama-person. (Charlie)

(What is the reason you chose not to wear make up?) It might be out of laziness (laughter). ‘Cause I’m very, I like to sleep a lot, so I’d rather sleep in, as much as I can and just get ready very quickly in the morning and be where I have to be. I don’t know if it’s a waste of time, but it’s just less sleep. Or I, I don’t know, I just never wore it, so I guess it’s just out of habit, not wearing. (What other things are more important to you than make up?) Sleep. I also have to eat breakfast, so that’s important. (Samantha)

In addition, Samantha emphasized the connection between taking care of oneself physically and taking care of one’s mind.

I try to do things that are, you know, good for me, ’cause it’s not just your body, but it’s also your mind. If you want to be able to think, do well in school or learn, be able to have your mind ‘till you’re older, it’s important to take care of yourself. (Samantha)
In discussing their comfort-related choices, the majority of the participants spoke about clothes, such as choosing more casual and comfortable attire over outfits that were in fashion.

(What type of clothes do you prefer to wear?) For me it’s about comfort. If I don’t feel comfortable in it, it doesn’t matter how good it looks. (Amani)

I think everyone can look good and feel good about what they’re wearing. It doesn’t matter what size you are, it’s just a matter of finding the right clothes. Most of my clothes I feel like I’ve chosen pretty well. Like, they’re pretty good for my body type. I feel comfortable in them. (Heather)

I’d never wear jeans, I always wore sweatpants . . . because the way, you know how women's jeans are made so that you can see the bum and you can see the shape of the upper legs? I didn't like that. . . . I always wanted to be more comfortable in sweat pants. (Grace)

The participants also spoke about making sure they wear warm clothes in the wintertime and several participants stated they looked more at the functionality of the clothes than at the way they looked.

(What type of clothes do you like wearing?) Jeans and a t-shirt. They’re functional. And I gotta tell you, it’s a lot easier to take snow when you are not trying to worry about your
skirt going too high, and it happens, I see it. I’m not sure why you would buy something like that. (Carol)

One pair of my jeans I actually bought men’s. . . . I don’t care if they are men’s jeans. I don’t, they’re comfortable and they were bought for winter, a few sizes big, so I could wear a second pair of pants underneath to insulate. And in the winter, because they are so loose, they form this wind air pocket inside and I don’t feel the cold at all. . . . Function above looks. It has to be functional or it’s not worth it. (Charlie)

The participants touched on the issue of freedom associated with body-related choices. Several participants made a connection between the clothes they chose to wear and a sense of freedom or restriction associated with it.

When I’m just in my normal clothes I can just do whatever I want and I don’t have to worry about like mascara running or like if something’s blotchy or something. It’s just, it gives me more freedom, I find. (What does it feel like, being free?) It feels like you can do whatever you want and you don’t have to worry about it. It’s like more, it feels natural, yeah. Like that’s the way it should be . . . it just feels not fake. It feels like you don’t need to like, put on a mask or pretend like you’re something you’re not. (Penelope)

If you’re hanging out with the guys you don’t want to be dressed up like a girl really, you just want to be like one of them. It’s just, I don’t know, I think how you dress really brings out a lot like, how you feel or how you act. . . . I won’t feel like I’m part of the
guys if I’m like, even like say, at a wedding with my guy friends I won’t feel like I’m really a part of it, because I’m so dressed up and so girly . . . then you feel restricted, like, you can’t bring out that aspect of your personality, when you’re dressed up like that, when you are more feminine. (Patricia)

Similarly, Heather spoke about a sense of liberation related to her experience at a spa:

I had this experience where I went to a spa . . . A lot of women walk around naked or topless . . . I’ve never walked around, you know, without a top on or something . . . So I did it and it was like a really liberating experience, because I was just like, we are brought up to be very self-conscious . . . But all the other women did it too, so it never phased them, right? No one is looking at you, really, it doesn’t matter. So that was kind of a big, just like, being comfortable enough in my body that I could do that and just walk around and not think about it. So that was kind of a big step!

Prioritizing Health

In their interviews, all the participants spoke about the importance of health in their lives and the majority of participants spoke about prioritizing health over appearance and body weight.

You see those in magazines and all that, if you always think about that, then obviously you’re not going to be happy with yourself. I find that for me when I feel healthy or when I feel like, that’s when I feel more happy with my body. It’s more of like a health thing than a physical appearance kinda thing. (Penelope)
The skinny-culture . . . I try not to let it be important. It isn't important to me, really. What's important to me is my health. So I'd say I try to not let it affect me. (Tamera)

I want to look fit, I want to look in shape and I want to stay healthy, but it doesn’t matter, if in that process I happen to look the way I did a couple years ago that’s great, but if I don’t, then whatever. I’m just being healthy, that’s the most important part. (Heather)

Participants emphasized the importance of balance, stating that being either overly thin or overly obese would not be healthy.

Probably ‘cause I am studying health, so then that affects that I want to be healthy and you know like, too skinny is unhealthy, too big is unhealthy, so I kind of know that as well. (Penelope)

Physically to be healthy, you know, not have any, you know, high blood pressure I guess and just things associated with weight, if you’re way too thin that would cause problems, if you’re obese that would cause problems. But if you’re not on either sides of the extreme and if you’re somewhere in the middle, then wherever you are in the middle is fine. (Stephanie)

Body shape and that, I guess, in the media . . . being slim and all that, but myself, I don’t have a preference. I just see the only problem with not being like thin or something and being overly obese is just that it’s not healthy, that’s all. That’s how I see it. (Lucy)
Participants spoke about making an effort to maintain a healthy lifestyle, including integrating physical activity and healthy eating patterns into their lives. Several participants also touched on the importance of “not overdoing it” and accepting where they are at.

For me, health is very much just being able to maintain physical activity. So, I mean, in my best days, I was going to the gym three or four times a week for two hours at a time, ’cause I enjoy running on the track, I can't run on the street, ’cause I have bad knees, so I stick out and use the elliptical for a while and doing yoga a couple times a week. And I enjoy doing that and I enjoy being able to go for long walks and things like that. (Tamera)

It’s hard to maintain perfect health. . . . I still try to walk up the stairs if I can and when I can. Walking outside if I can. Eat healthy, of course, vegetables, fruits. Not so much grain, I should probably eat more grain. (Carol)

Two very important things, I think, in loving your body and being comfortable with it is, number one, being healthy and eating well and also getting physical activity, whatever it is. So doing that, but also not overdoing it, right? So not doing it excessively. Accepting that maybe this week I only have time to go to the gym once or I have time to like, go for a run and then maybe go for a walk with a friend do something, because that’s as good as anything, going for a walk. (Heather)
Several participants also spoke about discouraging their friends from going on unhealthy diets and instead encouraged them to make healthy lifestyle changes.

My friends usually, if they bring [dieting] up then I’ll, you know, I’ll tell them, “no, you’re fine, don’t do that to yourself”. I’m one of those friends that will, I’m kind of against that. I don’t think it’s that healthy. (Stephanie)

I always tell them, like, “you should make it a lifestyle change”, ’cause I think yo yo dieting is really bad for your body, so I kind of just give them the whole lecture on, you know, “you should do things, don’t go on crash diets” . . . . If you make it a lifestyle change, if you eat properly, if you incorporate activity into your daily life, it’s just like little bits, you won’t see drastic change right away, but the change that you will see will last a lot longer. (Samantha)

Trusting and Attending to Bodily Cues

As mentioned in the previous section, healthy eating came up in numerous interviews. The majority of participants spoke about making an effort to eat in a healthy way.

(Would you say that you eat healthy?) Generally, yes. Like, we always have a lot of fruits in the house, so whenever you want to snack, there’s always so many fruits. Like, we buy mangoes by the case-full and we always have a lot of variety, like, we can have pears, peaches, apples, plums, nectarines, mangoes. (Sarah)
I try to cook as much as possible, make my own meals. Right now my boyfriend and I started actually looking at the ingredients and we try to buy, we can't really afford a lot of organic food, but we try to buy whatever we can. And just like, looking at the least amount of ingredients per product, so we try to buy more healthier choices. (Kelly)

In discussing healthy eating, several participants spoke about being attuned to their bodies by listening to them for cues of hunger and trusting their bodies by responding to appetite.

I try to eat at least three meals a day, I like to eat. I normally eat when I’m hungry. So I guess my body, you know, I eat regularly, so I guess it just gets hungry regularly too. So when I’m hungry, then I’ll eat. (Samantha)

I noticed for me, because I was active in the fall and then the spring kind of, so in the winter you, like, it takes a little while for your body to realize that you don’t need as much food. So a few weeks actually you are still like eating, eating, and then slowly your appetite goes down a bit, so you don’t eat as much as when you are playing sports. I probably gained a bit of weight, but I think it’s more just something your body knows how to deal with and like, it’s something you’ll automatically realize. (Sarah)

In the quote above, Sarah she trusted her body to adjust to her change in activity level instead of becoming concerned and attempting to restrict her food intake. She went on to talk about responding to her sense of hunger without ‘overthinking’ about it, along with another participant.
It’s a habit to eat and you don’t overthink how it makes you feel. . . . You’re hungry - you eat, if you’re not hungry - you don’t eat. It just works out. (Sarah)

I don’t really think about that, I just kinda eat when I’m hungry. (Patricia)

Trust in their bodies was also apparent from the participants’ comments related to eating ‘junk food’ and sweets, as the participants advocated for occasional consumption of such foods, rather than only eating foods generally considered to be ‘healthy’.

Eating healthy, I mean, I guess it’s: eat all the food groups and the right amount and this and this. But you don’t always have to eat healthy every single day. You don’t have to follow exactly these restrictions and rules. There’s always room for cake and cookies. I guess, eating a variety of foods is good. (Stephanie)

I still eat junk food. But it’s not so bad as long as like it’s in moderation and like, it’s life, you have to eat some good tasting junk food once in a while. You can’t just like starve yourself or like just eat vegetables the rest of your life kinda thing. ‘Cause it’s still like, life is still for you to enjoy and to have, to make the most of it. (Penelope)

Participants’ attitude was partially explained by their accounts of having sweet foods consistently available to them throughout life, which made such foods commonplace and reduced the temptation and restrictiveness generally associated with them.
We always had ice cream in our fridge, but I think because it's always around that's why it's not really a big deal anymore, I guess. (Grace)

I don’t have like that temptation for food, because it’s always been there. It’s normal for me to have cakes and cookies, so I’m like, oh, cakes and cookies, okay. It’s always been there, so it’s not so special that I want to have it, you know, I got to have it. (Stephanie)

In addition to not being overly strict about eating certain foods only, the participants emphasized the importance of enjoying the food they eat, as could be seen in Penelope’s quote above and which also resonated in several other interviews.

I like being able to eat healthy, but then kind of I don’t want to not eat something because I’m concerned about my weight, you know? I want to be able to enjoy everything else at the same time, like enjoy a piece of chocolate cake. (Heather)

Oh my god, you have to have chocolate. I love chocolate. You definitely need it just to stay sane, or else you’re going to go crazy. You can’t restrict yourself like that, like, you can’t live a crazy life. You have to let yourself go. You have to enjoy food. You can’t just be completely controlled by it. (Patricia)

Similarly to Patricia, who connected a non-restrictive way of eating with staying “sane”, several other participants also connected one’s eating patterns with the functioning of one’s mind.
I don’t fall prey to fads like the Atkins diets. I pretty much went online, I did research, I found out that the whole no carb thing is pretty much cutting your whole body’s primary energy source right there, that’s what carbs are. There’s also been a study later released that it’s really bad for women, because it affects the mind psychologically supposedly, kind of removes the happy juice. That pretty much cinched it for me, I ain’t going on that diet. (Charlie)

(Do you ever skip meals?) I try not to, but if I do, I make sure the other two are a bit bigger than usual. Kind of need that energy for the brain to work. It’s hazy, it’s hazier if I don’t eat what I need to eat. (Carol)

Rejecting Appearance-Related Practices

In their interviews, the participants spoke out against dieting for weight loss for appearance-related purposes. Neither of the participants envisioned herself ever going on a radical diet and several participants expressed their bewilderment about how someone could just stop eating.

I don’t know, it just seems like a lot of time and energy wasted on trying to be super thin. . . . I’ve seen some people drinking water and eating a few crackers a day. You’ve got to deal a lot of will-power to not at least snack every now and then. How do you do it? (Carol)
Obviously, I’m not going to try and be that thin. You know, I always thought like, okay, I’m not going to go and stop eating. I always thought it was so unreal how a girl could just stop eating or make herself puke and those things that we learned. I always thought it was so unreal, I’m like, who would ever do that? (Stephanie)

Similarly, the majority of participants spoke out against engaging in practices that tie a number to the way one feels about herself or her body, such as weighing oneself frequently on a scale or placing an emphasis on the size of one’s clothes.

I think numbers are like, so terrible. Like, even sizes of clothing, it’s horrible. When you start tying in numbers to how you feel about yourself, it’s very, very bad. I think people need to step away from that. Stop mentioning numbers, like, “oh, she’s a size two”, or “she’s a size four” or “she weighs this much”, because it plays mental games with you and not in a good way. Just stay away from it. Step away from any scale that you see or don’t even look at sizing if you have too. Just get yourself away from the numbers. (Patricia)

(Do you weigh yourself regularly?) No, I don’t, I hate doing that, ‘cause it makes me feel (pause) I don’t know. It just feels like a waste of time to stand on the scale. I could be doing something more, better. (Penelope)

In addition to discussing body weight-related practices, the participants brought up several other practices associated with changing women’s bodies for appearance purposes. For
example, the majority of the participants either rejected wearing make up entirely or stated they only wore it on special occasions or in small amounts. Several participants connected make up with something artificial that one hides under, which they refused to do.

[Make up] is not supposed to be a mask that you hide under. It’s supposed to be something that enhances what you already have and how you feel about yourself already. I am a make up artist, I own so much make up and most of the time I don’t wear make up. Most of the time I don’t wear anything and I’m perfectly fine with that, because make up doesn’t make me who I am. (Amani)

Even when I go out I still wear the same amount of make up. I always wear the same amount of make up, I never, you know, go all out or anything. So I guess I was just, as I became more confident with who I was, then I didn’t feel like I needed to, like, I wanted to show people who I was and not to, like, cover it with some sort of, like, fake thing, you know. (Stephanie)

I don’t really care too much about what other people think. I don’t really stick out and yeah, I don’t wear a lot of make up. Occasionally I do, but not a lot and I don’t, I don’t brush my hair either. (Sarah)

Just as Sarah, several other participants rejected spending much time doing their hair, straightening it, dying it, or brushing it.
I haven't brushed my hair in like four years (laughter). And I'm still, I find certain things, I've never straightened my hair. *(Do you own a hairbrush?)* No. (Grace)

I think my natural colour is the best colour that works for me. And just like, I like to keep things more natural, because it seems like, why would I want to cover up who I am kind of thing. (Heather)

The participants also spoke out against a variety of other body-related practices aimed at concealing things that are generally considered unattractive for women, such as pimples, body hair, and wrinkles.

All these wrinkle creams, like millions and billions, like, every company has some sort of an age-defying formula. But I’m like, whatever went, like, what’s wrong with getting older and having wrinkles? (Tamera)

To be honest about, like, I don't shave my legs that much, as you may have noticed. But I don't think it makes you less feminine per se to not shave your legs a lot or to not wax stuff. (Grace)

Several participants connected the different bodily practices expected of women to certain industries making women feel unattractive for financial gain.
I am suspicious of the fact that, you know, products come out all the time that make different things not good . . . things that I feel like in my lifetime I’ve seen become less and less attractive. I kind of think that the cosmetics industry has a lot to do with it and the cosmetic surgery industries. Like, they make a lot of money off of us thinking that like, things are unattractive. (Tamera)

I think, basically, a lot of companies . . . try to sell products, right? And they’re trying to make women feel like they’re not adequate without their products. They’re not feminine without their products. So then, a woman sees that ideal model on TV and then they say, “buy this cream and you can look like her”, so she’ll be like, “ok, I'll buy this cream”, right? Or whatever, like clothes or something like that. . . . And it's a shame, because you shouldn't do that. (Kelly)

In contrast to the view that the female body is unattractive in its natural state, the participants spoke kindly about their bodies, as could be seen from the quotes above, stating that they liked their bodies and their curves.

I can’t really say a specific time, but it was kind of gradual that I learned to like my body as it is and it doesn’t really affect me when I see, you know, like these posters and advertisements and all that. (Lucy)

As I’ve gotten older, like over the last year and a half, I’m less like boyish without hips. I’ve gotten a bit more curvy. (How does it make you feel becoming more curvy?) It’s
nice! It’s really nice. At first I was just like, oh, you know, but now I’m really liking it.

. . . Generally, if you’re curvy everything is going to fit you better and it makes me feel like more of a woman. (Heather)

**Summary of ‘Physical Self Care’**

Narratives related to the way the participants treated their bodies included numerous examples of physical self-care. The participants prioritized their self-care and comfort over looking good for others; for example, choosing to sleep in and have breakfast in the morning over putting on make-up. One participant also connected physical self-care to mental self-care. The participants also chose to wear comfortable and warm clothes instead of outfits that were in fashion, choosing functionality over appearance. Several participants made a connection between the choices they made about their appearance and feelings of freedom.

The participants spoke about the importance of health in their lives, which they prioritized over appearance and body weight. They also spoke about balance and the importance of being neither overly thin nor overly obese in order to be healthy. The participants attempted to maintain a healthy and balanced lifestyle by integrating such things as exercise into their lives, but also stressed the importance of not doing it excessively. The participants also encouraged their friends to have a healthy lifestyle that would exclude unhealthy diets.

As another important part of physical self-care, the participants spoke about the importance of healthy eating. They spoke about being attuned to their bodily cues of hunger and responding to them without ‘overthinking’ it. Rather than only eating foods that were generally considered healthy, the participants also occasionally ate ‘junk food’ and sweets, explaining that the consistent availability of such foods throughout their lives reduced for them the temptation
and restrictiveness generally associated with these foods. The participants also emphasized the importance of enjoying the food they ate and connected one’s eating patterns with the functioning of one’s mind.

Finally, participants generally rejected feminine bodily practices aimed at altering one’s appearance. They spoke out against body weight-centered practices, including dieting for weight loss, frequently weighing oneself, and placing an emphasis on the size of one’s clothes. The majority of participants refused to wear make up excessively or spend excessive amounts of time on hair-related activities. They also rejected other bodily practices centered around eliminating things generally considered unattractive for women, such as pimples, body hair, and wrinkles, and spoke out against industries they felt were making women feel unattractive in order to sell products. Instead, the participants made kind remarks about their own bodies and their curves.

‘Body’ Chapter Summary

The core category of ‘Body’ included three major categories, ‘Meaningful Activities’, ‘Ways of Engagement’, and ‘Physical Self Care’. The first major category was divided into three themes related to meaningful activities in the participants’ lives, including introspective, creative, and physical activities. The second major category contained two themes related to the way the participants engaged in different activities, namely, by focusing on competence, skill, and strength rather than appearance, as well as by engaging in activities with passion and becoming immersed in them. Finally, the third major category included four themes related to the way the participants chose to take care of themselves; specifically, by prioritizing their comfort, freedom, and health over appearance, trusting and attending to their bodily cues of hunger, and not engaging in practices aimed at changing female bodies for the sake of appearance.
CHAPTER FIVE
SOCIAL INFLUENCES

This chapter examines the third core category that emerged from the theme analysis, which was comprised of social influences in the participants’ more immediate environment as well as the broader social environment. Social influence-related factors affected the participants throughout their lives and interacted with identity and body-related factors discussed in chapters three and four, respectively.

Social influences were divided into three major categories. The first major category, entitled ‘Family Environment’, included four themes (see Figure 5). The first three themes were comprised of important people in the participants’ immediate families; namely, their mother, father, and siblings, who have influenced the way the participants felt about and treated themselves and their bodies. For example, immediate family members avoided making body weight-related negative comments, encouraged the participants to engage in physical activities, and provided information about the un-attainability of the idealized image in the media. The fourth theme was comprised of other familial influences, including other significant family members, the influence of cultural backgrounds of their families, and family meals.

The second major category, entitled ‘Peer Environment’, included two themes related to significant people from the participants’ age group in their immediate social environment (see Figure 5). The first theme dealt with the positive influence of the participants’ friends, who placed little emphasis on body weight and provided reassurance during difficult times. The second theme dealt with the positive influence of romantic partners, who supported and accepted the participants the way they were, regardless of their appearance.
The third major category, entitled ‘Broader Social Environment’, included five themes related to other social influences that affected the participants’ beliefs and practices in relation to themselves and their bodies. The themes in this category included the media, school, health practitioners, supportive relational communities, as well as religion and spirituality. Participants had limited exposure to mainstream media and the media they chose to be exposed to tended to be conducive to developing a positive body image. They were also exposed to positive health-related information through schools and were supported and reassured by their teachers and their family doctors. In addition, the participants emphasized the importance of supportive relational communities for developing a positive body image and spoke about learning about the importance of taking good care of their bodies through their religious or spiritual affiliations.

A diagram illustrating the three major categories and their corresponding themes can be seen in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Core Category of ‘Social Influences’, Major Categories, and Themes.
Family Environment

In discussing their family environment, the participants frequently spoke about their mothers, fathers, and siblings. The participants also discussed the influence of certain extended family members, their cultural heritage, and family meals.

Mother

In their narratives, the participants frequently spoke about their mothers. In several instances, the mother was mentioned first in response to the general question of what they believe helped them resist the pressure to be thin posed at the beginning of the interview. All the participants stated that they had a good relationship with their mother and the majority called their mother a role model, frequently emphasizing her strength as something they especially admired.

(Do you have any role models in your life right now?) Mostly my mom, because she works hard. . . . Sometimes I wonder if she’s Supergirl in disguise, because she does unbelievable things. She pushes her through everything. Whatever bad things thrown at her, she’ll push herself through it. (Charlie)

(Do you see [your mom] as a role model?) Yeah, I do. I see my mom as a strong woman. . . . After she had my brother she’s gained a bit of weight, but like the thing that I love the most is like she doesn’t, this doesn’t bother her. She doesn’t feel like she has, she doesn’t have to stay fit. She does like, you know, she has little workout videos she does at home when she has the time. But she does them when she has the time, she doesn’t focus on it, she doesn’t make it like a chore. (Heather)
The majority of the participants stated that their mothers never made negative comments about their own or the participants’ bodies.

[My mom] is not super thin . . . she has like a stereotypical Brazilian body, you know, kind of bigger thighs and big butt. So I think living with that my whole life I feel like that’s the body image that I have . . . and she has never, “oh, I should go on a diet” or “oh my god, I need to lose weight”, she never said those things to me, so I never thought I should do those things. (Stephanie)

I know a lot of parents, like a lot of mothers, they always pressure their kids, “oh, why are you so fat?” . . . For me, my mom never really comments on it . . . on like physical body shape. (Penelope)

I don’t really know if [my mom] had body issues . . . she wouldn’t talk to me about it or anything. That would be a little bit weird, a mom saying, “I feel fat, I don’t feel good about myself”. That would be kind of awkward, I think. (Lucy)

Two participants spoke about their mothers reassuring them during difficult moments when they felt less secure about their bodies.

My sister didn’t have a butt or my mom, they don’t have that. So I’ll be complaining about one thing, say I’ll be like, “ugh, my butt in these jeans, it’s so annoying, it’s so round, whatever”. And my mom will be like, “well, at least you have a butt”. You know,
like, little things like that. So she, I don’t know, like, it’s always positive, she always puts like, a positive spin. (Patricia)

I actually said that to her once, I was about sixteen, “I wish I could be like my friends, who can just stop eating. I can't do that, I like food!” (laughter) But she was always the kind of mom who'd . . . just sit me down and be like, “let’s talk about this. Complain all you want and let's go buy some clothes that fit you properly”. (Tamera)

Participants spoke about learning from their mothers by example appropriate ways of treating themselves and their bodies, such as learning not to place too much emphasis on physical appearance or body weight.

We never had a scale in our house because, when I was twelve I asked my mom why we never owned like something to, because I never really knew how much I weighed, because I'd go to the doctor only once a year. My mom said that she thought it was silly to have a machine determine if you're going to have a good day or not. . . . It was just never really in my household for me to have a problem with that. It made me feel really good and no one else's parents said stuff like that, so I was happy. (Grace)

Some people would say, they’ll be like, “oh, you don’t wear [make up]”, I’m like, “no”. (What helped you resist this indirect pressure to wear make up?) I guess my mom doesn’t wear make up either. Well, she’ll wear it sometimes, but she doesn’t put it on that often, so I guess I just copied my mom. (Samantha)
My mother, she’s not so much an appearance person . . . in terms of trying to look thin or anything, she doesn’t think like that. Seeing that people love her for who she is, you know, it’s not her body type or anything, I guess it just shows me that, you know, it’s not, people don’t love you for being skinny or for being more muscular. (Anna)

The participants also learned from their mothers about food and eating. In discussing this, they frequently mentioned the influence of their mothers’ culture of origin.

(What do you think taught you to trust your body and eat when you’re hungry?) Probably just the way my mom made food. We always had a full packed kitchen and food was really important. You were always eating. If you’re Polish, you go to somebody’s house, you have to eat their food, you have to, it’s just a matter of what. I don’t know, just because eating was so natural, because it’s there, if you’re hungry then eat. What’s stopping you, kind of? (Patricia)

In our family, or maybe in some Chinese families too, food is very important . . . we grew up eating a lot. Like, for breakfast, my mom believed in a hearty breakfast, so I always ate a meal equivalent to lunch or dinner for breakfast (laughter). So I guess we grew up eating a lot, so I always ate more than my friends. (Samantha)

Several participants spoke about their mothers as someone who distanced them from the mainstream culture by speaking to them about the unrealistic nature of the idealized image in the media and not buying them tight-fitting or brand name clothes and magazines.
[My mom] worked with eating disorders for awhile as a therapist. So she was always . . . very attentive to it and very sort of careful about what she would say . . . and just sort of to remind me constantly that, you know, there's this ideal image versus something else. Versus what real bodies look like. (Tamera)

(Were there ever times when you mom explicitly talked to you about weight?) If we see it in the media, I think sometimes it'd kind of be like health education, so my mother would say something like, “oh, you know that isn't real” or “they spend all day with their trainers and exercising and dieting and it’s not healthy to do that”. So I know that it’s not healthy. (Sarah)

[My mom] never got caught up in the name brand thing. She never bought me, she wouldn’t buy me tight fitting clothes, like she wouldn’t buy me anything like that or a bikini. . . . When we would go shopping my mom would never buy me a thong. Never! She’s like, “that’s so bad! You shouldn’t, no! If you want to buy something like that, you’re going to buy it yourself”. My mom was a really good influence in that way, she’s very, she taught me that those things don’t matter. And I’m glad she did that. (Heather)

Father

Just as mothers, in the majority of narratives fathers were described as an important influence on the way the participants viewed and felt about themselves and their bodies. With several exceptions, the majority of the participants spoke about their fathers accepting women’s
bodies just the way they were and not making any negative comments about their, their mothers’, or any other women’s bodies.

My father . . . is someone I look up to and he’s never really fancied thin women. His acceptance of my size and just his acceptance of women in their natural state . . . he’s been one factor that showed me that you don’t have to be thin to be accepted by people. Every person will find someone who finds beauty in them, regardless of the way they look. . . . When I was growing up he used to defend me when other people would say I was overweight. They’d say, “oh, you’re getting too heavy” and he’s like, “no, she’s fine the way she is”. (Amani)

(What about your dad, did he ever make comments about body weight?) No. No, he has three daughters and you kind of expect a dad to be really protective or very kind of, “watch yourself” or “that skirt is way too short”. No, actually he kind of like appreciated it. He appreciates curves . . . so he was that kind of dad. He likes women’s curves, he prefers curvy over skinny. But no, he would never bring up weight, no. Yeah, he would never say anything negative. (Patricia)

[My dad] never said anything to my mom. Like, I never saw him commenting on her weight and he always was, you know, they’re always, like, very much in love. And he always, you know, “my honey” and blah, blah, blah and all that stuff. So seeing him love her for what she was, then I think indirectly he showed me. (Stephanie)
In chapter four, examining protective factors related to the participants’ bodies, physical activities emerged as one of the themes. About a third of the participants spoke about their fathers as facilitators of their involvement in sports while they were growing up.

Growing up my dad always played sports with us. . . . I think I was in every kind of lesson, like swimming, skating, hockey, soccer, basketball. Yeah, every kind of sport. So I guess we just grew up a really active lifestyle. (Samantha)

I played a lot when I was little, 'cause my dad used to take us out to play baseball. So I guess I started playing, I was about five or six when I started playing. . . . It was fun playing with my dad and my brother. Like, when I played, I was on my brother's team. My dad was the coach. Like, it was really just fun time with my dad and brother. (Tamera)

About a third of the participants also spoke about their fathers having instilled in them a sense of respect for food and in several cases encouraged the togetherness of family meals.

[My parents] would always make us eat our vegetables and all that, but another thing was always clearing off our plate, to not waste anything. (Where was that coming from, clearing your plate, not wasting anything?) Oh, that’s my dad. Because, you know, growing up in a poorer family, he wanted us to take those values and, you know, make sure everything was used and eaten and not wasted, so that kind of came into play. (Lucy)
My stepfather, he does all the cooking. . . . Usually my step-dad wouldn’t actually eat with us, because he would eat while he was cooking, he would just snack, so he wasn’t really hungry by the time we ate, but he liked to watch us eat and like his food. So that was what made him happy - people liked his food, right? (Kelly)

When my father cooks, he likes everyone to come and sit at the table. He gets, I guess, hurt or offended when people try to take their bowls and one person tries to go and sit, eat in front of the computer and one in front of the TV or one takes it to their room. He really likes the togetherness of having a family meal and he’s always like that. (Amani)

**Siblings**

A third of the participants spoke about their siblings, usually a sister, being a positive influence on their body image, teaching them critical thinking skills, being a source of knowledge about the un-attainability of the idealized image in the media, and reassuring them during difficult times. Three participants also stated that their sisters were their role models.

I think [critical thinking] is something that my sister taught me. Yeah, she kind of taught me how to analyze people or not be so trusting. . . . She took a marketing course, I think, so I think she learned about the whole airbrushing thing, just how anything can be changed, right? So she’s like telling me, “the pictures that you see, they’re not like that”. . . . I could never see my older sister having an eating disorder and she’s someone that I really look up to. (Samantha)
Having sisters, you know your sister will like, say you feel like . . . “ah, I don’t like this dress, it’s not looking good on me today”, but then . . . because you have a sister and you’re female you kind of understand and so you’re just kind of, I don’t know, it’s kind of just positive feedback, I guess, to one another. I guess that kind of helped. (Patricia)

While siblings were sometimes described as a source of strength, in other instances the participants described themselves as more resilient than their siblings. For example, siblings were sometimes mentioned as one of the reasons the participant chose to take a part in this study: two participants spoke about being concerned for their younger sisters being exposed to pressure to be thin and one participant spoke about her sister’s struggle with an eating disorder.

(What made you interested in participating in this study?) I saw a posting on the board and it seemed like something to do. I have three little sisters. . . . It’s kind of worrying if my sisters get too worried about this stuff and I’m sure there is a lot of girls that are worried, girls that they know, who end up feeling that way. (Carol)

I actually qualified as a research participant and also it seemed like something that could be beneficial for other people, since I know a lot of people, my sister for example, she watches TV all the time, she is exposed to a lot of this pressure to be thin. (Kelly)

My sister had an eating disorder and I didn’t know until she told me afterwards and my friend told me just recently too. So just kind of having people close to me that were
affected by it kind of made it seem a lot more real and made me want to understand it.

(Heather)

Several participants spoke about their siblings being more dissatisfied with their bodies than they were. Two participants connected the negative comments their parents made about their siblings’ bodies to the siblings’ struggles with body weight, while pointing out that they themselves were never recipients of such comments.

My sister, the second oldest one, when she was younger my dad would make, definitely, he made comments to her, because she was always a little bit heavier than all of us... just like random comments, you know, throughout her childhood and I think that really affected her. Because she’s always been a little bit heavier, like we’re pretty much the same size, but she’s always carried a little bit of extra, you know, fat like on her tummy. And I know she’s always been really sensitive about that. . . . My parents never said anything to me, but they said stuff to her. (Heather)

My sister . . . she’s more conscious about her weight. . . . When she was younger, she used to be . . . a little bit bigger and then you can see in high school, you see in the pictures that she slims down, slims down, slims down. (Did your parents ever comment on that?) Well, you know, it’s those little things, like, “oh, why is Penelope smaller than you?” or like, “whose side of the family did you get it from? You must’ve got it from your dad, the weight” and all that stuff, but it’s like, little subtle things, but I guess it kind
of, even little things, they make a difference, especially if you’re conscious about that.

(Penelope)

Tamera also spoke about her brother being conscious about his weight and going on diets, which she connected to his involvement in ballet in his childhood, comparing it to her own violin practices.

When I was a kid . . . I was a violinist and my brother was a dancer. And violin . . . it's better to be in good physical shape, but it's not a requirement, whereas for ballet, it was constantly, they'd get sent to the nutritionist, they'd get told that they need to lose weight in their thighs, they need to lose weight in their stomach, and so my brother, when he was eleven, twelve, thirteen, was told all the time what was wrong with his body. And I did not have that at all. . . . He's always been a little bit more attentive to how he looks and his weight and things like that, than I have. Probably because of dance I think. (Tamera)

Other Familial Influences

In discussing their family environment, the participants also brought up other significant family members, the cultural heritage of their families, and the positive influence of eating meals together as a family.

Other significant family members. Several participants spoke about extended family members encouraging them to eat more or providing reassurance about their bodies.
When I was a kid . . . everyone would always be telling me to eat, so it wouldn’t be, no one would ever tell me, “oh, you look great being skinny” or anything like that. They’d always be like, “you’re so skinny, eat some more” and they’ll keep feeding me more and things like that. So I think maybe just that constant thing of people telling me to eat more. . . . I’ve always looked to gain weight rather than looked to be skinny. (Was it people in your family?) I think mostly in my family, like, relatives and all that. (Anna)

When I got to high school . . . I kinda felt I think like really small, it was really different. So maybe, I think that was what kind of got me, “wow, look at that other girl or that other girl”, you know? . . . And I’d tell my aunt and then, “no, you don’t need to lose weight” and I’m like, “okay” . . . It was kind of like, no matter what they think, I know that I don’t need to do anything, I don’t need to lose weight, I don’t need to worry about my body weight. You know? It was good, it’s good, like, the support. (Stephanie)

Half of the participants specifically mentioned their grandmothers or their grandparents trying to feed them as much as possible while they were growing up.

(Did your grandmother ever comment on weight or eating?) No, my grandmother was just always very grandmotherly and like “eat more” and just stuff like that. (Grace)

[My grandparents] were trying to stuff me with food a lot. ‘Cause like, I mean, grandparents are like, “oh, you’re going to be hungry”, they don’t want you to be hungry.
They were trying to feed me a lot of food or just always shoving food down my throat. (Patricia)

I slept over at [my grandparents’] house and [my grandmother] made me a bowl of cereal and a coffee and I was like, “thank you very much” and I ate it, ’cause that was about my limit and she asked me if I wanted eggs, and I was like, “no, I think I’m okay”. And she insisted… made me three eggs and then she asked me if I wanted a bagel and I was like, “no, no, I'm fine”, but she was like, “I have a bagel!” and she wouldn't let me say no. . . . She's very much constantly trying to feed everyone. (Tamera)

**Cultural heritage.** When talking about their grandparents, several participants specifically mentioned the influence of their families’ cultural heritage on the way their grandparents and their generation thought about food and the body.

I’m fifty percent Dutch. . . . [My grandmother] didn’t move here until she was in her mid twenties. . . . She’s not very concerned about, like, body image. When I see her, I look at her as like a strong woman, you know, like a farmer. She helped her husband on the farm. And not necessarily thin. I don’t feel like it was, there’s such a, the same kind of image that there is here with media and stuff. (Heather)

I think in the Chinese culture, I guess, the older generation always tries to make the kids eat more and so they’re always putting more food on your plate when you eat or, you
know, if you go to a restaurant and there’s food left over, they always make the kids eat
it. (Anna)

My grandma . . . is a World War 2 veteran. . . . It taught her to be really smart about
food, because she lived through that whole, in Russia during the war it was chaos. There
was little to no food available. . . . After the war . . . it shaped her to be, to eat healthy in
large amounts. (Charlie)

Charlie, who emigrated from the former Soviet Union to Israel, went on to talk about
being positively influenced by the Jewish culture’s attitude towards food. About half of the
participants also connected their cultural backgrounds to food-related beliefs and practices in
their families.

In Israel . . . they pretty much don’t have that crazy whole obsession with being really
thin and stuff. Jewish people really love good food . . . they don’t have so much of a peer
pressure to get thin, so maybe that’s another reason why I kind of grown not so
influenced by it. (Charlie)

In my parents’ home country [Colombia] . . . they don’t care quite as much as here about
nutrition, but it’s, make sure that those bellies are full. . . . When you come from, you
know, generally third world or developing countries where sometimes food is a struggle
to have, it’s something to be appreciated and valued, then oftentimes the main thing is
just about being full. (Amani)
Eating a good meal, it doesn’t matter what it is, it could be gravy or something, Polish people don’t skip on, they don’t look at how much butter they put in something, they just kind of eat until they are satisfied. (Patricia)

Participants’ cultural beliefs also came through in their narratives via sayings. Four participants brought up sayings from their cultures of origin that they heard while growing up, emphasizing such things as the importance of taking good care of one’s body and teaching children by example.

[In Poland] they say, you’re going to be like a stick . . . grandparents are like, “oh, you’re going to be hungry”, they don’t want you to be hungry or to go back to your parents and be like, “they didn’t feed me”. They were trying to feed me a lot of food or just always shoving food down my throat, because like yeah, you don’t want to be a stick, right? It’s like their saying. (Patricia)

There is a Chinese saying, I forgot who said it, but it’s kind of like, “the way you treat your body before you’re fifty is how your body will treat you after you’re fifty”. So like, my mom just always taught us to be good to ourselves. (Samantha)

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, right? . . . They have a saying in Spanish that I laughed about when I heard it. Literally, what it translates to is that every piece of shit has its fly . . . basically what it’s just trying to tell you is that someone will find beauty in
different people. . . . You might not be the society’s ideal of beauty, but someone might find you beautiful. There is someone pretty much for everyone. (Amani)

I think role models, just being the way you want your child to be is like, the only way. . . . There is this saying in Brazil that advice is asked for, not given. And so, you know, when they are feeling unconfident they will go to you, but you can’t always, even if you’re telling them, “that’s an unhealthy choice, that’s wrong, that’s right”, it still might not get into their head. Only when you are actually in trouble do you think to go and ask for help. I think the only way is just to show them. (Stephanie)

**Family meals.** All except two participants stated that they had family meals daily as they were growing up, emphasizing they enjoyed eating together with their families.

*(Do you remember having family meal as you were growing up?)* Yup. Dinner was always a family affair and if you were late, you’d get your share docked. Really. I would, I was always the first at the table. . . . It was me, grandma, grandpa, and my mom. Yeah, so we would always have these meals. (Charlie)

When I go home on weekends, we try to eat together, all together. And when I lived at home, we tried, like, we always ate together too, which is really nice. *(Is it something you did as you were growing up as well?)* Yeah. And it’s like, in the Asian style where there’s the big thing in the middle and everyone grabs from the pot. (Penelope)
We always ate together, yeah. Even if I had sports or whatever, my parents would always wait for me to come home and then we’d all eat together. Or even if my sister takes a nap, she’ll always be like, “oh, wake me up when we eat dinner”. We’re just really used to sitting together eating. So yeah, it’s really strange if we’re eating and a person’s not there. So you know, we always ate together. (Samantha)

Samantha, along with several other participants, went on to talk about the family meals as a regular part of the day when she was able to spend time and socialize with her family members.

I miss eating with my parents. ‘Cause I guess, like you know, when we eat together it’s also our time to talk. Yeah, my family is quite talkative. We normally talk about our days and like, I don’t know, just stuff that’s going on. So it’s like our time to talk to each other. (Samantha)

We were all eating together and it was just like a very normal part of our day . . . we'd all just be sitting together and eating whatever, and it was just a really normal part of life that this is one of the daily routines. I think that might have had some sort of an effect. (Tamera)

Several participants also spoke about frequently eating meals with extended family members and about the importance of food at extended family gatherings.
Food is very much like a glue, kind of holds together family gatherings. . . . After Church on Sundays it would be dinner at somebody’s house and pretty much the dinner was the main thing and, you know, just spending the time. Or when we have birthdays or holidays, it’s about the food. You know, different people bringing the different food. People are usually not happy unless there’s a good amount of food. When you think about, “oh, was that party good?” one of the first things you think about was, “was the food good?” (Amani)

We’d usually go over to my grandma’s place for Thanksgiving dinner and Christmas dinner and that kind of thing. We’d have a pretty extravagant meal over there, like, baked potatoes and turkey . . . we would make sure we’d finish most of what was on the plate. Didn’t want to, you know, waste stuff. (Lucy)

Through their family meals, the participants picked up family values related to food, such as learning not to waste food, as can be seen in Lucy’s quote above, and learning to appreciate food. About half of the participants shared that their parents encouraged them to eat more, which in the majority of cases the participants connected to their family’s cultural background.

(Can you tell me about your family meals?) Basically, it was a lot of food, because I guess when [my parents] were growing up there wasn't a lot of food. . . . So for them living in Canada, they felt really grateful in the fact that there's so much food. They just, you know, they wanted us to appreciate it. So they always, we always had a lot of food on the table. . . . When I was a child, my parents always made me finish my food . . .
they would be, you know, urging me or kind of like tricking me to have more food. . . . I think it's a cultural thing, definitely, I think coming from the East-European background. (Kelly)

[My mom] always encouraged me to eat more. I think that’s also a part of the culture, though, the Brazilian culture, to eat healthy. They always want everybody to eat more. She usually, when I was more of a child, she would serve my own plate, she’d make the plate for me, but then when I started making my own plate . . . she would usually be like, “aren’t you going to eat your vegetables?” or, “go eat more, have some more”.

(Stephanie)

Just as Stephanie, several other participants shared that their parents either chose their portions for them by serving them food or were otherwise attentive to how much and what type of food they put on their plates.

My mom always set the meal . . . we never took the food ourselves, so you’re not watching other people take food. I think that’s also like a psychological thing, when you’re, for some girls if you see other people take food you don’t want to take as much. But like no, my mom would just put the food on the plate, “here you go, this is yours, eat it all”. So you don’t think about how much you’ve taken or how much you’ve eaten, because you all have to eat whatever goes on your plate. (Patricia)
In the Asian culture type usually we eat with a smaller bowl, like a bowl of rice, but in our family we always ate with a plate. So I think my parents always liked to see what we were eating, like seeing whether or not we’re eating enough vegetables or meat. (Anna)

Anna went on to emphasize the importance of eating together as a family for teaching children about healthy eating and ensuring they eat well:

Looking at my life, having parents who are conscious about what their kids eat and you know, eating dinner together, I know a lot of families, they don’t eat dinner together. So you know, parents don’t see what their kids are eating or like, how much they’re eating. So I think having that time as a family to eat together and being a good example and role model in terms of exercising and eating healthy is something that’s important.

**Summary of ‘Family Environment’**

In discussing their family environment, the participants frequently spoke about their mothers as role models and emphasized their strength. According to participants, their mothers did not make negative comments about their own or the participants’ bodies, and instead, reassured the participants at times when they felt insecure. Mothers also frequently set an example for the participants of the appropriate ways of treating themselves and their bodies through their own behaviours and attitudes related to physical appearance, food and eating. In addition, mothers tended to distance the participants from the mainstream culture by teaching them about the idealized images in the media and by not buying them magazines or sexualized clothing.
Participants also spoke about the influence their fathers had on the way they viewed themselves and their bodies. The participants stated that their fathers accepted women’s bodies the way they were and appreciated women’s curves. Fathers generally did not make negative comments about women’s bodies, including the participants’ and their mothers’ bodies. Participants’ fathers also frequently facilitated their engagement in sports, while physical activity emerged as one of the protective factors in chapter four, ‘Body’. In addition, fathers tended to instil in the participants appreciation for food, and in several cases, for family meals.

Siblings, most often sisters, were discussed in a third of the narratives. Siblings taught the participants critical thinking skills, including teaching them about the un-attainability of the idealized images in the media. Just as mothers, siblings frequently reassured participants during times when they felt insecure about their bodies and in several cases they were described as role models. In other narratives, however, participants spoke about their concern with their siblings’ struggle with body image issues, in several cases highlighting negative parental comments about their siblings’ bodies, which the participants never experienced in relation to themselves.

Participants also spoke about the positive influence of extended family members, frequently grandmothers, encouraging the participants to eat more and to gain more weight as they were growing up. In discussing familial influences, the participants frequently spoke about their family’s culture of origin and its effect on familial beliefs and practices related to food and the body. In addition, the majority of the participants spoke about having daily family meals with their immediate families and frequent extended family meals, where they learned food-related norms and values.
Peer Environment

Another significant social influence in the participants’ lives was peer environment. In their narratives, the participants frequently spoke about the positive influence of their friends and romantic partners on the way they felt about themselves and their bodies.

Friends

All the participants stated that they had good friends they felt close to. Several participants connected these positive relationships with their friends to their strength and ability to resist negative pressures. Several participants also touched on the issue of trust, stating that they trusted their friends’ opinion more than the opinion of other people around them.

(Do you feel like the relationships that you have with your friends are affecting at all the way you live in your body?) Yeah, I think so. I think, like, when I’m alone, like, it’s just me, even when they’re not there I can remember the things that they’ve said to me and remember the relationships that I have with them and then I take that strength. . . . They help me, you know, be strong and happy even when they’re not there. (Stephanie)

I’ve known J. for five years and E. for eight years, so we’ve been close friends and looking at all these lesser friends that we’ve known for a couple of months and we kinda automatically go, “okay, should I really be believing that coming from a person who I’ve known for like six months compared to something else a person says that I’ve been friends for like six or seven years?” It kinda creates this buffer around. That’s another reason why I think most people are pressured, because they have all of these lesser
friends that they listen too much to and they don’t have all that many real lifetime friends.

(Charlie)

The participants stated that the majority of people within their group of close friends did not discuss the topic of body weight or make deprecating comments about their bodies.

(Does the topic of weight ever come up with you guys?) I think it’s not so much weight, but it’s more exercising . . . but weight, no, not really. ‘Cause I think we’re all really healthy people, like, we eat really well, we don’t like eating junk food and stuff like that. So I don’t think weight, body weight and all that is such a big issue. (Anna)

We usually talk about school, about like funny things that have happened and we just, it’s more, we just talk about other things. Anything else in the world other than weight.

(Penelope)

There wasn’t a lot of, I don’t remember talking about weight or making weight related comments among each other. I don’t recall that . . . we didn’t really talk about it. (Kelly)

Participants spoke about their friends as having goals and interests unrelated to body weight or appearance, such as receiving good grades at school or developing their careers. Several participants pointed out their own agency in choosing such friends.
Me and my friends were super nerdy. We didn’t really talk about our bodies or anything, we were just more concerned about our grades. I was really into, I was very kind of academic and I don’t know. It just never came up, body stuff, never, even when, yeah, never. Or I just never really surrounded myself with the kind of people that would be interested in it. (Patricia)

A few [friends] that I interacted with, they had goals for where they wanted to go in their life. And the idea of going after that small image, there is no depth in that. For a lot of people that I know, they were more interested in making something more for themselves, rather than going after that body shape. I guess they just set up different goals . . . [they] want to become teachers, historians. All that takes a lot of time and energy and it takes even more energy to watch everything you eat. (Carol)

We didn’t really talk about TV . . . we played like video games and stuff. We were just nerds. . . . We just played video games, we didn’t really play anything that would have influenced any kind of body image issues or anything really. I can’t really think of anything. (Lucy)

Another frequently mentioned interest among the participants’ friends was involvement in sports. Several participants described their friends that were involved in sports as individuals who place little emphasis on body image and instead prioritize strength.
When you participate in sports, we always, you eat together and you eat the same kinds of food and no one, I find in general people that were playing sports didn’t really care about body image as much. (Sarah)

I guess it kind of like brings us all together, finding pride in things like muscular legs. Some girls would complain that their jeans won’t fit anymore, because their legs have gotten so muscular because like, from working out in the season. We would laugh about it. (Patricia)

(Do you remember friends ever talking about weight, either positively or negatively?) Yeah, I do have a couple of them . . . usually the ones in the sports, if they’re talking about it, it’s just like they want to get buffer or kind of thing, like bigger or more muscles. (Penelope)

Several participants mentioned friends who were bigger than them, yet were happy with their bodies, which positively influenced the participants’ own body image.

My one friend, she’s like 6’1 and she plays rugby, so she’s a little bit, like, huskier and she’s just an amazing person. She’s just such a wonderful person and she’s so happy all the time, so giving and so loving and she’s just a wonderful, wonderful influence. And I’m sure it was tough for her being 6’1 and like, and a little, and like, you know, just bigger boned, you know, like, you could tell she is a rugby player. I’m sure it was tough for her, but it just didn’t really phase her, which is like amazing. (Heather)
My friend T. . . she's the kind of person who's like, “yeah, I should go to the gym” and she got herself a gym membership and then she just never went and she doesn't care. At all. It's just something that doesn't even phase her. . . . I think I'm really amazed with her, because she's just, it doesn't seem to ever bother her at all. . . . I think she's my body image role model. . . . So being around her was just, if I ever felt like something was an issue, she'd always be like, “hello, you know, I'm shorter than you, I'm rounder than you, like, whatever. It doesn't matter”. (Tamera)

Similarly, Patricia emphasized the positive influence of surrounding herself with women who were secure and confident about their bodies:

Having a good group of friends always, like, the positive types, the ones that are pretty secure with their bodies, I've had that throughout my life. I think it's just the females in my life, probably, the women, they've been really good, surrounding myself with, I don't know, upbeat, confident, self-assured, secure women, I guess. (So being surrounded by confident, secure women was a good influence on you?) I think so, yeah, the most.

About half of the participants spoke about feeling accepted within their group of friends for who they were regardless of their appearance.

If you are confident in your social situation, then you’ll realize that physical things are not quite as important and then you’ll be able to realize the other things about like, your weight and physical appearance. . . . If you see that it’s not the way you look is what
makes you accepted, but it’s like, your network is a support and you know that you’re accepted in ways other than just by what you look, then that will help you figure, then you’ll be able to be more resilient. (Penelope)

We'd always just sort of all be sitting around, like, leaning on each other, being really sort of mellow together and I think in the end it was like, who we were, what we were, didn't even matter at the end. We were just like all there together and it was really great. So yeah. (Accepted for who you were.) Exactly. (Tamera)

In addition to feeling accepted, the participants shared that when they or someone from their group of friends had difficult moments, they provided reassurance and support for one another.

Once or twice I did have those moments of, “why, I would be so much better if I was one of them, then they wouldn’t be pressuring me”. But my friend was like, “snap out of it, half the people like you, because you don’t like that stuff” . . . I always have my best friend E. to slap me back to reality. And if it’s not E., then it’s J. And if it’s not J., it’s K. And if it’s not K., it’s probably someone else. I always have someone to slap me back to reality. . . . We kinda support each other. (Charlie)

We were the co-ed team with guys and the guys would never make any comments, the guys were always like, “oh, you guys look fine”. One of the skinny girls would complain like, “oh, I’m not feeling very good today” or “the way I look” or something, you know,
just having an off day, but even the guys were like, “oh, you look good”. So it was a good, positive, supportive atmosphere from them. (Patricia)

I'm susceptible to having bad days sometimes. I think me and most of my friends are, and we're there for each other during that, and we sit down and listen to each other go on about how, you know, all these ridiculous body image problems, and that's just what we do. Then we just let it pass and it passes. (Tamera)

**Romantic Partners**

At the time of the interview, one third of the participants were in a romantic relationship, while two thirds of the participants were single. Regardless of their relationship status, the majority of the participants believed that romantic partners played an important role in affecting the way they felt about themselves and their bodies.

*(Did romantic relationships affect the way you feel about your body or your body weight?)* I would say they’ve helped. It’s a funny thing, because in relationships, especially when you’re really intimate with someone, it can be very scary, because you expose all of you kind of thing, you know what I mean? And I would say in my last relationship I felt very good with myself and very comfortable and I didn’t feel any pressure at all. (Heather)

I think every romantic relationship had made a little impact on how I viewed my body. You want to feel accepted by the person that you love, right? Especially I think in
personal relationships like that it’s important to have someone that is going to make you feel good about yourself or if you don’t feel good about yourself, to help you out.  
(Amani)  

I think it probably helped. I think all of them have helped. . . . All the guys that I’ve been with, just very positive, very much like, I guess into curves, I don’t know. Appreciative, I guess, of athletic, they’re athletic themselves, so maybe that’s why, I don’t know, just good guys. It’s always been a positive, it’s always had a positive effect on me. (Patricia)  

The participants spoke about their romantic relationships as close, supportive and encouraging, while several participants emphasized the mutual nature of such support and encouragement.  

I think being in a relationship that’s happy and where, you know, you’re both contributing to something, it does make you feel better. We’re both really encouraging of each other. I find that we’re both very verbal and we’re both people who like receiving verbal affirmations and stuff like that. And so, you know, like when he’s telling me, “oh, you did really well in that“, you know like, I feel good about myself. (Anna)  

They’ve always been really supportive, so I’ve never been in a relationship that was, like, bad. . . . I think having someone who appreciates you, like, after you have a boyfriend for like, the first time you’re like, oh my gosh, he likes me and you know, that makes me
feel great, and even when it’s over you know that someone did like you and so, you know, that can happen again. (Stephanie)

We support each other in our interests and we kind of like, yeah, we really accept each other for who we are. I know that I have some qualities that my boyfriend doesn't like and he has qualities in him I don’t like, but we accept each other. We’re really open. We’re really honest about whatever bothers us and we try to improve the relationship. We’re working on different issues we have. So it's a pretty close relationship. (Kelly)

Just as in Kelly’s quote, the issue of acceptance arose in half of the interviews as the participants spoke about feeling accepted for who they were by their romantic partners, regardless of their appearance.

I thought that if you wear a lot of make up and you’re not yourself then when you attract someone they’re not going to be attracted to what you really are. So he was attracted to me kind of like just the way I was, I guess. (Grace)

My last relationship, I felt like, you know, in the morning when I didn’t look that great or you’re tired or whatever, it was okay. I felt like, you know, he wanted to be with me just as much when I looked kind of crappy or when I was sick, I felt like he still hung out with me when I was sick, didn’t feel very well, and I think that’s really important. What made it the best was that he saw me in my worst and it was okay. He didn’t judge me for it or anything. (Heather)
Heather went on to talk about the positive effect of being able to be herself in a romantic relationship:

I think that’s what made me most comfortable around him, was the fact that I could really just be myself. And being able to just be myself made me allowed to, made me able to feel comfortable not just personality-wise, but body-wise and like the way I dress, whatever I do, I wasn’t afraid to be whatever I wanted to be around him.

Like Heather, half of the participants pointed out that their current or past romantic partners did not make any negative weight-related comments.

*(Do you guys ever talk about weight?)* I think, yeah, sometimes. Like he, well, he’ll just say that he likes the way I am, he doesn’t really like really stick-thin girls. Weight, actually, not so much. I guess, he likes the way my body is. *(How does that make you feel?)* That makes me feel good, because I like the way I am, too. *(Samantha)*

*(Do you guys ever talk about weight?)* No. Oh, but then when I was, sometimes we talk about it, ‘cause like, ‘cause when I did Dragon Boat we had to weight lift and all that stuff and I was like, “oh, now I can lift you up on the shoulders” and whatever, right? And he was impressed. And then, I don’t know, just stuff like that, but not usually, not usually at all. *(Penelope)*
Several participants also shared that their romantic partners made positive comments that made them feel better about their bodies when they felt insecure.

They’ll bring things up, but they’ll be like, positive things. . . . It’s strange, because it’s usually comments about things that I’m probably least confident with. . . . those are the ones that I really remember, the ones that I kind of probably needed the most to hear. . . . So just hearing that, it definitely stays with you, totally stays with you. ‘Cause it makes you feel more attractive, better about yourself. (Patricia)

It didn’t really come up that much that I thought I was chubby or something, but he would always say, “I think you’re perfect, I think you’re perfect the way you are”, it was just really cute, and “I don’t want you to change or anything like that”. It was just a really good relationship. . . . I did have some image issues in high school like that and when I talked to him it was like, I felt more accepted, like it was fine to be how I am. (Lucy)

In addition, several participants shared their beliefs about romantic relationships that emphasized their own agency in choosing romantic partners that would value them for who they were, rather than their appearance.

In my family it was pretty much if a man is not happy with your outward appearance, then he’s not worth to have around, because if he’s not happy with the way you look, then that’s all he cares about. (Charlie)
My best friend who has all these body image issues . . . she started wearing mascara every day . . . and I just told her if it's to look good for her friends, her friends don't care. And if it's to look good for boys it's better that a boy should like you for how you really look, I think. She agreed, but she still wears it. (Grace)

**Summary of ‘Peer Environment’**

In their narratives, the participants frequently spoke about close friendships, which they credited with support in helping them resist negative pressures. The majority of participants’ friends did not make any negative comments about their bodies and often completely avoided the topic of body weight. Instead, their friends had goals and interests that were unrelated to their appearance, such as receiving good grades and playing sports. Participants also spoke about feeling accepted by their friends regardless of their appearance and supported by them at difficult times. Several participants pointed out their own agency in choosing the friends that they did.

Participants also spoke about past and current romantic partnerships as close and supportive and as important in affecting the way they felt about themselves and their bodies. Participants reported feeling accepted by their partners regardless of their appearance. Romantic partners did not make any negative comments about the participants’ body weight and instead made positive comments at times when they felt insecure. Just as with friends, several participants emphasized their own active role in choosing romantic partners that would value them for who they were.
Broader Social Environment

The participants also discussed positive influences in the broader social environment, including the media, their schools, health practitioners, supportive relational communities, and religious or spiritual affiliation.

Media

As discussed in chapter three, ‘Identity’, the participants thought critically about the thin images they saw in the media and spoke about them as unreal, unattainable, and inapplicable to their own lives. In addition to such identity-related factors, in speaking about their everyday environment, the majority of participants stated that they had limited exposure to mainstream media both growing up and currently.

I try not to watch too much TV. I keep my TV limited just because, like I said, too much of it is mumbo jumbo. Too many things out there, you know, makeover shows and the Swan and all these things, it’s just too overwhelming. I try to focus more on real-life relationships than something on TV. (Did you watch much TV when you were growing up?) Not in relation to other young kids, no. We did more things outside and family-wise, those things were more of our entertainment. I don’t think TV is a very good influence. (Amani)

I didn’t really read a lot of magazines. I read like music magazines, but it wasn’t a really big part of my life. TV, I also didn’t watch a lot of TV. I mean, I watched Simpsons and stuff like that, but not like, what was it that was in high school, like the O.C. . . . It didn’t really interest me that much. Even now I don’t really watch TV much, because I don’t
I have a TV at my place right now. . . . I usually watch like sci-fi programs, it's not really, doesn’t really have anything to do with body image, to be honest. (Lucy)

I remember when I was fourteen I started listening to better music. I don't know if that helps. I stopped listening to whatever was on MTV and stuff like that. Maybe that helped, because there are women everywhere like flaunting themselves who are half naked and I stopped watching stuff like that and I started listening to older stuff. (Grace)

The participants also spoke about being exposed to more positive media. For example, several participants spoke about learning from TV about eating disorders as well as watching shows that explained and problematized the heavy use of Photoshop and airbrushing in creating idealized images.

My first encounter with the eating disorder issue was when I was younger, I watched one documentary and it was about an actress . . . she just started college, I think, and then yeah, she started not eating or she started throwing food away and I was wondering like, “why would someone do that?” . . . She'll faint sometimes, and it was just something that really scared me. I guess, seeing that at a young age, I was like, “wow, I don't ever want that to happen to me”. (Samantha)

I came across the Tyra Banks Show . . . she does a lot of shows, where it’s about body image and self esteem. I remember I saw an episode how she, there was a girl who tried to always look like girls in the magazines and she’ll try really hard and she’ll feel really
down about herself. . . . They had all the make up artists and hair people come in and did her face and everything and it showed her that it took hours for her to look gorgeous. And at the same time Tyra Banks took off all her make up . . . helping her see that being so beautiful on TV and in the magazines, it takes hours and it takes tonnes of people to get you to that stage of beauty. I thought that was a good show. (Anna)

Participants’ narratives suggested that they were not passive recipients of information from the media, but that they chose to be exposed less to mainstream media and instead watch TV programs that were generally conducive to developing a more positive body image, as can be seen from the quotes above. Similarly, Patricia spoke about certain female characters being more appealing in her eyes:

Certain movies, I’ll be attracted to the female character, like, her body, ‘cause I think it’s like, I’m thinking Angelina Jolie Tomb Raider or like some kind of action movie, because you see them with some muscle and strength and you know they’re shooting guns and being a little more masculine . . . actually doing something instead of just walking around, you know. To me that’s much more attractive in a woman than someone that’s a stick and not doing anything.

Participants made similar choices with regards to magazines. Rather than reading fashion magazines, the majority of the participants spoke about having more educational interests. For example, they stated that they enjoyed reading books, newspapers, or magazines that were more educational.
(Do you ever read magazines?) Not so much, no. Well, I’ll read Time or Maclean’s or the National Geographic, but I don’t read the other ones. Well, maybe if I’m waiting in line at the grocery store, then I’ll see it, but no, I don’t really read magazines. (Samantha)

I was never into magazines. . . . The only thing, I don’t know, I was always into, like, weird things. I always, I had these wildlife things that was like this little, like, paper thing that was about one animal . . . so I was into like, that kind of stuff, you know, like looking at things that were educational, I guess. Not that magazines aren’t, but I was never into like, superficial stuff. (Stephanie)

I don’t bother too much with the celebrity magazines. I don’t care for somebody else’s life that has nothing to do with mine. Like, whether I know if Britney Spears has 7 or 73 lovers it doesn’t change my life at all, so it’s just a waste of my time reading it. I’d prefer to read a book or a magazine on how to knit a sweater. Maybe I’ll never knit a sweater, but at least if I want to it’s something that I can actually use in my life, it has a value, you know. (Amani)

Two participants spoke about their experience of growing up in a rural, secluded area, where there was not much advertisement, as something that shielded them from a potentially negative influence of the media.
(What do you think helped you resist the thin image and not buy into that?) I guess, at the community that I was in, it was a rather quiet one. There wasn’t as much advertisement around me going on. Like, it’s really quiet, we were kind of like the outskirts, the suburbs, really quiet. Half the area was forest. (Carol)

I lived in this tiny little area all covered by forest and farmland, so I was like way out in the middle of nowhere, so I wouldn’t like see all these billboards and stuff from the city or anything, so it didn’t really affect me like that. . . . There was my house and there was maybe like four neighbours down the road. It was like huge, huge expanses in between, so I mean, it was really isolated. That might have had an impact on who I was. (Lucy)

Similarly, Tamera spoke about the difference between living in a smaller town as compared to a large urban city in terms of her exposure to the media.

I feel extremely exposed to [the media], even though I don't even own a TV . . . Toronto makes it harder, I think. When I lived in Peterborough it was very different, because like, if you didn't have a TV, it wasn't like when you walk down the street and there's a Chapters in the middle of the road with the magazine section right through the door. The Chapters was out, almost out of the city and so what was Downtown, unless you went into variety stores you didn't see magazines. . . . There was one movie theatre in the whole town, so movies weren't a big activity. So I think in Peterborough it was easy to avoid, but in Toronto it's almost impossible. (Tamera)
Several participants praised already existing positive initiatives in the media, such as the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, and emphasized the need for a greater representation of women of different body sizes in the media.

There’s a lot of things that promoting like, not just skinny people or not just like stylish, you know, like the Dove commercials that says like, “being you” and all the stuff? Those things I think are pretty good. (Penelope)

I think it’s like maybe a little shift in the media. Like those Dove ads, I think they’re really good . . . where it’s ‘love your body’ and they’ve got pictures of all different women, like, loving themselves and I think that’s really cool. I think media needs to start moving in that direction. (Heather)

I think, you know, maybe magazines should do what they say and like, I remember when I was about 15, reading Seventeen magazine about how to be comfortable in your body and then you flip the next page and it’s all skinny models. And it’s like, “great”. So, you know, maybe showing models that aren't so skinny. (Tamera)

In addition to advocating for greater body weight and shape diversity in the media, the participants also pointed out that it would not be sufficient to only change the media and emphasized the importance of having real life role models and positive relationships.
You don’t see too many women in the media, you know, that are strong and built and they do this for a living, you know, like female firefighters or police officers. They usually get like a negative connotation with it . . . I think that’s why, I think women just lack confidence or they’re just lacking that kind of mentor to be more like, happy with themselves, confident with their bodies.  \textit{(So you’re saying there’s not enough role models, strong women that other women could look up to?)} Yeah, but I don’t think it’s like role models that you need to see on TV, like, that’s not a role model. I don’t know, you need I think role models that you see in everyday life. You know, ‘cause those are the ones that affect you the most, not just ones that you see on TV. (Patricia)  

I was reading an article about how kids these days are lacking the inter-relationship communication thing, because they’re going on Facebook and all that. Even though they say they have so many friends on their list, it’s all just superficial friends, so they’re lacking that deep communication with other people. I really agree with that. (Anna)  

\textbf{School}  

School was often mentioned as one of the sources of knowledge about body image-related issues. The majority of participants mentioned their health class, in which they learned about such things as healthy eating and the dangers of dieting. However, the majority of the participants also stated that they did not find their health class especially helpful.  

\textit{(In school, was there a class where you learned about the dangers of dieting?)} Yeah, we had health class . . . , but then I think it’s more like what you talk with your friends about.
You discuss it in class, but then you discuss it out of class and I think conversations with friends seem more applicable than just them telling you. ‘Cause you hear about like, real stories of people who have problems and stuff and then, yeah. I think that was more useful than the class. (Penelope)

We had an assignment once where we had to write, you know, all the different foods we ate and we had to keep track of, I guess the minutes of exercising we did . . . I guess just being more aware of our body. (Did it make you more aware of your body?) No. (laughter) It was bad, because it was just an assignment, so I think a lot of the girls, we just kinda made it up. (Anna)

In our gym class we also had like a health portion . . . they talked about the number of calories to consume. I remember doing a project where we had to write down everything we ate and then write down everything we did and then calculate the calorie intake and the amount that you burned. (Was this class helpful?) Not really. I’m sure they did cover the food groups, but I think those things I already knew. (Samantha)

In accordance with Samantha’s assertion, several participants also felt that the class in which they learned about disordered eating was taught too late.

Maybe if teachers talked more about it when kids are very young, like, grade one or two, that would probably help, because my friend is a camp counsellor and one of her campers
has an eating disorder, she's seven. So like yeah, should probably start that stuff really early to get helped. (Grace)

We took like a sex ed class and we did things about body image and things like that. That was also important, but I think just at that point I didn’t really need that help. I was already confident in myself, so I didn’t really need anybody to tell me to not lose weight or to not fall for that. (Stephanie)

On the other hand, several participants spoke about having taken courses at university that evoked critical thinking about body image, which they found helpful.

In first year in university they showed us like a movie . . . looking at all of these advertisements throughout the few last decades and how the messages ads send to women are absolutely horrible. . . . Like an organized kind of way of making women feel a certain way about themselves, right? Same as like, they showed us how they airbrush all the pictures and how it's not even a real woman at the end of the product, it's completely computerized, right? So that definitely helped me realize that I don't have to envy those people I see on TV or in ads, because they had a little help as well, right? (Kelly)

I think that there is still, no matter what, a level of patriarchy too, like, what women are supposed to look like. Like, I mean, I used to take some Women's Studies courses and a lot of the time feminists would go on about shaving your legs or whatever, and how bad this was and how it was a mark of patriarchy, because, you know, the ideal of what a
woman should look like as hairless like a little girl, kind of a thing. As much as I don't see it that way, I think there's something to it. (Tamera)

Similarly, several other participants emphasized the social nature of the problem and highlighted the importance of having an overall positive school environment.

I think having something for the boys in schools is really important. Or just kind of teaching them how to act around women . . . if you target them young, then men will know how, I don’t know, appreciating a woman’s curves. I think also teaching men, not just women, to appreciate their bodies, but also men to like know how to treat women. (So not just making it the women’s problem.) Oh yeah, everyone’s problem. It’s a social problem, I think. (Patricia)

(You mentioned that in Hong Kong girls are smaller, how did that make you feel?) I guess it was okay, because I went to an international school, so a lot of the students in my school were from overseas and I think everyone overseas, we’re a little bit bigger. . . . I think I would probably feel a lot more out of place if, say, I went to a local school. But because I went to an international school, all my friends knew where to go shop for clothes that would fit us. So yeah, I think that helped. (Samantha)

I went to a very very good elementary school. At that point, there wasn’t so much teachers pepping the girls for being pretty and all that, it was really more what you are capable of doing. . . . I just had some really good role models, I guess. (What were the
teachers like?) Really smart. They were very nice people, very kind and they were very encouraging for the pursuit of anything that we were interested in. So there wasn’t much of, “be a good girl, do what you’re told, and stay quiet”, there was none of that. (Carol)

Like Carol, other participants spoke about teachers whom they saw as role models, who taught them to think critically, and otherwise helped them to develop their potential and positively influenced their lives.

If a teacher is confident in herself, some of the women, like, the female teachers that I’ve had, they’ve just been so confident in themselves that it inspires other girls to be confident in themselves. These teachers are intelligent women, you know, and I think that inspires women to want to be intelligent, to be confident. Teachers just themselves can be role models. (Stephanie)

One of my favourite teachers throughout all of basically elementary and high school . . . in first grade with this teacher she would teach me third grade math . . . she was a great teacher. I got along really well with her. She really helped me to go to my full potential with things. Like, she would do the one-on-one thing and that would make me feel included through the education and the curriculum and that. And I would feel like I was learning a lot from her. (Lucy)
There was a few teachers along the way that stood out... they all kind of like encouraged me. It was the ones that encouraged me to think for myself and to do my own thing and just to make sure I stay very true to what I was wanting to do. (Heather)

**Health Practitioners**

Just as teachers, the participants’ family doctors were sometimes described as a source of knowledge and support. About a third of the participants spoke about consulting with and being reassured by their doctors about their body weight. In the majority of those narratives, the participants’ agency in seeking out this information was also apparent.

Back in high school was actually when I noticed that I was getting a bit of a belly and a bigger butt (laughter). . . . I was actually, I was concerned in high school, so I went to my doctor to have a weight test done and she like would measure the height and the weight and I was basically right in the middle of average, so I thought I was fine. (Lucy)

Unless my doctor tells me I have something wrong, which God forbid he does, knocking on wood here, I just do whatever feels right. . . . I’m not worried about other stuff because, yeah, my doctor says I’m technically overweight by 10 kilos, but he says unless you gain another 30 it won’t be a problem. He says my 10 kilos pretty much makes me what, he says if I were to lose them I would look like a stick, because I’m 5 foot 8 and for me to lose any mass would pretty much make me willowy. He says that it’s not gonna look good. (Charlie)
It was very very mixed, the things that you see on TV and in magazines and on billboards, that did not correspond with what they taught us in health class. *(And how did you make sense of it?)* Logically (laughter), the doctor told me that this stuff is how it is, nutrition facts and that’s what it adds up to. (Carol)

**Supportive Relational Communities**

Several participants spoke about a part of a supportive community that centered around things other than appearance.

[In yoga class], it’s not just a room full of skinny girls . . . there’s just so many different women there of different sizes and different shapes, but no one’s looking at each other, because we’re all focused on ourselves. So it’s a really, really safe, good environment. . . . All the women that are in that room are focusing on themselves, which means they’ve taken a step to take care of themselves and not just to take care of themselves as in like, ‘I want to lose 10 pounds’, it’s like, take care of yourself as in like, I want to love myself and I want to feel good, like, feel good mentally about myself and that they are taking that time, that hour aside to focus on them. (Heather)

In the video game community . . . there are a lot of overweight gamers, I mean, I have plenty of friends, but most of them don’t care. They’re comfortable with themselves. Maybe, because they have this community, who like them and it kinda fosters this sense of, that yes, there is an alternative niche into which you fit in readily by being yourself, by not being this superficial something what everyone else expects. And yeah, I guess
you could say that there is the popularity and then there is our popularity. Two different types of popularity. ‘Cause in our popularity it’s all measured by now friendly you are to different people, how many friends you’ve got. (Charlie)

Several participants spoke about the helpfulness of being in a supportive environment, where feelings and concerns could be discussed, when they were asked what could be done to help women who struggle with weight issues.

(Is there anything that can be done for women who struggle with weight issues?) Just positive people around you, you know. Just people who are confident in themselves, just like support, a lot of understanding. A lot of support and confidence around, ‘cause eventually it will rub off on you. . . . they have to let it out. They have to talk about it. And I think by voicing their concerns and their insecurities it’s kind of like they take it out of them and then the confident person puts all the support in. So it’s kind of like an exchange of the negative for the positive. (Stephanie)

(Is there anything that can be done for women who struggle with weight issues?) Maybe making them feel like they can just speak out, talk about their feelings, how they’re feeling and making them feel like there is a supportive environment that is listening to them, that cares. Just yeah, making them feel like they’re not the only ones, maybe, that are feeling bad about their bodies or just strange sometimes, like they’re not feeling as attractive, you know. Just making sure they feel like they can be listened to and heard. (Patricia)
Patricia went on to talk about building a supportive community of women based on positive relationships, rather than negative judgment of each others’ bodies, for bigger social change to occur.

Women shouldn’t . . . [be] like, “oh, look what she’s wearing, she looks bad, her butt is so huge in that dress, that does not look good on her”, or “she should lose 10 pounds”.

*(What should women do instead?)* Just say positive things about other women . . . being more supportive and yeah, probably just a more supportive community, network of women. . . . Eventually, if you hear it often enough, then I don’t think things like the media would bother you as much. If you hear something, like, positive comments or you feel like there is support, you feel supported by other women, I think it will later on have a bigger change. (Patricia)

Several participants also pointed out that such spaces, where the topic of body image was discussed in their everyday life, were rare. This came up in response to the question of what it was like for them to participate in the study, posed at the end of the interview. The participants pointed out that being able to discuss the topic was a positive and a learning experience.

*(What was it like for you to participate in the study?)* It’s been a good experience, good to get all this kinda stuff off my chest, I guess. I don’t know, it’s just something that’s usually not talked about, so it’s kinda good to let it out. *(Do you think it’s something that should be talked about more?)* Yeah, yeah, definitely. If more women felt that it was okay to talk about this stuff with other people, it would be, you know, I think they’d have
a lot more support for what they’re going through and I think that would benefit them a lot more. (Lucy)

Thank you for bringing me here, ‘cause like, it’s true, after talking this, it makes me, maybe there is something to it . . . it’s just kind of nice to be able to actually vocalize things that I think about. ‘Cause it’s very different and I guess there is a reason why I’m comfortable with myself and it’s not just, it’s not all these isolated things, but it helped me realize that it’s a combination of all these things. (Penelope)

**Religion and Spirituality**

When inquired about their religious affiliation, two thirds of the participants stated that their religion or their spiritual beliefs were either important or very important to them. About half of the participants reported that they regularly attended their religious institutions and connected their beliefs and values to their religion.

(Are you affiliated with any religion?) Yeah, I’m Jewish. (And how important is that in your life?) It’s becoming very important. I just lived in Israel for a year, so when I came back here, being with, being closer to the community was more important than it had been in the past. (Tamera)

(Are you affiliated with any religion?) I’m a non-denominational Christian. (How important is religion in your life?) It’s quite important. I practice my religion and I feel that it probably is the source of most of my values and opinions. (Amani)
I was brought up Roman Catholic and at this point I’m not sure where I’m at with that, but I still go to Church and practice it. *(How important is it in your life?)* I feel like it’s really important, but in the last couple of months I’ve been unsure about how I feel about the Catholic Church and whether I necessarily want to continue with it, but the spiritual part of life is very important to me. (Heather)

Some of the participants’ religious or spiritual beliefs were specifically related to the way they lived in and treated their bodies; for example, several participants spoke about having been taught the importance of respecting and taking care of one’s body.

Myself being a Christian, there are certain values that make me different from say, someone who is not a Christian and being able to stand true to those values and, like, that’s important to me. I think it’s more, what you do is more important than, say, how you look. (Anna)

I think most of the things that I do, like, it can trace back to my religion . . . [such as] respect your body. It’s not necessarily, it’s just like, take care of it, because if this is the body that God gave us, then you shouldn’t like, abuse it with like, getting drunk all the time or with drugs. *(Would dieting also fall into that category?)* Yeah, because that’s also, like dieting is not bad if you want to, like for health reasons, but if it’s overly just because you wanna be something you’re not, then it’s generally like, looked down upon. (Penelope)
In the Bible it does quote, you know, be careful what you put in your body, to take care of your body, that it’s the temple of the Lord, that you should respect your body. When people get grossly overweight . . . that is not taking care of yourself and taking for granted your health, because you can put it at risk and stuff. (And would that apply as well when people don’t eat enough?) Of course, because you have to give your body nourishment to take care of it. (Amani)

**Summary of ‘Broader Social Environment’**

In discussing their everyday social environment, the participants stated that they had limited exposure to mainstream media, both currently and as they were growing up. Instead, they chose to be exposed to media that was conducive to developing a more positive body image, such as watching TV shows that problematized idealized images and reading educational magazines or books. Several participants spoke about their experience of living in rural areas as protective from the negative influence of mainstream media. Participants also advocated for greater body size diversity in the media and praised already existing positive initiatives, while also emphasizing the importance of having real-life positive role models.

Participants spoke about school as a place where they learned about body image-related issues, although they also felt that health class was taught too late in the curriculum. Several participants spoke about the helpfulness of courses that evoked critical thinking about idealized images and of having an overall positive school environment. In addition, participants spoke about specific teachers as role models, who taught them to think for themselves and helped them to develop their potential.
Another source of knowledge and support were participants’ health practitioners, who were mentioned in a third of the interviews. Participants spoke about their doctors providing them with information about healthy body weight. Just as with friends and romantic partners, participants’ own active role in seeking out such information was apparent from the narratives.

In addition, several participants spoke about being a part of a supportive community, which centered around things that were unrelated to appearance, such as women doing yoga for self care. Participants also advocated for more relational forums in everyday life where issues related to body image could be discussed and spoke about the interview process, where they were able to discuss such issues, as a positive learning experience.

Finally, participants spoke about their religion or spirituality as important in their lives and connected to it some of their beliefs and values. Several participants gave specific examples of religious values that were related to the way they lived in and treated their bodies, such as being taught to take good care of one’s body.

‘Social Influences’ Chapter Summary

The core category of ‘Social Influences’ included three major categories, ‘Family Environment’, ‘Peer Environment’, and ‘Broader Social Environment’. The first major category was divided into four themes related to the participants’ family environment, including protective factors associated with participants’ mother, father and siblings. It also included factors related to family meals, to other family members that were significant in the participants’ lives, and to the cultural heritage of the participants’ families. The second major category contained two themes related to the participants’ peer environment, and included factors associated with participants’ friends and romantic partners. Finally, the third major category contained five themes related to participants’ broader social environment; specifically, positive
influences of the media the participants were exposed to, their school, including teachers, their health practitioners, supportive relational communities, as well as their religious affiliation and spirituality.
CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to explore protective factors that help women resist societal pressures for thinness. The investigation focused on interviews of fourteen young women, ages 18 to 25, who identified themselves as having been able to resist the pressures to be thin and as “liking their bodies no matter what its size”. Through life history interviews, memories related to anything that participants felt was helpful for them in developing a positive body image were elicited from childhood, adolescence, and to present day. Analyses of participants’ experiences revealed that protective factors that emerged from their interviews were divided into three core categories: experiences of identity, ways of inhabiting the body, and the nature of social influences.

Factors related to participants’ identities that emerged from their narratives dealt with rejecting conventional ways of being associated with being a woman in this society, and adopting alternative ways of being. Protective factors related to ways of inhabiting the body included engagement in meaningful activities, characterized by competence, skill, strength, passion, and immersion, as well as physical self care. Finally, protective factors related to social influences in participants’ lives included family, peer, and the broader social environment, which encouraged participants to take a caring and accepting stance towards themselves and their bodies. In brief, the present study expands the existing psychological research on protective factors in body dissatisfaction and disordered eating by revealing a multitude of factors that help women develop and maintain an accepting attitude towards their bodies regardless of its weight. The study also highlights both women’s active role in maintaining such a resilient stance and the importance of social factors that assist them in this process.
To date there is no published account that explored with women who identify themselves as resilient to body weight-related pressures what it was that helped protect them from those pressures. While there is no study to date that has aimed at developing a comprehensive understanding of what helps women develop a resilient stance towards pressures for thinness, a series of studies with girls and women executed by Piran and her colleagues examined factors related to positive embodiment. The results of the present investigation seem to correspond to the findings of Piran and her associates explicated in the Developmental Theory of Embodiment. The core category of Identity in the present study seems to correspond with the ‘Mental Freedom’ construct, which according to Piran and Teall (2012) involves the impact of social expectations and labels on one’s embodied experience. The core category of Body seems related to the ‘Physical Freedom’ construct, which addresses the nature of active engagement with the world. The core category of Social Influences seems related to the ‘Social Power’ construct, which addresses relationships with others and with desired communities. Nonetheless, unlike the embodiment studies, the present study addresses pressures for thinness specifically and in this regard can inform eating disorder prevention programs.

The results of the present inquiry suggest that in order to understand the full experience of having a protective stance and of being resilient to pressures for thinness, one needs to consider all three domains of identity, ways of inhabiting the body, and social influences. Most studies to date have focused on only one or another of the three core categories discussed in the Results chapter. The results of the present investigation are discussed in relation to these studies, including the discrepancies and the parallels between the findings.
Identity

The first core category that emerged from the narratives of women in this study was Identity and it included protective factors related to participants’ ways of viewing and treating themselves as well as their choices of how to deal with different norms and expectations placed upon them. Identity-related protective factors that emerged in this study were divided into two major categories that included participants’ rejections of conventional ways and adoption of alternative ways of being women.

Rejecting Conventional Ways of Being

Study participants resisted living according to conventional norms and expectations associated with being a woman, including appearance-related expectations such as the idealized thin image frequently seen in the media.

Critical thinking. Narratives of the women in this study contained numerous examples of critical thinking, including analyzing and questioning messages about the thin ideal they received from the media and from others, rather than applying such standards to themselves. The women were sceptical of the idealized images and spoke about them as superficial, unreal, and unattainable, supporting their statements with statistical information and facts. They also spoke about seeing the idealized images as inapplicable to their own lives, pointing out that it was a part of the model’s or the actresses’ job to look that way, and mentally separated themselves from the images they saw in the media.

The fact that study participants were able to take a step back and think critically about the idealized images suggests that they did not internalize the thin ideal. While thin ideal internalization has been found to be a causal risk factor for negative body image and disordered eating (Levine & Harrison, 2004; Stice 2002), the protective function of critical thinking has
been previously noted in the literature on eating disorder prevention. Piran (2010) examined research on eating disorder prevention programs and found a tendency for greater sustainable changes for programs that enhance the development of a critical stance in the participants. An example of such a program that teaches girls and women to process what they see in the media more critically is media literacy. In one such program, aimed to strengthen college women’s resistance to media images, Irving and Berel (2001) found that all three intervention conditions reduced participants’ perception of thin media images as realistic and as similar to them, and one intervention also reduced the perceived desirability to look like a fashion model. In another media literacy program, also targeted at college women, Coughlin and Kalodner (2006) found that following participation in the program, women at high-risk for an eating disorder reported significant reductions in body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, feelings of ineffectiveness, and internalization of societal standards of beauty.

Another type of eating disorder prevention programs that encourage participants to take a critical stance are the cognitive dissonance-based programs. These programs are based on Festinger’s (1957) cognitive dissonance theory, which proposes that inconsistent cognitions lead to psychological discomfort, therefore motivating people to change their cognitions in a way that would restore consistency. In one such program, adolescent participants in the dissonance intervention engaged in activities meant to be counterattitudinal for individuals who have internalized the thin ideal, such as participating in role plays and writing an essay about the costs associated with pursuing the thin ideal (Stice et al., 2006). The authors found that participants in the dissonance condition, as compared to other conditions, showed greater decreases in eating disorder risk factors and in bulimic symptoms. Two other studies with sorority members found that cognitive dissonance prevention program was successful at reducing dietary restraint, body
dissatisfaction, eating disorder pathology, and thin-ideal internalization with college-aged women (Becker et al., 2005; Becker et al., 2006). In addition, another cognitive dissonance program found long-term effects of a cognitive dissonance prevention program (Stice, Marti, Spoor, Presnell, & Shaw, 2008). Specifically, the authors found that participants in the dissonance condition showed decreases in thin-ideal internalization, body dissatisfaction, negative affect, initial eating disorder symptoms, and psychosocial impairment by 2- to 3-year follow-up, as well as reduced risk for onset of eating pathology through 3-year follow-up.

Critical thinking has been found to be protective against body-related pressures not only when used in relation to messages received from the media, but also in being able to critically examine the role of gender inequity in the development of body weight and shape preoccupation, as emphasized by Piran (2001). In her eating disorder prevention program implemented at an elite ballet school, the participants used their critical consciousnesses developed through the process of reflection in focus groups and action, to transform their school environment. The ballet school program was also supported by a quantitative outcome evaluation, comparing the baseline cohort with cohorts four and nine years later, which found significant reductions in restrained eating and in disturbed attitudes about eating and weight, for students grades seven to nine (Piran, 1999b). For students in grades 10 to 12, there was a significant reduction in disturbed attitudes and behaviours towards eating, less disordered eating symptomatology, and a more realistic assessment of their body shape (Piran, 1999b).

Supporting Piran’s (2001) emphasis on gender inequity, in their meta-analytic review of research on feminist identity and body image and eating problems, Murnen and Smolak (2009) suggested that feminism might be protective in that it should lead to an elevation of critical thought, which in turn should prevent internalization of oppressive cultural messages. Other
feminist theory literature also supported the importance of critical thinking for prevention of eating disorders. For example, it was argued that in order to prevent eating disorders, young girls need to be taught to critically examine the expectations placed upon them as well as the consequences of trying to live up to them (e.g., Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Shisslak & Crago, 1994).

While previous research connected critical thinking to prevention of disordered eating, validating the findings of the present investigation, the current study adds to that research by offering a better understanding of the processes, which help women resist the pressures for thinness. For example, it sheds light on specific strategies women use in order to prevent the images from negatively affecting them, such as mentally separating themselves from the idealized images as well as reminding themselves that adhering to the thin ideal is a part of another woman’s job.

**Rejecting social constructions of gender.** Women in the present study rejected the thin ideal as unnatural and connected its existence to financial gain of such industries as dieting and cosmetics at women’s expense. Most participants revealed pro-women attitudes, stating there was nothing women cannot or should not do and advocating for women to pursue anything they desire. They also rejected the mainstream appearance-based views of femininity and attractiveness and did not think of themselves as traditionally feminine. Instead, they had their own understanding of what it meant to be feminine or attractive, naming such things as confidence, charm, and personality. To examine their awareness of the cultural ideal, the participants were asked to describe the ‘ideal woman’, which they were easily able to do, and unlike some variations in descriptions of height or hair colour, they uniformly stated that the ‘ideal woman’ was thin. However, despite their awareness of what is valued in the society, the
participants rejected that ideal, stating that it was lacking in important areas and several participants spontaneously described their own ‘ideal woman’.

The fact that the women in the current study were able to retain their resistance to the idealized images that is generally lost around puberty, as well as develop an alternative understanding of what it meant to be an ‘ideal’, feminine or attractive woman, can be partially explained by the participants’ exposure to other cultures that value a more curvaceous physique in women. For example, several participants who were born or lived in South America or the Middle East, spoke about more voluptuous physique being considered attractive for women in these cultures.

This resistance to the ‘ideal woman’ in the present study resonated with some of the narratives in a life history qualitative study with 23 pre- and post-pubertal girls (Piran, Antoniou, Legge, McCance, Mizevich, Peasley, & Ross, 2006). The study, which analyzed drawings of the ‘self’ in relation to the ‘ideal girl’ and its associated narratives, found that some of the girls in the pre-pubertal group expressed resistance to the ‘ideal girl’. On the other hand, such resistance was not present in any of the narratives of the post-pubertal girls, consistent with Gilligan’s (1994) longitudinal qualitative study with girls, which noted the change in girls’ resistance during adolescence, when their willingness to be outspoken about what they know was replaced by attempts to emulate the ‘perfect girl’.

Findings of the present investigation are also in agreement with a meta-analysis of correlational data of feminist identity and body concerns (Murnen & Smolak, 2009), which found that feminist identity helps protect against extreme body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness. The authors argued that the development of a feminist orientation might help women contextualize cultural experiences, rather than personalize them. In addition, feminist critics
connected the cultural construction of femininity and beauty or attractiveness to the development of eating disorders; for example, Wolf (1991) argued that dieting was the essence of contemporary femininity. While Bordo (1993) pointed out that feminist cultural criticism cannot magically make women immune to cultural images, she stated that it can help foster a healthy scepticism and help guard against feeling too comfortable with the mainstream culture.

Consistently with the present study, other research also found that women from ethno-cultural backgrounds that do not idealize thinness tend to have lower levels of disordered eating and body dissatisfaction. For example, in their meta-analytic review on the roles of ethnicity and culture on eating disturbance and body dissatisfaction, Wildes et al., (2001) found that overall, Black women reported fewer symptoms of eating-related psychopathology than White women. Similarly, two qualitative studies found that Black girls were overall more satisfied with their body weight than White girls (Milkie, 1999; Parker et al., 1995) and one qualitative study examined the overall positive body image in African American and Latina women (Rubin et al.’s (2003). In addition, a quantitative study found that European American group had more overall body dissatisfaction than the Spanish and Mexican American groups (Warren et al., 2005). On the other hand, Croll et al.’s (2002) large quantitative study examining risk and protective factors related to disordered eating behaviours in adolescents, found that Hispanic and Asian females were significantly more likely to engage in disordered eating than White females. Also, in their review of ethnic differences in dieting, binge eating, and purging behaviours among American females, Crago and Shisslak (2003) found that while dieting was more prevalent among White than among minority females, binge eating and purging behaviours are just as common among minority females, suggesting that the association between ethno-cultural group membership and body image is more complex.
The present investigation suggests that exposure to alternative beauty ideals might be protective against pressures for thinness. In particular, the study suggests that participants who identified with their ethno-cultural group that embraced alternative beauty ideals found that to help them in resisting pressures for thinness. Further, participants that have internalized alternative constructions of femininity and attractiveness, describing the ‘ideal woman’ as accomplished, interesting, or intelligent, also found these constructions to be protective against pressures for thinness.

**Rejecting peer norms.** Women in the present study also rejected the views and practices of their peers, who bought into the mainstream representation of women’s bodies. Participants compared their own positive body image with that of some of their peers and spoke about placing less importance than their peers on physical appearance. Several participants also spoke about purposely choosing not to do what everyone else does, because they wished to be different. Partially clarifying what helped the participants reject mainstream peer norms was the fact that seeing some of their peers struggle with body dissatisfaction and disordered eating made them realize that they did not want to be in their peers’ place, as discussed in the narratives of several participants. Women in the study also spoke about their desire to help and to be a good example for their peers who struggled with body image issues. In addition, study participants spoke about encountering weight-related teasing and negative comments directed against themselves or their friends and standing up to it.

The fact that all the participants knew someone in their peer group who struggled with body image issues is consistent with the high prevalence of disordered eating among college-aged women (Cordero & Israel, 2009). Protective role of resistance to peer norms is in agreement with Twamley and Davis’s (1999) quantitative study, which examined the link
between personality and environmental factors and eating pathology. The authors found that awareness of thinness norms was less likely to be associated with internalization of the thin ideal among women, who were more nonconforming to group norms.

Addressing the aspect of weight-related teasing and negative comments discussed by the women in the present investigation, in her paper reviewing research on the relationship between peer and friendship factors and body dissatisfaction and weight loss behaviours in adolescent girls, Paxton (1996) argued that teaching cognitive skills for managing teasing and weight-related comments would be helpful for prevention of eating disturbance. The women in the present study were not only able to cognitively dispute weight-related comments, but also spoke out against them, exhibiting the opposite of self-silencing that was found to predict disrupted eating patterns and body weight and shape preoccupation (Piran & Cormier, 2005).

In addition to validating the protective role of not conforming to mainstream peer norms, the current study adds to existing research by offering a better understanding of what helps women reject peer pressures. For example, participant narratives emphasize their desire to be different as well as their desire to be good role models for their peers. Study findings also suggest that being exposed to peers who struggle with disordered eating might not inevitably lead to poor body image, as women in the present study spoke about learning from such negative examples what they would like to avoid.

**Adopting Alternative Ways of Being**

Instead of adhering to mainstream norms and expectations of women, current study participants adopted alternative ways of living their lives, which came through in their narratives from the way they viewed themselves, the subcultures and labels they identified with, and their emotional self care.
Self view. When they were asked to describe themselves presently and in the future, participants’ descriptions did not focus on their body weight or appearance and instead, emphasized their personal qualities and values. In speaking about themselves in the future, the participants emphasized their own happiness and health, as well as hopes of having a family and a career, rather than appearance-related hopes or fears. They also stated that they were happy with themselves and spoke about being proud of their own accomplishments. With regards to participants’ self described physique, eight women made references to their body weight being average, four participants spoke about being “overweight” or “heavier”, one participant called herself “thin”, and one participant stated she was “a little underweight”.

All the participants stated they were content with their body weight. While several participants made a connection between having an average or slimmer body type and resisting the pressure to lose weight or expressed hopes that their weight would not become significantly above average, most participants shared that they were not overly concerned when they had gained weight in the past and several women spoke about wanting to gain weight. Throughout their interviews, the women in the study also spoke about the importance of education in their lives, about their intellectual achievements, education-related goals, and about prioritizing intelligence and education over appearance. It should also be noted that all fourteen participants were either in the process of applying to a postsecondary institution, were already enrolled, or had already completed postsecondary studies. Several participants pointed out that unlike some of their peers who struggled with weight, they had other aspects in their lives besides appearance they could focus on, suggesting that the results of the present study might not be generalizable to women, whose lives do not contain any protective aspects. It also emphasizes the need to study resilience in women with a range of different backgrounds.
Such positive self descriptions are in agreement with Croll et al.’s (2002) quantitative study on risk and protective factors in disordered eating behaviours, which found positive self esteem to be protective. They also fit in well with the results of a longitudinal quantitative study on risk and protective factors in the development of eating disturbances in girls, which found positive self-evaluation, particularly with regards to one’s physical and psychological characteristics, to be protective against disturbed eating patterns (Gustafsson et al., 2009). The present study differs from these two studies in that they were quantitative and that their participants were adolescent girls.

The fact that several participants made a connection between having an average or slimmer body type and resistance to pressure to lose weight is consistent with two quantitative research studies, which found that women with low body weight were less affected by the pressures for thinness (Eisenberg et al., 2005; Gustafsson et al., 2009), although it does not account for the resilience of the four participants in the current study, who identified themselves as “overweight” or “heavier”. Also, unlike Polivy and Herman (2004), who in their discussion paper on the sociocultural idealization of thin female body shapes hypothesized that thin images in the media would not be distressing, but inspirational if a woman sees them as attainable, several women in the current study spoke about wanting to gain weight or shared that they were not overly concerned when they had gained weight in the past. This is in agreement with Twamley and Davis’s (1999) assertion that the perception of one’s body as “thin enough” is more protective than having a thin body.

The emphasis on intellectual achievement expressed by the participants in the present inquiry is consistent with Croll et al.,’s (2002) quantitative study, which found that school achievement was a protective factor against disordered eating behaviours. It is also consistent
with Crago et al.’s (2001) summary of general protective factors common to a variety of emotional and behavioural problems, among which were above-average intelligence and academic competence.

The findings of the present investigation offer a richer understanding of which particular aspects of themselves now and in the future might be particularly valuable to the women’s positive self concept, including their personal qualities, values, happiness, health, intelligence, as well as building a family and a career. Study findings also point out that it might not be the average or slimmer weight itself that is protective, as about a third of the participants identified their weight above average, but the way women feel about their bodies and about weight gain. Additionally, the findings help to explain the way in which focus on education or intelligence might be protective as the women in the present study spoke about gaining confidence from their intellectual achievements and a sense of worth unrelated to their appearance.

**Identifying with alternative subcultures.** Rather than identifying with the peers who have adopted the values of the mainstream culture, when describing themselves as they were growing up, the majority of the women in the present study spoke about identifying with alternative subcultures or groups, including tomboys, male peers, goths, and nerds. These groups fell outside of traditional femininity in that they offered alternative ways of dressing and behaving as well as different values. Adopting membership in these alternative groups made it easier for the participants to reject the ideal of beauty of the mainstream culture.

The ‘tomboy’ label resonated with a prospective qualitative study by Legge (2011), who investigated the ‘tomboy’/’girly girl’ dichotomy in the narratives of 27 girls as they moved through adolescence, including privileges and consequences associated with each label. With regards to privileges, she found that identifying with the label ‘tomboy’ in childhood was
associated with having a stronger connection to self, feeling more comfortable in one’s body, and physical freedom, and in adolescence it was associated with a strong connection to self and comfort with one’s appearance. In addition, the label ‘nerd’, which sometimes was used interchangeably with the label ‘geek’, resonated with Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz’s (2006) qualitative study on agency, subjectivity, and empowerment, which conducted focus groups with adolescent girls. In examining narratives of girls who consciously positioned themselves against mainstream femininity, they found that several girls accepted the label ‘geek’, consciously positioning themselves against symbols of femininity that made other girls in their school popular.

While the Currie et al. (2006) study did not examine the effect of identifying with an alternative subculture on the participants’ body image, other research emphasized the importance of considering supportive subcultures for eating disorder prevention. For example, in discussing her eating disorder prevention program implemented at a ballet school, Piran (1999b) concluded that even within an environment that involves harsh body weight and shape pressures, it is possible to create a subculture with healthier norms, although she also highlighted the need to target the larger social environment as well, where the harsh pressures exist. Similarly, in discussing their study evaluating the effectiveness of a school-based peer support group, McVey et al. (2003) concluded that the peer support groups helped to create changes at both the individual and subcultural levels. The authors also argued that making changes at the subcultural level might help sustain some of the gains made during the intervention. In addition, based on her clinical experience, in her discussion paper Jasper (1993b) argued that body image groups allow women to create a counterculture, where thinness and beauty are not equated, weight prejudice is challenged, and competitiveness around body size and shape is discouraged.
While participants in the present investigation did not currently identify with the label ‘tomboy’, their narratives suggest that they were able to maintain a strong connection to self, suggesting that identifying with the label ‘tomboy’ might have long term positive effects on the way one feels about herself. Similarly, while study participants referred to themselves as ‘nerds’ in the past tense, they continued to place importance on education and intelligence. The protective role of identifying with the ‘goth’ label for resisting thinness-related pressures was not discussed in research to date. The fact that some of the participants partially borrowed boys’ identities by identifying with the label ‘tomboy’ and with male peers, emphasizes that there are very limited options for girls and women who do not wish to belong to a group associated with traditional femininity, such as being a girly or a popular girl. It also highlights the need to support alternative subcultures as pockets of resistance that can help women reject mainstream ideals of femininity.

**Paradoxical freedoms.** Participants in the study also applied to themselves a variety of personality traits and qualities, which generally carry negative connotations, including calling themselves selfish, lazy, rebellious/stubborn, shy/modest, plain/average, and weird/odd. In the present study, participants used such arguably unflattering terms in reference to themselves as explanations for why they did not engage in certain behaviours they felt were expected of them; for example, they spoke about not wearing make up out of laziness and prioritizing their comfort and health due to selfishness. While not all the instances were related to body weight, they all tended to be connected to the different societal expectations of the participants as women. It appears that while the participants used terms in reference to themselves which generally have negative connotations, rather than being self-deprecating, these terms reflected the participants’
awareness of the way others may perceive them. It is also possible that the study participants did not have language available to them to describe themselves otherwise.

This resonated with the narratives of in the Currie et al. (2006) qualitative study with adolescent girls, where many participants actively fostered an identity that earned them the label ‘weird’ or ‘different’. Currie et al. (2006) asserted that girls “must negotiate meaning through male-centred language that favours androcentric discourse” (p. 425). This highlights the fact that regardless of individuals’ own attempts at resisting the pressure to look or behave a certain way, the social environment that surrounds them will invariably have an effect on how they view and describe themselves. Despite this awareness, the participants chose to embrace those supposedly negative qualities by using them as an explanation for why look and behave the way they do. In that way, by adopting such arguably unflattering self-descriptions they gave themselves permission to remain attuned to themselves rather than to try to fit the societal ideal.

With the exception of the Currie et al. (2006) study, there is no other research on the adoption of negative self labels. Unlike the present study, however, the Currie et al. (2006) study, examined narratives of girls and looked at agency and empowerment. The present study expanded their findings by uncovering additional self labels and suggesting that women continue to use them in their young adult life, which might help to protect them against pressures for idealized femininity. Study findings also proposed a process through which an adoption of negative self labels seemed to allow the study participants the freedom to prioritize their own needs and desires over what was expected of them as women.

**Emotional self care.** The results of the present study identified emotional self care as a protective factor, helping women resist pressures for thinness. Narratives of the women in the study contained numerous examples of the ways they took care of themselves emotionally in
different situations to avoid being negatively affected by the thin ideal. These included engaging in positive self talk, using one’s sense of humour, normalizing difficult moments, as well as mentally separating themselves from negative comments other women made about their own bodies and seeing them as inapplicable to themselves. Women in the study also spoke about making an effort to accept themselves the way they were and to be content with their bodies, despite not fitting idealized images. Rather than relying on others for approval, they emphasized the fact that such acceptance had to come from within and spoke about not pretending to be someone they are not for the sake of others.

The fact that emotional self care was found to be protective in the present study was consistent with Croll et al.’s (2002) large quantitative study with adolescents, which found high levels of emotional well-being, assessed through a scale inquiring about mood, stress, sadness, hopelessness, nervousness, and satisfaction, to be protective against disordered eating. The protective aspect of self acceptance found in the present investigation was in line with Wertheim et al.’s (1997) qualitative study on the pressures to be thin in adolescent girls, which found self acceptance to be protective from becoming concerned about one’s weight and engaging in weight-watching and dieting. These findings were also in line with Rubin et al.’s (2003) qualitative study on body image among African American and Latina women, which proposed that self acceptance exhibited by their participants may modulate risk for body dissatisfaction associated with disordered eating.

In addition, interpreting others’ negative comments about their own bodies as inapplicable to themselves resonated with some of the findings in Paquette and Raine’s (2004) qualitative study on sociocultural context surrounding body image of women who did not currently have an eating disorder. In their study, women reinterpreted in a positive context some
comments from romantic partners and friends, which could be seen as negative. While the women in Paquette and Raine’s (2004) study dealt with comments from others and women in the present investigation spoke about comments others made about themselves, it appears that women in both studies were able to externalize the comments, rather than take them personally. In agreement with this, Paquette and Raine’s (2004) concluded that it was not the nature of the comments, but the woman’s interpretation of their meaning, that influences her body image.

The results of the present investigation emphasize women’s active role in prioritizing their emotional self care. Study results highlight several additional self care strategies used by women, including engaging in positive self talk, using a sense of humour and normalizing difficult moments when they arise. These emotional self care strategies help to clarify the processes through which some women might be able to protect themselves from body image concerns and other negative emotions associated with the pressures to be thin.

Summary of ‘Identity’

The present investigation contributed to existing research by identifying a multitude of protective factors related to identity in resisting pressures for thinness. The women in the present study rejected conventional ways of being women by thinking critically about the messages they received and by rejecting conventional norms and expectations of women, including those related to body weight and appearance in general. Instead, they adopted alternative ways of being, which included viewing and evaluating themselves in non-appearance-centered ways, identifying with alternative subcultures and labels in place of the ones generally associated with femininity, as well as prioritizing emotional self care and self acceptance. While several protective factors identified in the present investigation have been identified in previous research studies, such as critical thinking, self acceptance, and certain alternative subcultures, they have
not been examined in relation to other aspects of identity. Also, several protective factors have not been previously identified in research studies and are unique to the present inquiry. For example, adoption of negative self labels, which were in fact ‘resilient’ labels, has not previously been connected to being protected from pressures for thinness. In addition, the present investigation provided a better understanding of the processes through which identity-related factors were able to shield women from pressures for thinness; for example, by clarifying specific strategies women used as part of emotional self care.

Body

The second core category that emerged in the study was related to women’s ways of inhabiting the body and it included protective factors related to choices and ways of engaging the body with the external environment as well as ways of relating to and treating the body. While it was argued that for a person with an eating disorder the body “becomes one’s enemy, an alien being bent on thwarting the disciplinary project” (Bartky, 1998, p. 28), women in the current study experienced their bodies as enjoyable and treated them with care. Body-related protective factors that emerged in this study were divided into three major categories that included meaningful activities, ways of engaging in those activities, and physical self care.

Meaningful Activities

Narratives of the women in the present study contained descriptions of their engagement in various activities that were meaningful to them, including introspective, creative, and physical activities.

Introspective and creative activities. Women in the study spoke about engaging in introspective activities, such as reading, meditating, spending time in the nature, journaling, listening to music, as well as simply thinking, and made an effort to find quiet time for
themselves in order to reflect on things. The participants connected engagement in some of these activities to their emotional well being.

Participants also engaged in creative activities, including painting, drawing, creative writing, singing, and writing music. Similarly to introspective activities, they spoke about their engagement in these activities as an emotional outlet. About half of the participants spoke about performing in front of others by acting in plays, singing, or playing musical instruments, connecting this to an increase in their confidence. Several participants also spoke about making their own clothes, rather than adhering to the mainstream look.

While there might not be a direct link between participation in introspective or creative activities and one’s ability to resist pressures for thinness, participants connected their engagement in these activities with such things as emotional well being and increases in confidence, which have been found to be protective in other research studies (e.g., Croll et al., 2002; Hesse-Biber et al., 1999). The results of the present study are also in agreement with Smolak and Murnen’s (2001) discussion chapter, in which they asserted that participation in activities that shift the focus off of thin appearance may provide girls with a means of expressing themselves and help reduce eating problems. Findings of the present investigation related to engagement in introspective and creative activities were unique to this study as no other study discussed such activities in the context of resilience to pressures for thinness.

**Physical activities.** All the women in the study engaged in physical activities and their engagement ranged from playing sports competitively on teams to more casual forms of physical activity, such as taking leisure walks. When talking about their experiences growing up, half of the participant spontaneously spoke about engaging in activities more frequently associated with boys, such as climbing trees, building forts, and being in the cadets. Participants spoke about
feeling good about their bodies and energized when they were being physically active. They also spoke about physical activities helping to take the focus off of their appearance and providing them with more meaningful things to occupy their minds with. Several participants also touched on the issue of accessibility by discussing things that made it easier for them to continue engaging in physical activities as they grew older, including parental encouragement, sports teams at their school that were open to girls, and living in an area conducive to taking walks. In addition, while engagement in physical activities was important for most women in the study, several participants pointed out that they did not view it as a chore that needed to be completed and were not hard on themselves if they were unable to exercise as planned.

Findings of the current study are consistent with a meta-analysis examining the impact of exercise on body image, which found that exercise was associated with a positive body image (Hausenblas & Fallon, 2006). Similarly, they are consistent with the results of a meta-analysis examining the relationship between athletic participation and eating problems among female athletes, which found that participation in non-elite and non-lean sports was protective against eating problems (Smolak et al., 2000). The issue of accessibility resonated with a qualitative study examining the shift in adolescent girls’ leisure activities as they move through adolescence (Mizevich & Piran, 2007), which found that there were significantly more opportunities for girls to engage in physical activities in childhood, than as they got older. In addition, an emphasis on non-chore-like engagement in physical activity among participants in the present investigation resonates with Bordo’s (1993) feminist critical analysis, in which she points out that contemporary concern with fitness can at times be excessive and pathological.

While previous studies identified engagement in certain physical activities as protective against pressures for thinness, the present study contributes to a better understanding of the ways
in which engagement in physical activity might be protective. For example, women in the
present study pointed out that physical activities helped them shift the focus away from
appearance and provided them with more meaningful things to focus on. Study findings also
bring attention to the issue of accessibility, highlighting the need for increasing opportunities for
engagement in physical activities.

Ways of Engagement

Study findings indicated several commonalities in the way women in the present study
chose to engage their bodies in different activities. Specifically, participants spoke about
competence, skill, strength, passion, and immersion.

Competence, skill, and strength. Participants’ descriptions of their engagement in
activities frequently focused on competence, skill, and strength, rather than appearance and
spoke about valuing more what their bodies could do rather than what they looked like. Women
in the study mentioned positive feelings they experienced in response to developing skills in
areas unrelated to their appearance. They also spoke about an increase in their self confidence
and self esteem as well as a sense of pride related to their accomplishments. When appearance
was mentioned in the narratives, participants spoke about their preference for appearance of
strength, such as muscles, to thinness.

These findings are in agreement with a quantitative study comparing female college
students, who either participated in judged sports, in refereed sports, and non-athletic students
(Zucker et al., 1999). Zucker et al.’s (1999) study found that women participating in refereed
sports showed less body weight and shape concern and suggested that an emphasis on the
function and prowess of the female body may promote greater body satisfaction, than an
emphasis on its aesthetic qualities. The findings of the present study are also in agreement with
Tiggemann’s (2001) quantitative study that examined the relation between leisure activities and body image, which found that a greater emphasis on sporting success was associated with lower body dissatisfaction and higher self esteem. Tiggemann’s (2001) suggested that “playing sports might confer a sense of body competence, whereby bodies can run fast or jump high and generally have a function other than merely being objects to be looked at (which must be thin and attractive)” (p. 139).

While Tiggemann’s (2001) and Zucker et al.’s (1999) studies discussed the positive effect of participation in sports on body image, the present study suggests that a sense of competence and skill in any meaningful activity can be protective. The results of the present study also help to clarify what it is about competence, skill, and strength that might be protective, such as the fact that they increase women’s self esteem and confidence in a way that is unrelated to their appearance. Findings of the present investigation suggest that it is not only the activities that women engage in that can buffer against pressures for thinness, but that it is also important to consider the way one engages in them.

**Passion and immersion.** In discussing their engagement in different activities, women in the study spoke about engaging in activities with passion. They frequently mentioned feelings of enjoyment and fun and used such words as “amazing”, “powerful”, and “adrenaline rush”. Women in this study also spoke about immersing themselves in different activities that were unrelated to appearance or body weight, emphasizing that during such engagement, they did not think about their bodies. They pointed out that in order for them to perform well, they needed to stop thinking about what they bodies looked like in the process. Several participants also spoke about enjoying certain activities even though they did not excel in them. They emphasized that
having fun was more important than the end result and pointed out the pointlessness of engaging in activities without enjoying them.

The protective aspect of such passionate and fun way of engaging in activities is in agreement with Smolak’s et al. (2000) assertion, who based on their meta analysis of studies on female athletes and eating problems emphasized the value of athletic participation for fun, fitness, and social interaction for developing girls. However, the present results expand this assertion to include other meaningful activities as well. The results of the present investigation also draw attention to passionate involvement in activities as possibly protective in itself, which is a unique finding of the present study. Similarly, there was no research on immersion in activities unrelated to body weight as protective against pressures for thinness. Study findings point at ways of engagement in different activities as a fruitful area for future exploration.

Physical Self Care

Results of the present study indicated that physical self care was protective against pressures to be thin. Study participants spoke about prioritizing their comfort, freedom and health, listening to their bodily cues of hunger, and rejecting excessive engagement in appearance-related practices.

Prioritizing comfort, freedom, and health. Women in this study spoke about prioritizing their self care and comfort over looking good for others. For example, they spoke about choosing to wear comfortable clothes in their everyday life and warm clothes in the wintertime, choosing comfort and functionality over outfits that were in fashion. Several participants connected their choice of clothes with a sense of freedom, contrasting it with a sense of restriction associated with being dressed up in a traditionally girly way. Study participants spoke about the importance of health in their lives and prioritized their health over appearance or
body weight. They spoke about being overly thin or overly obese as not healthy and emphasized the importance of balance. The idea of balance also came up when participants spoke about their efforts to maintain a healthy lifestyle, yet pointed out the importance of “not overdoing it” and accepting where they are at the moment.

Strategies adopted by women in the study are among the ones identified by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) in their paper on the Objectification Theory, who suggested that women wear comfortable shoes and loose-fitting clothes, as a way of stepping outside of the “objectification limelight”. They argued that this would help women resist and subvert the culture’s practice of objectification in their lives and in this way enhance their psychological well-being.

Participants’ emphasis on not being overly thin or overly obese for health reasons resonated with research pointing to high prevalence and adverse health consequences of both eating disorders and obesity (e.g., Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2007). The only research study that connected women’s resilience to pressures for thinness with an emphasis on health was Rubin et al.’s (2003) qualitative study on body aesthetics in African American and Latina women. In their study, Latina women spoke about their self care practices as being motivated by their desire to be healthy, rather than desire to control body size or shape.

While the Rubin et al. (2003) study points to their participants’ ethnic background as something that helped them develop a protective stance, the results of the present study suggest that current attitudes that involve prioritizing one’s comfort, freedom, and health might be viewed as protective factors that help women maintain a positive body image. The findings of the present study agreed with Fredrickson and Roberts’ (1997) theoretical suggestion that for women to prioritize their self comfort would enhance their well being, and added to it by connecting such focus on comfort with pressures for thinness specifically.


**Trusting and attending to bodily cues.** Healthy eating came up in numerous interviews. Participants’ narratives revealed their trust in their bodies as they listened to their bodies for cues of hunger and responded to them. Trust in their bodies was also apparent from the fact that they advocated for occasional consumption of ‘junk food’ and sweets, rather than restricting their foods only to those generally considered ‘healthy’. Helping to explain how they developed such attitudes towards food and eating were participants’ accounts of having sweets consistently available to them throughout life, making them commonplace and reducing the temptation and restrictiveness that are associated with their consumption. In addition, women in the current study emphasized the importance of enjoying their food and several women connected their eating patterns with the functioning of the brain.

The protective quality of eating in a healthy way was consistent with Gustafsson et al.’s (2009) longitudinal quantitative study on risk and protective factors for disturbed eating in adolescent girls, which found healthy eating attitudes in early adolescence to be protective against later development of body weight concerns. However, unlike the Gustafsson et al. (2009) study, which looked at measures that assess attitudes and behaviours associated with eating disorders, the present study provides examples of what such healthy eating attitudes might look like for women. There are no other studies to date connecting women’s positive attitudes towards food and eating to being protected from thinness-related pressures.

**Rejecting appearance-related practices.** Consistently with their rejection of mainstream of femininity and attractiveness based on appearance or body weight, women in the present study frequently rejected appearance-related practices aimed at modifying or problematizing their bodies. They spoke out against dieting to lose weight as well as against engaging in activities that tie a number to the way one feels about herself or her body, including
weighing oneself frequently and focusing excessively on the size of one’s clothes. They also spoke out against numerous other practices aimed at altering women’s bodies for appearance-related purposes, such as frequent and excessive use of make up and hair-related activities. As well, they mentioned other body-related practices aimed at concealing things generally considered unattractive for women, such as pimples, body hair, and wrinkles, and connected the different bodily practices expected of women to financial profit certain industries gain by making women feel unattractive. Contrasting the mainstream societal view of the female body as unattractive in its natural state, the women in the present study spoke about their bodies and its curves with love and kindness.

The positive effect of placing low importance on one’s physical appearance was consistent with McVey et al.’s (2002) quantitative study that examined risk and protective factors associated with disordered eating in early adolescence. The study found that for girls who perceived their competence in the area of appearance to be low, lower levels of importance placed on physical appearance appeared to lower the risk of disordered eating. Also in agreement with the findings of the present investigation, in their qualitative study on the sociocultural context of women’s body image Paquette and Raine (2004) found that for women in their study, being aware of and refusing to participate in the “fashion game” brought a sense of agency, which gave them strength to resist sociocultural pressures.

Feminist researchers have long emphasized the importance of awareness for resisting cultural pressures (e.g., Bartky, 1998; Bordo 1993) and for helping women experience their bodies in more positive ways (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). For example, Bartky (1998) in her theoretical paper on Foucault, femininity, and patriarchy, outlined a variety of practices aimed at disciplining women’s bodies, including skin care, body hair, and make up-related practices, and
highlighted the political nature of resistance to such practices, stating that women’s rebellion “is put down every time a woman picks up her eyebrow tweezers or embarks upon a new diet” (p. 43). Participants’ rejection of appearance-related practices is also consistent with some of the strategies aimed at resisting objectification of the female body offered by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) in their theoretical paper on the Objectification Theory. Specifically, the authors suggested that women not remove “unwanted” body hair and not wear cosmetics.

While previous research studies have connected low importance placed on physical appearance with lower rates of disordered eating, the present investigation identifies specific strategies that might be used to resist appearance-related societal pressures, which have to date only been discussed in theoretical papers. For example, women in the present study spoke about not weighing themselves frequently and not spending excessive amounts of time on their hair, including straightening, dying, or brushing it.

**Summary of ‘Body’**

The present investigation added to existing research by identifying numerous protective factors from pressures for thinness related to ways of inhabiting one’s body. The women in the present study spoke about their participation in meaningful activities that were unrelated to their appearance, including introspective, creative, and physical activities. They engaging in those activities with passion and immersion as well as focused on their competence, skill and strength, rather on the way their bodies looked in the process. They also took good care of their bodies, prioritizing their comfort, freedom and health over their appearance, trusting and responding to their bodily cues of hunger, and rejecting or minimizing engagement in practices targeted towards changing women’s bodies for the sake of appearance. Several body-related protective factors, such as engagement in certain physical activities and focus on one’s health have been
previously identified in research studies. Other factors, however, have not been previously identified in the literature, such as the protective aspect of engaging in activities with passion and immersion, or have only been discussed in theoretical papers, such as rejection of specific appearance-related practices. Also, the present investigation clarifies specific ways of engaging in activities and caring for one’s body that help to maintain a positive body image.

**Social Influences**

The third core category that emerged from the study was comprised of different social influences in participants’ lives. While identity- and body-related protective factors mainly addressed the attitudes, activities and practices that helped the women in the study maintain their resilient stance with regards to pressures for thinness, social influences mainly included the factors that helped them develop that resilience in the first place. The importance of considering the social environment for eating disorder prevention was emphasized by Piran (2010) in her examination of eating disorder prevention programs, who argued for the need to address different aspects of the social environment in its complexity for sustained gains of eating disorder prevention work. In the present study, protective factors related to social influences were divided into three major categories that included participants’ family environment, peer environment, and the broader social environment.

**Family Environment**

In discussing their family environment and its influence on their lives, women in the current study spoke about their mothers, fathers, and siblings, as well as several extended family members, their cultural heritage, and family meals.

**Mother, father, and siblings.** Both mothers and fathers appeared to have had a significant influence on how the women in the study felt about themselves and their bodies and
were a source of positive messages about weight, eating, and the body. The majority of mothers never made negative comments about their own or the participants’ bodies and taught the participants by example how to treat their bodies, including teaching them not to place too much importance on their physical appearance or body weight and to trust their bodily cues for hunger. Similarly, the majority of participants’ fathers did not make negative comments about the participants’, their mothers’, or other women’s bodies and about a third of the fathers instilled in the participants a sense of respect for food.

The narratives also contained examples of other ways in which one of the parents encouraged a positive body image in the study participants. For example, all the women in the study stated they had a good relationship with their mother and mothers were frequently mentioned as participants’ role models. Mothers also reassured the participants when they felt less secure about their bodies. Several mothers explicitly taught the women in this study about the unrealistic nature of the idealized images in the media and distanced them from the mainstream culture by not buying them fashion magazines or tight-fitting clothes. Similarly, the majority of study participants spoke about their fathers accepting women’s bodies just as they were. About a third of the women in the current study spoke about their fathers encouraging their involvement in sports or playing sports with them as they were growing up. Since engagement in physical activities emerged as a protective factor in the present study, fathers’ support appeared to be a facilitator.

Positive influence of siblings, usually sisters, also emerged in about a third of the narratives. Just as mothers, siblings, frequently sisters, were described by women in this study as role models, who taught them to think critically about the images they saw in the media and reassured them when they did not feel secure about their bodies. On the other hand, several
participants spoke about their siblings being less resilient to thinness-related pressures than they were, in one case having struggled with an eating disorder. Two participants connected this to negative parental comments directed at their siblings’ bodies, pointing out that they themselves never received such comments from their parents.

Positive influence of having a close relationship with one’s mother was consistent with Swarr and Richard’s (1996) quantitative longitudinal study, which found that adolescent girls, who felt closer to their mothers, reported fewer weight and eating concerns. While there is no research to date connecting paternal encouragement and involvement in daughters’ physical activities to daughters’ positive body image, Swarr and Richard (1996) found that adolescent girls who spent more time with their fathers had healthier eating patterns two years later. The authors suggested that fathers who remain close to their daughter during puberty likely convey acceptance of her developing body, which may subsequently be internalized and decrease the daughter’s risk of developing eating problems.

Protective quality of having importance placed on physical appearance in one’s family was consistent with a qualitative longitudinal study with college women, which found that all the women who stopped exhibiting disordered eating post-college reported that their parents never placed an emphasis on body weight or appearance (Hesse-Biber et al., 1999). In addition, study finding were in agreement with quantitative research on parental influences on body image. Tester and Gleaves’ (2005) found that young women who reported low past family emphasis on weight control were less likely to internalize the thin ideal. Similarly, Cordero and Israel (2012), who examined how parents can protect college-aged daughters from disordered eating, found that lower levels of messages about body weight and shape from mothers and fathers were related to lower levels of unhealthy eating.
Study findings were in line with Rodin et al.’s (1990) discussion paper on vulnerability and resilience for eating disorders, in which they suggested that parents who have resolved their own issues and prejudices with regards to body weight may protect their children from developing weight-related concerns. Similarly, the fact that siblings of several participants in the present study were dissatisfied with their bodies was in line with research that identified negative parental comments as a risk factor for the development of eating disorders (e.g., Shisslak & Crago, 2001; Wertheim et al., 2004).

The fact that the women in the present study experienced moments in which they felt less secure with their bodies is discrepant from the medical view of eating disorders as either present or absent and is consistent with the view discussed in feminist theoretical literature that body image problems exist on a continuum, on which all women in the Western society find themselves (Bordo, 1993; Brown, 1993, Rodin et al., 1990). The findings of the current study highlight the fact that while it might not be possible to completely shield a woman from social pressures, it is possible to provide supports that would help offset their negative effect.

While previous studies pointed out the protective aspect of placing low emphasis on appearance in one’s family, the present investigation adds to the existing research by also revealing examples of positive messages that parents conveyed to the participants in the study as they were growing up. For example, their mothers taught them to trust their bodily cues for hunger and limited their exposure to mainstream culture. Study findings also point out unique ways in which participants’ fathers influenced them, including encouraging their participation in sports, modeling respect for women, and instilling in them a sense of respect for food. In addition, examination of sibling-related context helps to shed light on family dynamics that might either protect a young woman or put her at risk for body dissatisfaction. Study findings
highlight the importance of considering differential treatment of siblings by their parents in families where only one of the siblings exhibits disordered eating as a fascinating avenue for future research.

**Other familial influences.** In addition to parents and siblings, the influence of certain extended family members emerged as protective in the current study, most frequently grandparents, as the women in this study spoke about being reassured about their bodies and encouraged to eat more as they were growing up. In speaking about their older family members as well as about their own food-related beliefs and practices, women in this study frequently spoke about the influence of their cultural heritage on their attitudes towards food and the body. For example, several participants spoke about the scarcity of food in their families’ countries of origin as well as about the emphasis in their cultural heritage on enjoying a good meal.

Family meals also emerged as a protective factor in the current study. The majority of the participants had daily family meals while growing up, where they socialized with their families and absorbed family norms and values related to food and eating, such as learning to appreciate and to not waste food. In addition, several women spoke about their parents choosing food portions for them and being otherwise attentive to how much and what types of food they ate. Just as with grandparents, participants’ parents also encouraged them to eat more, which the participants frequently connected to their family’s cultural heritage.

The protective aspect of family meals has been discussed in previous research. For example, in Neumark-Sztainer’s et al. (2007) meta-analysis of shared risk and protective factors for overweight and disordered eating in adolescents, frequent family meals, positive atmosphere at family meals, and frequent lunch intake emerged as protective factors against binge eating and extreme weight control behaviours, as well as against increases in these behaviours over time.
Similarly, in another meta-analysis on shared family meals and nutritional health, Hammons and Fiese (2011) found that children and adolescents who share family meals three or more times per week are more likely to have healthier eating patterns and are less likely to engage in disordered eating. The authors suggested that mealtime may provide a setting, in which parents can recognize early signs of problematic eating patterns.

Despite existence of research showing that women belonging to certain ethno-cultural groups, such as African American and Latina women, might be more protected from the Western thin ideal (e.g., Parker et al., 1995; Warren et al., 2005), such research tended to focus on the protective role of the curvier physique idealized in those cultures. On the other hand, the present study suggests it might be important to also consider the cultural values and attitudes related to food, eating, and beauty, as well as consider the messages that may be conveyed by elderly family members who spend time with girls as they are growing up.

Findings of the present investigation also add to the results of the meta-analyses of quantitative studies examining the connection between family meals and eating pathology, by contributing to a better understanding of the processes through which family meals might help women acquire beliefs that offset societal pressures to be thin.

**Peer Environment**

Peer environment also emerged as a protective factor as women in the present study spoke about the positive influence of their friends and romantic partners on their body image. All the women in the study spoke about having close friends and several women connected those positive relationships to their strength and ability to resist negative pressures. Similarly, the majority of the participants felt that their current or past romantic partners were important in affecting the way they felt about themselves and their bodies. Women in the study also spoke
about feeling accepted by both their friends and romantic partners regardless of their appearance as well as being supported and reassured by them during difficult moments. When speaking about both their friendships as well as their romantic partnerships, participants emphasized their own agency in choosing to surround themselves with such positive relationships.

In addition, women in the present study spoke about positive influences relevant either specifically to friends or to romantic partners. The majority of their friends did not make negative comments about their bodies or discuss the topic of body weight, and instead had goals and interests unrelated to appearance, including academics and physical activities. Friends who were involved in sports were usually described as prioritizing strength over appearance. Several participants also spoke about the positive influence of friends with bigger physique, who were happy with their bodies. Positive influences specific to past and current romantic partners included the fact that they did not make any negative weight-related comments about the participants’ bodies. Instead, they sometimes made positive comments, which made the women feel better about their bodies at times when they did not feel secure.

The importance of positive relationships with friends and romantic partners was in agreement with Hesse-Biber et al.’s (1999) longitudinal qualitative study examining factors that influence recovery from eating disorders among college women. The authors found that all women in the group that got better following their struggle with disordered eating in college described having satisfying friendships and intimate relationships with men, as compared to the group of women who remained at risk for disordered eating.

Although the majority of research studies on the topic looked at negative peer influences, several studies highlighted positive peer influences. In their study evaluating the effectiveness of school-based peer support groups, McVey et al. (2003) found that it was effective in improving
body esteem, global self-esteem, and reducing dieting. The authors pointed out that the participants found the group experience to be helpful, fun, and worthwhile and stated that it provided them with a sense of belonging. Similarly, Wertheim et al. (1997) in their qualitative study, which examined sociocultural pressures to be thin among adolescent girls, found that friends sometimes prevented girls from engaging in disordered eating behaviours. In addition, in her discussion paper on prevention implications of peer influences on body dissatisfaction and weight loss behaviours in adolescent girls, Paxton (1996) argued that friendship environment can be protective against the development of eating concerns and can provide a healing environment for those who already experience such concerns.

The protective aspect of positive comments and absence of negative comments from romantic partners of the women in the present investigation suggests a possible explanation for why Paquette and Raine’s (2004) qualitative study did not find romantic partnerships to be protective against weight-related pressures: In their study, they found that the comments made by participants’ romantic partners tended to perpetuate existing sociocultural messages.

The findings of the present study highlight the strong influence of romantic partners on women’s body image, emphasizing the importance of including them in eating disorder prevention initiatives. The study adds to the existing research on peer influences by uncovering specific attitudes and behaviours that the women in the present study felt positively affected their body image, such as feeling that they were accepted regardless of their appearance and being reassured during difficult moments by their friends and romantic partners. Study findings also identify aspects of peer environment that might be especially protective, including being surrounded by people who do not discuss body weight, are involved in sports, and who are happy with their bodies despite their bigger physique.
Broader Social Environment

Protective factors in the broader social environment that emerged in the present study were related to media, school, health practitioners, supportive relational communities, as well as religion and spirituality. The importance of considering the broader social influences was emphasized by Wolf (1991), in her feminist analysis of women’s beauty ideals, which asserted, “until our culture tells young girls that they are welcome in any shape – that women are valuable to it with our without the excuse of “beauty” – girls will continue to starve” (p. 205).

Media. The women in the present study spoke about their limited exposure to mainstream media, including television and magazines, as they were growing up. Several participants mentioned that they lived in rural or small towns, which limited their exposure to advertisements and other mainstream media. Study participants also spoke about being exposed to more positive media, such as television shows teaching about eating disorders and problematizing the use of airbrushing in creating idealized images as well as educational magazines, books, and newspapers. Participants’ narratives highlighted their active role in dealing with the media, both in taking a critical stance with regards to mainstream media, as discussed in ‘Critical thinking’ section, as well as in choosing what media to be exposed to. For example, participants spoke about choosing to read books over magazines and preferring to see movies with strong female characters. While study participants praised existing positive initiatives in the media, such as the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, they also advocated for more inclusion of women of diverse body sizes in the media, yet emphasized that such media would not replace the need for real life positive role models for girls.

While most research on media and body image tends to look at the link between frequent media exposure and body dissatisfaction or disordered eating (e.g., Berel & Irving, 1998; Groesz,
Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Shisslak & Crago, 2001), the present study highlights the existence and influence of more positive media. The positive influence of participants’ exposure to media that problematizes the use of airbrushing is in line with media literacy programs, discussed in the ‘Critical thinking’ section, which teach women to think more critically about idealized images they see in mainstream media.

Consistently with the active role of the women in the present inquiry in dealing with the media, in their qualitative study on sociocultural context surrounding women’s body image, Paquette and Raine’s (2004) found that several of their participants tried to resist media influence by avoiding it or choosing what to be exposed to. Also, women in their study who felt more satisfied with their bodies spoke about how the media has improved over the past 10 years by presenting more alternative body shapes and sizes. Similarly, in their critical analysis of media influence on disturbed eating, Berel and Irving (1998) argued that there is a reciprocal relationship between media exposure and individual characteristics and concluded that women are active participants in selecting and responding to media. They then suggested that media-driven body dissatisfaction was not inevitable and that women could learn to make different media choices as well as process media more critically. Likewise, in their review of theory and research concerning media influences on body weight and shape in girls in women, Levine and Harrison (2004) highlighted implications for prevention of assuming a more active role in dealing with the media through media activism and media literacy.

While previous research spoke about women trying to avoid their exposure to mainstream media, the present investigation also emphasizes women’s agency in choosing what type of media to be exposed to, which has to date only been discussed in theoretical research. These findings suggest that while it might not be possible to completely avoid the mainstream media, it
might in fact be possible to limit one’s exposure to it as well as to make an active effort to seek out more positive media that problematizes mainstream beauty images and encourages their critical evaluation.

**School.** Women in this study spoke about health class in their school as one of the sources of knowledge about body image-related issues, although the majority of participants did not find their class especially helpful, stating for example that students did not take it seriously or that it was taught too late. However, several participants in the current study spoke about taking courses at university that critically discussed body image, which they found beneficial. Results of the study also emphasized the protective nature of overall positive school environment. Study participants touched on the social nature of body image-related problems; for example, highlighting the need to include boys in prevention initiatives and to treat girls and boys equally at school. Participants also spoke about the positive influence of certain teachers, whom they saw as role models, and who taught them critical thinking skills, as well as helped them to develop their full potential.

Lack of helpfulness of the health class in school was in agreement with the meta-analytic review of eating disorder prevention research by Stice and Shaw (2002), which found smaller effects for psychoeducation-based interventions. Alternatively, the helpfulness of postsecondary courses that focused on critical thinking about beauty ideals is consistent with the previously discussed media literacy programs.

In line with the emphasis on positive school environment for a positive body image in girls, in her qualitative analysis of a program implemented at a ballet school, Piran (2001) found that transforming the school environment by reducing inequity in the body domain that deprecated their bodies, resulted in a decreased body weight and shape preoccupation among the
female students. Also supporting the importance of positive changes in a school environment was McVey et al.’s (2007) comprehensive school-based prevention program with middle school students, entitled ‘Healthy Schools-Healthy Kids’. The program included multiple components, such as workshops for the teachers, teacher-led curriculum, peer-support groups, a one-session focus group, and additional school-wide activities. The authors found that the program had significant positive effects, including reduced internalization of media ideals and reductions in disordered eating. In addition, in her examination of primary prevention programs at high school and university levels, Piran (2010) found that programs that did not include environmental changes may only encourage resistance for a limited time, and concluded it is difficult to hold on to a place of resistance without changes at least in a person’s immediate social environment.

The positive influence of teachers was in agreement with Francisco, Alarcão, and Narciso’s (2012) qualitative study on adolescent elite dancers and gymnasts, which found that a positive relationship between a teacher and students to be protective even in such high risk contexts for the development of eating disorders. The importance of including teachers in eating disorder prevention has also been emphasized by Piran (2004) in her discussion paper, who pointed out that teachers’ intensive interaction with students could be enlisted towards prevention efforts and suggested that teachers could provide constructive daily experiences to students as well as integrate relevant material into their curricula. As an example of an attempt of engaging teachers in eating disorder prevention, McVey, Gusella, Tweed, and Ferrari (2009) examined the effectiveness of a web-based training on prevention of eating disorders for teachers and public health practitioners. The authors found that the program was successful in increasing knowledge of facts concerning restrictive dieting and peer influences among teachers as well as positively influenced their own acceptance of their body shape. The authors suggested that such
changes could help motivate teachers to appreciate the benefits of reducing weight bias and teasing as well as educating students about the negative effects of restrictive dieting.

Findings of the present investigation support prevention program research that emphasizes the protective nature of a positive school environment on girls’ body image and highlight the importance of creating such a positive environment when girls are still young. Study findings also highlight the role of teachers in helping the participants develop critical thinking skills as well as their full potential, unlike existing research, which has been conducted specifically in high risk settings with adolescent elite dancers and gymnasts.

**Health practitioners.** About a third of the women in the study spoke about their family doctors as a source of knowledge and support. They spoke about consulting with their family doctors about their body weight and accepting the doctor’s opinion, such as being told that everyone’s body is different. Participants’ narratives highlighted their agency in seeking out this information from a credible source and choosing to believe it over the information they received from mainstream media. The only other qualitative study that looked at health professionals in the context of women’s body image found that different health professionals made comments that influenced the women in the study both negatively and positively (Paquette & Raine, 2004). The authors pointed out that health professionals were also embedded within the sociocultural context that influenced their perceptions of women’s bodies. This could clearly be problematic in case of unwarranted negative comments about body weight given the fact that their opinions of the health professionals in the study were rarely questioned, in line with Jasper’s (1993a) assertion that the pressure for women to be thin is often supported by trusted professionals. Since the women in the present study did not report any negative comments made by their health
practitioners, it is unclear how they would respond to such comments. Given the influential nature of health practitioners’ opinions, additional research in this area would be beneficial.

Supportive relational communities. Several women in the present study spoke about being a part of a supportive community, which did not center around appearance or body weight, such as being a part of the video game community. The benefit of being in a supportive environment also emerged in the narratives when participants were asked about what could be done to help women struggling with body weight issues. One participant also spoke about the judgmental attitude women frequently exhibit towards each other and instead advocated for creating a supportive community of women in order to bring about a bigger social change. In speaking about the benefit of being in a supportive relational space where one’s thoughts and feelings related to body weight could be discussed, women in the present study pointed out that such spaces were rare in everyday life. Several participants also identified the interview for the study as such a space and spoke about being able to share their understanding as a positive learning experience.

The protective aspect of supportive relational communities found in the present study was consistent with Piran’s (1996) body weight and shape preoccupation prevention program at a ballet school, discussed in the ‘School’ section, in which change occurred within a context of reciprocal relationships within small peer groups before changes outside the group were targeted. Piran (1996) pointed out that if oppression alienated young women from one another, then by helping them reclaim the quality of their relationships, a prevention program would allow them to develop resistance. This is also consistent with McVey et al. (2003) study on school-based peer support groups, discussed in the ‘Peer environment’ section, which emphasized the importance of supportive group experiences in promoting a positive body image. In addition, in
reviewing theory and research related to prevention of eating disorders and negative body image, Levine and Piran (2004) argued that groups can help counter oppressive systems by providing a relational space in which alternative norms can be practiced and which can counter oppressive systems.

While the existing research on the positive influence of supportive group environments has been conducted within prevention programs, the present investigation emphasizes the lack of such supportive spaces in women’s everyday lives. Creating such supportive relational spaces, where women could discuss their thoughts and feelings related to the thin beauty ideal and its effect on their lives as well as strategies for dealing with it, offers the possibility of being more protected from societal pressures for thinness.

**Religion and spirituality.** Religion or spirituality also emerged as a protective factor in this study. Participants spoke about their religious and spiritual affiliation being important in their lives and connected to it their general beliefs and values. About half of the participants also reported that they regularly attended their religious institutions. Although most participants did not elaborate much on the topic, several participants’ religious or spiritual beliefs were specifically related to the way they lived in and treated their bodies. For example, they spoke about having been taught that what they do is more important than what they look like as well as the being taught the importance of respecting and taking good care of one’s body, such as not restricting one’s food intake or overeating.

Study findings are consistent with Rubin et al.’s (2003) qualitative study on body aesthetics among African American and Latina women, in which religion and spirituality provided the participants with a rationale for body acceptance and rejection of body modification to accommodate mainstream aesthetic values. Findings of the present investigation suggest that
regardless of one’s ethnic heritage, religious or spiritual beliefs that emphasize care and respect for one’s body may help to protect women against societal pressures to alter their bodies in order to fit a thin aesthetic ideal.

**Summary of ‘Social Influences’**

A multitude of protective factors related to social influences emerged from the participants’ narratives in the present investigation. The women in the present study spoke about their family environment and the positive influence of their mothers, fathers, siblings, and extended family members, as well as family meals and their cultural heritage on the way they felt about themselves and their bodies. They also spoke about their peer environment and the positive influence of their friends as well as past and current romantic partners. In addition, participants spoke about the protective aspects of the broader social environment, including their media-related choices, their schools, including teachers, their health practitioners, supportive relational communities, as well as their religious affiliation and spirituality. The protective aspect of certain social influences, such as parents, peers, and romantic partners, have been identified in previous research, the present investigation adds to the existing research by helping to clarify what specific attitudes and behaviours are protective. For example, study findings suggest that it is protective being accepted regardless of one’s appearance, not hearing negative comments about one’s weight, and being reassured during difficult moments by significant others. In addition, several protective factors have previously only been discussed in the context of eating disorder prevention programs, such as supportive relational communities and positive school environment.
Strengths and Limitations of the Current Investigation

The present study used qualitative methodology to examine experiences of young women in their resistance to the thin ideal. The results of the present study are grounded in both strengths and limitations, which are discussed in turn.

Strengths

One of the strengths of the present study is the use of qualitative methodology, which allowed an examination of women’s lived experiences and their own understanding of what helped them resist pressures for thinness. The study identified three main pathways affecting resilience to body weight-related pressures – identity, body, and social influences - and helped to clarify the ways in which they were protective. The richness of the study is in the complexity of each of its core categories, which included a multitude of protective factors, as well as its contribution to a better understanding of the processes behind some of the factors. For example, the study helped to clarify the process through which participation in physical activities comes to be protective against pressures for thinness. The study also helped to uncover the complexity of women’s experiences; for example, by uncovering the intersections with other pressures influencing women’s relationship with their bodies, such as the pressure to wear make up or tight and uncomfortable clothes, which came up spontaneously in the majority of the interviews. Similarly, the use of qualitative methodology allowed for an exploration of different social influences; for instance, the protective aspect of being a part of a peer group that did not identify with the mainstream culture, such as ‘nerds’ and ‘tomboys’.

The use of the life history approach (Cole & Knowles, 2001) was also a strength of the study, as it facilitated an understanding of the development of women’s resilience and the different factors that protected them throughout their lives, rather than only examining what was
fostering their strength at the time of the interview. For example, the women in the study spoke about their participation in physical activities as they were growing up, which helped them to develop competence and strength, and learn to value their bodies based on its functionality rather than appearance. Life history approach also helped to examine the social context of women’s lives, such as their home environment as they were growing up; for example, the women in the study spoke about not having a scale in their house and about having regular meals with their families.

Another strength of the present study was the diversity of the group of women who were interviewed. Women who participated in the study were diverse in terms of their ethno-cultural heritage, immigrant status, social class, and body physique. This diversity was beneficial for getting a better understanding of the ways in which social and cultural context of their lives helped to foster their sense of resilience in body image.

Additionally, the present study contributed to the current body of research on disordered eating and body image by looking at resilience in women. While most of the research to date looked at risk factors in the development of eating disorders, the current study aimed to understand what helps certain women resist pressures for thinness that all the women in the Western culture are exposed to. The approach used in this study brought attention to the importance of taking into account identity-related factors, body-related factors and social influence factors in order to gain a fuller understanding of what helps to foster a positive body image in women.

**Limitations**

One of the limitations of this study was the size of the group of participants. While the number of participants that were included in the study was guided by theoretical sampling
(Charmaz, 2006), in that new participants were recruited until the properties of the categories were refined and developed and no new properties emerged, it is possible that additional interviews might have brought up additional themes.

Another limitation of this study was that despite the ethno-cultural diversity of the participant group, there were no women from Caribbean, South Asian, or Aboriginal heritage in the group. Similarly, there was no diversity in terms of sexual orientation and physical disability in that all the women who participated in the study were heterosexual and able-bodied. Including a more diverse group of women in the study might have resulted in additional themes emerging in the interviews that would be reflective of lived experiences of a broader group of women. The group of participants was also relatively more highly educated, in that all the women in the group had either completed, were currently pursuing, or were in the process of applying for postsecondary education.

Additionally, the study included participants who were 18 to 25 years of age, since it was hoped that women in this age group would be more able to reflect on the recent experience of adolescence, while not currently going through the turmoil of adolescence. They would also not yet be protected by factors not available to girls and younger women, such as a successful career or a long-term romantic partnership. The downside of selecting this particular age group was that their accounts of what has helped them throughout their younger years were retrospective and that the study did not address protective factors that help women later on in life.

A limitation inherent in qualitative studies is the subjectivity of the researcher. To address this limitation, in the initial stages of the analysis, study participants were provided with a chronological summary of their interview and encouraged to provide feedback to the researcher to clarify or amend aspects of their narratives that would make them more reflective of their own
lived experiences of resilience. The final analysis was guided by the researcher’s interests and interpretations of the narratives and informed by the feminist theoretical approach, with attention paid to social and contextual factors. For example, my interest in familial influences has made me especially attentive to participants’ descriptions of their family environment as they were growing up, including their frequent family meals and an absence of a scale in their house. Despite the existence of pre-existing thoughts on the topic, such as my expectation to encounter the influence of social factors, during the process of interviewing and data analysis, I remained cognizant of such pre-existing thoughts and expectations. This facilitated my ability to be open to all aspects of participants’ reflections to the central question of the study, as a result of which numerous themes that emerged in the study were a surprise. For example, I expected participants’ peers to be a significant adverse influence on the way they felt about their bodies, yet, in addition to the protective effect of membership in the ‘tomboy’ group, I was surprised to discover that other peer subgroups emerged as protective. In addition, participants’ own agency in seeking out friends who exerted a positive influence on the way they lived in their bodies was another unanticipated protective factor. Further, the protective categories of paradoxical freedoms and creative activities emerged from the analysis entirely unexpectedly. The categories and themes that emerged from the analysis were discussed with and supported by the academic supervisor as well as by a team of peer graduate student researchers.

**Areas for Future Research**

The present study uncovered a number of protective factors in the development of positive body image not previously discussed in research in this area. Future studies may further explore the protective factors that emerged in this study in order to replicate the study findings with a larger and more diverse group of women, who identify themselves as resilient to body
weight-related pressures. In particular, the study suggests the usefulness of examining multidimensional theoretical models of protective factors, consistently with Smolak and Piran’s (in press) assertion of the need for multifactorial integrated models for uncovering the complexity of gender-based experiences. It would be especially interesting to see whether the same three categories of identity, body, and social influences-related protective factors emerge in future research. It would also be interesting to conduct additional research in the area of paradoxical freedoms, whereby women use negative attributes in relation to themselves as a way of explaining why they do not engage in appearance-related activities, but which also protect them against the pressure to engage in those activities expected of them as women in this society. In addition, it would be fascinating to continue exploring the protective function of different ways of engaging in activities, such as with immersion and passion, which emerged in the results of the present study and research on which is lacking.

It would be beneficial for future research to conduct an exploratory study with a diverse group of adolescent girls who identify themselves as resilient to pressures for thinness, since women in the present study could only provide retrospective accounts of what they felt was protective for them throughout adolescence. It would be especially beneficial to conduct a prospective longitudinal study that would conduct interviews with girls with a positive body image from the beginning of puberty, which was identified as the time when eating disorders typically develop (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), until their late adolescence, similar to the approach used by Piran and her associates (e.g., Piran & Teall, 2012). Such a study would make it possible to capture changes that occur over time in the girls’ resilience as well as turning points, which would help to better clarify the process through which young women develop resilience to weight-related pressures. It would also make it possible to capture and examine the
differences between girls who are able to maintain their resilience throughout adolescence and those who are not.

A similar area of interest for future research would be to compare young women growing up in the same household, where a young woman was able to develop resilience to weight-related pressure, while her sibling was not. In the current study several participants mentioned the fact that their siblings were struggling with body weight-related issues. While this could not be explored in depth in the present study, it could be a useful area for future research, as it would likely shed light on family processes that facilitate or hinder the development of resilience in young women.

In addition, it would be useful for future research to apply the results of the present study to clinical practice by creating a scale based on the protective factors that emerged in this study and validating it by administering it to a large group of women situated throughout the entire continuum of positive to negative body image. Developing such a scale would be beneficial for evaluating eating disorder prevention programs as it could be administered to girls and women pre-and post-participation in an eating disorder prevention program.

Finally, future research needs to explore practical ways of applying the knowledge of protective factors into women’s lives. Rather than labelling experiences of women struggling with disordered eating as individual pathologies, future research needs to examine ways in which the social environment can be changed as well as ways of facilitating relational forums of resistance to the pressure to adhere to an unhealthy aesthetic ideal.
Preventative and Clinical Implications

The findings of the present study have clinical implications for prevention and intervention of eating disorders in girls and women as well as helping them develop a positive body image despite societal pressures for thinness.

The results of the study suggest several practical strategies that women could use in their everyday lives to resist the pressures for thinness. Study participants rejected numerous appearance-related practices that made them feel self-conscious about their bodies. For example, they spoke about not weighing themselves frequently on a scale, not placing an emphasis on the size of their clothes, and not engaging excessively in other practices associated with changing women’s bodies for appearance-related purposes. They also spoke about making their health and emotional well-being a priority, listening and responding to their bodily cues of hunger, as well as allowing themselves to eat sweets and occasional ‘junk food’ to avoid associating such foods with temptation and restrictiveness. Other strategies include engaging in activities that are not focused on appearance or body weight, which has also been found protective in this study. For example, participants in this study engaged in a variety of introspective, creative, and physical activities, which they connected to their emotional well-being, increases in confidence, as well as feelings of competence and strength. In addition, limiting one’s exposure to mainstream media, including television and fashion magazines as well as exercising agency in selecting more positive media, has been found protective.

The fact that women in this study spontaneously spoke about their rejection of other appearance practices unrelated to weight highlights the interrelatedness of the different practices aimed at disciplining women’s bodies, resistance to which Bartky (1998) described as political. While such strategies could help individual women maintain a more positive body image,
especially women who are already somewhat resilient, it is important to remember that women’s struggle with body weight takes place in a larger social context. For example, study participants were easily able to identify at least several groups who benefit from women’s struggles with the thin ideal. Addressing and problematizing that social context is imperative for making positive changes in the way women feel about themselves and their bodies.

Study findings lend support to the view that eating disorders and the social obsession with thinness are a part of the same continuum (Brown, 1993), since despite self-identifying as resilient to thinness-related pressures, women in the study still occasionally experienced moments in which they did not feel secure with their bodies. These results speak against the medical model, which pathologizes the individual, and highlight the need to take into account the social environment that surrounds the women seeking treatment for disordered eating. For example, in working clinically with girls and women who struggle with disordered eating and extreme body dissatisfaction, in addition to normalizing their weight, clinicians need to help them understand their experience not as an individual pathology, but as an understandable reaction of societal pressures. Clinicians then need to work collaboratively with women in order to help them develop strategies for resisting pressures for thinness, such as the ones outlined above.

Considering the major role different social influences play in helping women develop a positive body image, study findings underscore the need to build in and capitalize on social supports rather than leaving young women to struggle with thinness-related pressures on their own. The protective role of the family highlights the need to involve families in prevention as well as intervention initiatives. It is important to convey to parents the positive influence of not making comments about their daughters’ bodies. Mothers need to stop commenting negatively
on their own bodies and fathers need to not make any negative comments about either the mother’s or other women’s bodies. Instead, parents should teach their daughters to think critically about the messages they receive from mainstream media and possibly some of their peers about women’s bodies as well as teach them to treat their bodies with care. Mothers need to be especially aware to not place too much emphasis on their own or their daughters’ physical appearance, since they are frequently seen as role models. An effort should be made for families to eat together regularly so that their daughters can absorb positive values about food and eating. In addition, in treating young women with body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, it is necessary to consider her family environment, especially differential treatment by parents, if her siblings do not struggle with negative body image.

The results of the study also highlighted the importance of the school environment in helping young women develop a positive body image. The positive influence of teachers in helping the women in this study develop critical thinking skills as well as their full potential emphasizes teachers’ unique ability to affect students’ body image if they integrate relevant material into their curricula, as suggested by Piran (2004). To this end, providing education about protective and risk factors to body image development as well as sensitivity training for teachers would likely be beneficial. Rather than treating negative body image as a girls’ problem, boys also need to be taught to treat their female peers and their bodies with respect. This could have a ripple effect outside of school as well, as positive relationships with romantic partners have been identified as a protective factor in this study. In addition, the fact that study participants did not find health classes very helpful suggests that rather than providing them with information, schools should consider other ways of engaging the students, perhaps through

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interactive discussions, where students could share their own experiences, which would make health class more relevant and hopefully more beneficial to the students.

Schools could also encourage and support alternative subcultures that are not focused on appearance. Women in this study spoke about identifying with such labels as ‘nerds’ and ‘tomboys’, which appeared to provide them with an alternative to the mainstream ideals of femininity frequently embodied by ‘popular’ and ‘girly girls’. In order to support such alternative subgroups, schools need to offer girls opportunities to express themselves in ways not centered around appearance, such as by organizing book clubs as well as having girls’ or mixed-gender sports teams, and a greater emphasis on girls being active during recess. These would be especially beneficial considering the fact that focus on intelligence, accomplishments, and physical activity have emerged as protective factors in this study. Alternative subgroups not focused on appearance could also help girls to develop or enhance a critical stance with regards to mainstream beauty ideal, which would be beneficial as an intervention strategy with girls who are dissatisfied with their bodies as well as for prevention.

Just as identifying with an alternative subculture, being a part of a supportive relational community emerged as a protective factor in the study. Study participants spoke about the opportunity to share their experiences of living in their bodies during the study interview as a positive learning experience and pointed out that there were rarely such spaces in everyday life. Such spaces could prove to be beneficial in clinical practice with women with disordered eating as well as for prevention before more extreme forms of body dissatisfaction develop. Providing opportunities for girls and women to convene within a supportive relational context in clinics, educational institutions, and community settings, where they could share their body image-
related experiences, thoughts, and feelings, would allow them to create spaces in which they
could support each other.

Women in the present investigation spoke about a variety of protective factors that have helped them throughout their lives related to their experiences of identity, ways of inhabiting their bodies, and different social influences, which appeared to reinforce each other as well as to have an additive impact. Girls and women need to be taught, supported and encouraged to prioritize their own emotional and physical self care, develop critical thinking skills, engage in meaningful activities with passion and immersion, reject mainstream peer norms, and join alternative subcultures not based on appearance. They also need to be surrounded by supportive family, peers, and broader social environments, which would all in combination contribute to their ability to cultivate resilience against the thin aesthetic ideal.
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Appendix A

Poster Advertisement

Do you like your body no matter what its size?  
Do you feel comfortable eating whatever you want?  
Do you resist being affected by the ‘thin ideal’?

Then you are invited to participate in a research study that aims to understand what helps women resist the pressure to be thin. Women of all shapes, sizes, and diverse backgrounds (e.g. ethno-cultural group membership, sexual orientation) are welcome!!

Who are we? 
My name is Jane Mizevich and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto working on this project for my dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Niva Piran.

What is the goal of the study? 
Despite the high prevalence of eating disorders, little is known about what protects women from their development. The aim of this study is to understand what helps women resist the pressure to be thin.

Who is eligible to participate? 
We are looking for women of diverse backgrounds between the ages of 18 to 25. Since we are interested in what protects women from developing eating disorders, this study will only include women who have never received a diagnosis of or treatment for eating disorders and who have never had severe eating problems (such as bingeing and vomiting twice per week or more, binge eating, or women who have lost more than 15% of their body weight due to extreme dieting and are experiencing loss of menses as a result).

Benefits of the study 
You may find it interesting or exciting to talk about your experiences in an area where you have developed resilience to cultural pressures. Your participation in this study may also help to identify practical strategies that women could use to resist the pressure to be thin, that schools could use to create an environment that would foster resilience in girls, and that parents could use in the process of raising their daughters. A gift certificate in the amount of $15 will be given to those who choose to participate.

If you are interested, please contact Jane at 416-xxx-xxxx or resilientwomen@gmail.com.
Appendix B

PARTICIPANT CONSENT LETTER
(printed on university letterhead)

Resilient Women: Resisting the Pressure to Be Thin

Dear Participant:

My name is Jane Mizevich. I am a doctoral student, working with Dr. Niva Piran, in the Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). I am asking your permission to participate in the research project I am doing about factors that help women resist the pressure to be thin.

Purpose of the Research

Why am I doing this research? Most of the research to date suggests that the pressure to be thin is associated with the development of disordered eating. While all girls and women in the Western culture are exposed to the pressure to be thin, some are more able to resist body weight and shape pressures and develop a positive body image. In order to understand why some women develop disordered eating while other women are more able to resist pressures about body weight and shape, we need to hear from women themselves. In particular we want to understand what experiences help women feel, at least partially, protected from pressures about body weight and shape. This will help us identify practical strategies that women could use in everyday life to counter these pressures and that parents, teachers, health, and mental health professionals could use to foster resilience in young women.

Description of the Research

If you agree to participate, I will interview you 1 time for about 2-3 hours, depending on how much time you need. In the interview, I will ask you about your experiences that might have helped you resist pressures about body weight and shape. I will ask you about any further thoughts and views on this topic and will make sure I understood your experiences well. This will be an opportunity to let you know how much I value your opinions and contribution to the study. I will use an audio cassette tape recorder to record all interviews. I will conduct the interview at a private room at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, at your home, or another place of your choosing. When I have finished interviewing all women who are participating in the research and analyzing the interviews, I will be glad to share with you the results of the research. I would ask you for the way you prefer to receive this information, by mail, email, or by phone. If you have further questions about the results of the study, you are welcome to contact me.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality will be respected and your identity will be protected unless required by law. The tapes will be kept in locked files for 1 year and then destroyed. The tapes will be identified by a research code name only. The tapes will be transcribed and all identifying names and
information will be taken out of the transcripts. The transcribed interviews, and any additional material that you provide during the interviews, will be identified by a research code only, and with all identifying information erased, will be kept in locked files until five years following the completion of the study, and then will be shredded. In any publication related to this research, we will ensure that all identifying information will be omitted so that you will not be identified. The one exception to this is the very unlikely event that you indicate that you might do serious harm to yourself or others, or that someone under the age of 16 is being harmed in any way. If that were to happen, I would inform you and appropriate mental health professionals.

Potential Benefits

In terms of direct benefit, women often express an interest in having the opportunity to talk about their experiences of themselves and their bodies, and in this interview, I aim to emphasize how much I value each woman’s views and opinions and the special strengths she has in dealing with day to day situations. In terms of indirect benefit, a greater understanding of the factors that protect women from body weight and shape pressures may help both parents and professionals in providing better conditions for girls to grow into strong women with positive self and body image.

Potential Harms, Discomforts or Inconveniences

There are no known harms associated with participation in this study. The only potential risk I have identified is that you may feel some discomfort when talking about your experiences. In this case, you may decline to participate and if you decide to participate you may skip any question, request a break, or withdraw from the study at any time. Throughout the interview, and especially before the end of the interview, I will check the way you feel about the interview. Following the session, if you find the discomfort to be more than minor, please contact me so that we can discuss how to provide further support. Should you decide to withdraw your permission to participate in the study, please let me know about you decision by telephoning me at the number below.

Participation

Participation in research is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time without consequence and you may skip any questions you are uncomfortable with. Should you wish further information about the study, or have any questions please telephone me. My number is listed below.

Sincerely,

Jane Mizevich, M.A.
resilientwomen@gmail.com
(416) xxx-xxxx

Niva Piran, Ph.D.
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto
npiran@oise.utoronto.ca
(416) xxx-xxxx
“I acknowledge that the research procedures described above have been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been informed of the alternatives to participation in this study, including the right not to participate and the right to withdraw at any time. As well, the potential harms and discomforts have been explained to me and I also understand the benefits (if any) of participating in the research study. I know that I may ask now, or in the future, any questions I have about the study or the research procedures. I have been assured that research records relating to my participation in the research will be kept confidential and that no information will be released or printed that would disclose personal identity without my permission unless required by law”.

“I hereby consent to participate”.

_____________________________    The person who may be contacted about the research is:
Name of Participant                   Jane Mizevich
___________________________________    who may be contacted at:
Signature                       (416) xxx-xxxx
___________________________________    resilientwomen@gmail.com
Date

______________________________
Name of person who obtained consent
Signature
Appendix C

Interview Guiding Questions

Examining the participant’s interest in the research

• What made you interested in participating in this study?
• What do you hope to get out of participating in this study?

The central question of the study

• In this research, we are interested in what helps women resist body weight-related pressures and develop a positive body image. When you reflect on your life, what comes to your mind as important factors and experiences at any time in your life that have helped you resist body weight-related pressures and develop a positive body image?

Probes used to facilitate discussion about domains identified as protective in previous research, if not covered in response to the central question

Awareness and perception of societal messages

• What makes a woman feminine?
• What makes a woman attractive? Do you see yourself as feminine/attractive?
• How would you describe the ‘ideal woman’?
• Who do you think benefits from having women struggle with the thin ideal?
• Do you believe there is anything that women can’t do that men can? Is there anything that women shouldn’t do?

Significant others

• What is your relationship like with your mother? Father? Siblings? What was it like as you were growing up?
• How did your family members influence the way you felt about yourself/your body?
• What were your romantic relationships like? Did they influence the way you felt about your body? (if yes, in what way?) Did you ever talk about body weight with your romantic partners?
• What are your relationships like with your friends? What are your friends like? Are any of them concerned about their weight? Do you ever talk about weight with your friends? How about while you were growing up?
• Do you remember seeing your friends/family members dieting to lose weight or making negative comments about body weight? (if yes, how did you make sense of it? How did you react to it?)
• Do you have any role models?

Food and eating

• Did you have family meals as you were growing up? Tell me about it.
• What is healthy eating for you? Do you eat healthy?
• Do you remember learning about the dangers of dieting or about healthy eating? When? How did it affect you?

Extracurricular activities
• How did you spend your free time growing up? How about now?
• Did you play sports as you were growing up? How about now?

Media
• How much TV did you watch as you were growing up? How about now?
• Did you read magazines?
• How do you make sense of the images in the media?
• What happens when you encounter the thin ideal (e.g., on TV)? How does it influence you? How do you react to it?

Personal characteristics
• How would you describe yourself? (if asked to clarify, ask how she would describe herself to a stranger she needed to meet in public for the first time)
• How would you describe your personality?
• How do you feel about yourself?
• How do you see yourself in the future (e.g., in 10 years)? Any hopes or fears?
• What do you think makes you different from women who are not as resilient to pressures for thinness?

Moments of difficulty and change
• Were there any turning points in your life when you became more resilient to pressures for thinness? What helped?
• Were there times/situations you were not as resilient to pressures for thinness? How did you deal with that?
• What happens for you when you see other women struggle with the thin ideal? How do you react to it? What helps you be different?

Ending the interview
• What was it like for you to participate in the study?
• What advice would they give to women who are struggling with the thin ideal?