THE INFLUENCE OF PEER RELATIONSHIPS
ON WOMEN’S LIVED BODY EXPERIENCES ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of peers in women’s lived experiences in their bodies from childhood to young adulthood. The present study used a qualitative life history methodology to delineate the range of peer processes, both adverse and protective, that affect women’s connection to their bodies over time, as well as the meaning women make of these processes, and their internalized reactions to peer influences across a developmental trajectory. In-depth interviews were conducted among fourteen women between the ages of 25 and 35, representing diverse social and cultural backgrounds, as well as current and past eating and body image problems.

Women participated in open-ended interviews, using a series of guided questions about their experiences with peers that affected their lived experiences in their bodies, from childhood through to adulthood. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed for themes using a grounded theory methodology. Two interrelated models emerged from the data that clarified ways in which relationships with peers shaped interviewed women’s lived experiences in their bodies over time. The Peer Processes Related to Dominant and Alternative Norms, Ideals and Expectations Model addresses peer processes related to the promotion of dominant and alternative norms, ideals and expectations regarding appearance and ways of inhabiting the body as girls and women. The Implications of Peer Processes on Social Power and Acceptance model delineates the ways in which widely sanctioned norms, ideals and expectations pertaining to participants’ bodies and
appearances, are expressed and internalized through concerns for peer status, power, belonging and acceptance. The research has both clinical and research implications, shedding important light on the ways in which peers enhance, maintain and disrupt girls’ and women’s connection to their bodies over time.
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated in memory of my mother, Anita.

You inspired me to pursue my passions, and taught me that no dream was too big or unreachable.

Thank you for teaching me to believe in myself, to embrace who I am,

and to always respect and value my friendships.
INTRODUCTION

Body dissatisfaction and the preoccupation with weight and shape are increasingly common among girls and women in Western society (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantef-Dunn, 1999). Over the past decade, research has demonstrated the influences of these constructs on the increased development of low self-esteem, social anxiety, substance abuse, depression, and most notably, eating disorders (Cooley & Torry; 2001; Cash, Theriault, & Anness, 2004; Stice, 2004). As one of the most commonly diagnosed psychological disorders that plague girls and women today, affecting approximately 1.5% of Canadian females between the ages of 15 and 24 (Government of Canada, 2006), eating disorders also represent the highest incidence of inpatient hospitalizations, suicide attempts, and mortality of any psychological illness (Newman et al., 1996; Sullivan, 2002).

Much literature to date has examined disordered eating within the context of various sociocultural factors that have been shown to perpetuate body dissatisfaction and weight and shape preoccupation in girls and women. One of the most influential of these factors has been the relationship with one’s peers. Beginning in early adolescence, peers command and regulate strict norms for body size and physical appearance (Jones & Crawford, 2006). Representing important transmitters for weight-related values and ideals, peers maintain a profound impact on girls’ developing sense of their bodies as they navigate through adolescent development (Wertheim, Paxton, & Blaney, 2004). Direct social pressure, in the form of appearance-related messages transmitted via close female friends, and the importance of appearance to one’s social network, significantly increase girls’ body dissatisfaction and likelihood of their engagement in weight-control behaviours (Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005). Further, in adult women, peer dieting is associated with a greater drive for thinness (Gravener, Haedt, Heatherton
& Keel, 2008), while perceived peer norms of thin body standards are associated with greater body dissatisfaction (Krcmar, Giles, & Helme, 2008).

However, the existing literature has been limited across several domains. Firstly, research has completely neglected the developmental trajectory of women’s body experiences within the context of their evolving relationships with peers across the lifespan. The dearth of studies on adult women’s relationships with peers in connection to their bodies further represents a significant gap in the current literature. Secondly, existing research has predominantly focused on risk factors and negative outcomes with respect to peer influences, largely ignoring protective factors associated with positive body experiences. Thirdly, previous research has relied predominantly on quantitative methodologies that tend to objectively measure and narrowly define women’s diverse experiences according to dichotomous categories (e.g., negative vs. positive body image; body dissatisfaction vs. satisfaction). Lastly, and most significant in light of the present study, past research has paid little attention to the intersection of multiple social factors (e.g., social class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, education and health) among participants, thereby neglecting the complexity of women’s unique body experiences as they are simultaneously influenced by experiences of power and privilege in their diverse social environments.

Thus, to account for these shortcomings the current investigation adopted a critical social perspective to highlight the role of peer processes in relation to women’s evolving experiences in their bodies across the developmental trajectory. Particular emphasis was given to changes over time, including past experiences with peers that are influential in shaping current ways of living in the body, as well as interactions with other important influential social dimensions, such as social class and ethnocultural membership. To explore women’s experiences with their peers and the meanings they have given to these experiences over time, life history qualitative interviews
were conducted. Specifically, participants were asked to reflect on their significant relationships with peers from childhood to adulthood, and their understanding of the influence these relationships have had on their subjective experiences in and of their bodies. This particular methodology offered a unique exploration into the complexity of women’s experiences and the social processes that mediate the influence of women’s connection to their bodies throughout their lives.
CHAPTER ONE
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter commences with an explication of the study of sociocultural influences pertaining to women’s body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. Particular attention is given to the role of the internalization of the objectifying gaze and the transmission of gender-based social discourses in perpetuating the ‘normative discontent’. Following, the chapter introduces the significance of peer relationships across the developmental trajectory. The influence of peers in the construction of the self, along with changes in peer interactions across the lifespan is highlighted, with specific attention to the role of social comparison and concern for peer-based acceptance. The chapter then presents the role of peers as a key social mechanism through which girls and women develop a critical understanding in and of their bodies. This section includes a comprehensive review of the existing quantitative and qualitative literature that has explored the influence of peers within the context of girls’ and women’s body image and disordered eating. The chapter concludes with an introduction to Critical Social Theory as it relates to the study of women’s body experiences. A review of the Developmental Theory of Embodiment (DTE; Piran & Teall, 2012) will highlight the role of the critical social perspective in revolutionizing our understanding of girls’ and women’s unique lived experiences in their bodies, while problematizing the dominant discourses of body image in the existing literature.

Sociocultural Influences

Research on the etiology of body dissatisfaction and weight and shape preoccupation has increased substantially in response to the growing rates of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating among girls and women in Westernized societies. Earlier research largely focused on the influence of various biological and intra-individual psychological factors in the development of eating disorders, while social factors remained relatively unexplored (Piran, 2001a). While valid
in their own right, these studies failed to provide a model of the predictive social mechanisms that together impact an individual’s experiences of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, including direct and indirect influences from family members, peers, and the media. However, over the past two decades a large body of literature has focused exclusively on sociocultural risk factors, with empirical evidence lending strong support for their influence in the development of an individual’s body dissatisfaction, a known risk factor for disordered eating (Stice, 2002).

Research on sociocultural risk factors has focused largely on three important constructs believed to influence the development of body dissatisfaction: 1) awareness of the thin ideal; 2) internalization of the thin ideal; and 3) perceived pressure to conform to the thin ideal (Cafri, Yamamiya, Yuko, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005; Stice, 2002). Theoretically, sociocultural factors implicated in the development of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating among girls and women have been associated with the internalization of an objectifying gaze, in association with the transmission of pervasive gender-based social discourses pertaining to the thin ideal (Piran & Cromier, 2005; Smolak & Murnen, 2004).

**Internalization of the Objectifying Gaze and the Transmission of Gender-Based Discourses**

Resting on the premise of Fredrickson and Roberts’ (1997) ‘Objectification Theory’, society defines women’s bodies as objects to be gazed upon and evaluated, whereas men’s bodies are typically defined in terms of their performance and ability (Smolak & Murnen, 2004). As early as childhood, girls come to learn, through their interactions with peers, family members, and the media, that their bodies are under the constant gaze and scrutiny of others (Smolak & Murnen, 2004). These critical sources also transmit gender-based discourses (Blume & Blume, 2003), prescribing unto girls a misconstrued depiction of femininity, and the vastly unattainable ‘ideal’ body. The ‘thin ideal’ subsequently creates a sense of disillusionment, whereby girls learn to internalize, and further associate the ideal with prosperity, success, beauty and control. In a
desperate attempt to govern their body’s hungers, desires and needs, girls as young as 5 years of age begin to show preoccupation and dissatisfaction towards their bodies in not conforming to these idealized standards (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006). So pervasive is the internalized gaze and gender-based discourse among girls and women residing in Westernized societies, that researchers have coined the term ‘normative discontent’ to reflect the widespread and inescapable nature of body dissatisfaction and the preoccupation with weight and shape that arise from these processes (Rodin, Silberstien, & Stiegel-Moore, 1985).

Over the past decade research has evolved by focusing more intently on the specific processes that lead some girls and women more susceptible to the influence of these various sociocultural factors (e.g., peers, family, media) that transmit messages of the objectifying gaze and the importance of the thin ideal. As described by Cash and colleagues (2004), an individual’s attitude towards the body is comprised of one’s investment (i.e., the importance placed on one’s appearance as a measure of one’s self-worth); evaluation (i.e., the degree of satisfaction with one’s body); and affect (i.e., the overall feelings associated with the appraisal of one’s body). Researchers have proposed several mechanisms through which the internalization and perceived pressure to conform to the thin ideal permeate these constructs and lead some girls and women more susceptible to the development of body dissatisfaction and weight and shape preoccupation than others.

For instance, underlying the theory of objectification, social comparison has been highlighted as one of the primary mechanisms through which evaluation can lead to body dissatisfaction (Choate, 2005; Keery, van der Berg, & Thompson, 2004). Social comparison may take the form of direct physical comparisons women make of themselves to the internalized ideal, as well as comparisons made with other significant females in their environment (e.g., friends, family members, colleagues, etc.). As discrepancies arise between the individual and the subject
to which she compares herself to, her evaluation of the body crystallizes, and her satisfaction increases or decreases depending on the nature of the comparison (positive vs. negative). Research on adolescent girls’ comparisons with idealized media images (Durkin, Paxton, & Sorbello, 2007) and female peers (Jones & Crawford, 2006) lend strong support for the mediational role of social comparison in the internalization of the thin ideal, and the subsequent influence on body dissatisfaction and weight and shape preoccupation.

Merging together the role of social comparison and the internalization of the thin ideal, the Tripartite Influence Model (Keery et al., 2004) has been widely utilized to explicate the influence of the three critical transmitters of social norms for behaviour and appearance: media, family and peers. While the media’s influence on the internalization of societal appearance standards and resulting body dissatisfaction is widely documented (see Levine & Harrison, 2004), girls and women do not adopt a uniformed understanding of the thin ideal. Rather one’s internalization of these standards may be influenced, instead, by a more focused presence within the individual’s immediate social environment (e.g., through interactions with family and peers).

**Familial Factors**

As highlighted earlier, young girls acquire their meaning of the objectifying gaze and internalized gender-based social discourses through interactions with significant others in their immediate environment. Within the family, gendered norms for behaviour and appearances are transmitted via parents, siblings, and other influential family members, fostering girls’ developing understanding of their bodies in relation to the external world. Specifically, research has explored the role of familial dysfunction, direct modeling, and the perceived importance of weight and shape within the family, on the development of girls’ body image.

With respect to familial dysfunction, families characterized by less cohesion, less support for autonomy, less communication and expressiveness, as well as greater conflict and hostility,
have been associated with a higher incidence of daughters who endorse body dissatisfaction and disordered eating patterns (Connors, 1996). High expectations for achievement within the family have also been associated with a higher prevalence of eating disorders among young girls (Stern et al., 1989). According to familial modeling, mothers have most often been demonstrated as a significant source of influence on their daughters’ weight control behaviours, and concern for physical appearance, based upon their own endorsed attitudes and behaviours towards eating and weight preoccupation (Field et al., 2001; Smolak, Levine, & Schermer, 1999). Research on paternal modeling remains inconclusive. However, perceived norms of physical appearance from mothers, fathers and siblings, suggest that girls immersed in families that uphold rigid standards for physical appearance, are at a significantly elevated risk for the development of weight and shape preoccupation and disordered eating (Dixon, Gill, & Adair, 2003; Field et al., 2005).

While not to negate the critical role parents and families occupy as important behavioural models and transmitters of societal appearance norms, research has more recently demonstrated peers and friends as being equally, and in some cases, more influential in girls’ internalization and adoption of harmful appearance-based standards, particularly during adolescence (Huan, Lim, & Gunewardene, 2000; McCabe, & Ricciardell, 2005; Presnell, Bearman, & Stice, 2004). However, further research is necessary to elucidate the mechanisms through which girls negotiate distinct influences from their family and peer environments, and how these influences contribute to an understanding of their bodies during adolescence.

Peer Relationships in a Developmental Context

*The Construction of the Self*

Peers represent a significant role in the development of an individual’s sense of self. According to Harter (1999; 2006), the ‘self’ represents the plethora of meanings, characteristics and attributes that an individual ascribes to him/herself. The self is further regarded as an
important contributor to an individual’s overall psychological wellbeing and self-esteem. Immersed in one’s representation of the self, is one’s body image, or the attitudes and beliefs one possesses in regard to one’s physical appearance, and body weight and shape (Cash et al., 2004). As a product of both cognitive and social constructions, individuals’ sense of self develops both through the meanings they make of their experiences, and most significantly, through their interactions with individuals in their immediate social environment (Harter, 2006).

Symbolic Interactionists and Internalization of the Self

Within the social domain, Harter’s (1999) review of the literature on the construction of the self highlights the important contribution of symbolic interactionists who have emphasized the role of one’s social interactions in formulating accurate representations of the self. In particular, three critical processes have been identified in their contribution to the development of the self: i) one’s imitations of the behaviour, attitudes, and standards of significant others; ii) the adjustment and modification of one’s behaviour according to the approval of significant others; iii) and the internalization of the perceived opinions and beliefs significant others are deemed to hold towards the self.

Charles Horton Cooley (1902), who developed the theory of the “looking glass self” postulated that significant others represent a social mirror upon which we gaze to acquire their opinions toward the self. These opinions are re-formulated into our own sense of self as we envision how we might appear to the other person, their judgments based on our appearance, and our reaction to their reflected appraisals. In this regard, our understanding of the self is believed to develop from an internalization of the perceived opinions others hold with regards to our appearances, character, attitudes and personality (Harter, 1999).

Following Cooley’s (1902) “looking glass self”, George Herbert Mead (1925) elaborated upon the critical role of social interaction in the development of the self by introducing the notion
of the “generalized other.” According to Mead, individuals embody the role of the “generalized other” through their adoption of the attitudes of all significant others present in their immediate social environment. Within this framework, the collective judgments of others are believed to contribute to an individual’s global sense of self-worth (Harter, 1999).

Finally, James Mark Baldwin’s (1897) contributions articulated the idea of changes in the representations of the self both within a particular relational context and across different relational contexts. In this regard, he viewed the construction of the self as a product of the interactional process between the self and the other. According to Baldwin (1987), the individual is in a constant state of revolutionizing his/her self as he/she engages with any number of significant others in the immediate social environment (Harter, 1999).

The Developing Self

The contributions of Cooley’s, Mead’s and Baldwin’s distinct yet interrelated theories on self construction, offer important insight to the role peers play in the development of the self, and further, in the development of one’s attitudes and appraisals of the body, throughout childhood and adolescence.

Childhood

Beginning in early childhood (i.e., 3 to 5 years of age), Harter (1999) describes children’s self representations to arise out of their understanding and internalization of the behaviours, emotions, preferences, and other observable characteristics found in significant others. At this stage, young children lack the cognitive skills necessary to engage in a process of social comparison whereby they evaluate themselves, and others, in reference to their ‘ideal self’ (Harter, 1999). Further, children’s self-representations at this age are largely defined in terms of their preferences and their possessions (e.g., “I like the colour blue”, “I have a big sister”, etc.). Unable to formulate a concise understanding of their ideal self in reference to their own self-
representations, children at this age thus tend to be unrealistically positive in their evaluations and utilize self-descriptions relating to various talents or abilities (e.g., “I know how to write all the alphabet!”; despite only knowing how to print a few letters) (Harter, 1999). Additionally, according to Harter (1999), young children’s cognitive limitations during this stage of development limit their ability to develop an understanding of the concept of self-worth. As such, they have a tendency to describe themselves in terms of concrete physical and cognitive self-attributes (e.g., descriptions of their appearances, behaviours, and friendships). Despite these cognitive limitations, children at this age begin to show an understanding and appreciation for standards of behaviour set by significant adults in their lives (Harter, 1999). For instance, children will choose to engage in behaviours that invoke positive responses in their parents, and will avoid those that invoke negative responses. This cognitive development is closely associated with the rise in rudimentary expressions of self-esteem and shame at this stage (Harter, 1999).

As children enter into middle childhood (i.e., 6 to 7 years of age), their advancing cognitive skills contribute to their ability to link and relate representations to one another (Harter, 1999). For instance, a common thinking pattern in children at this age is the idea of opposites, which allows children to generate opposing concepts such as ‘short versus tall’, ‘thin versus wide’, and ‘good versus bad’. However, children remain unable to coordinate these opposing concepts into meaningful representations, resulting in unrealistically rigid or fixed descriptions of themselves and/or others in their environment (e.g., “My friend Tommy is good, therefore he can never be bad.”) In conjunction with the cognitive advancements at this stage of development, children also acquire perspective taking skills, permitting children to develop an understanding of what Cooley (1902) referred to as the “looking glass self”. At this stage, children begin to conceptualize the viewpoint others hold towards themselves, ultimately serving as a self-reference in how to appear and behave in line with the expectations of others. In contrast to early
childhood, in which behavior is externally controlled by modeling, reinforcement and punishment, children begin to internalize the perceptions and reactions of others in their immediate social environment. As children become more aware of others’ perceptions, and as their internalizations of these perceptions crystallize, children begin to develop their own personal standards and motivations for their behavior (Harter, 1999).

From middle to late childhood (i.e., 8 – 10 years), the most notable cognitive development related to the construction of the self is the ability for children to formulate higher-order concepts, or generalizations, of their self-attributes (Harter, 1999). In contrast to early childhood, where a child may proclaim him/herself as “a good friend because I have more friends than Tommy does”, a child at this stage is now able to integrate various behaviours and self-attributes into his/her formulation of what it means to be “a good friend” (e.g., “I’m helpful, kind, and a good listener, which makes me a good friend.”) (Harter, 1999). Consistent with this development, children in middle to late childhood also acquire a more integrated self-system in which formerly opposing self-concepts are able to coexist with one another (e.g., “There are times when I have not been very nice to some people, but overall I am good friend”). Most significantly, the ability to formulate and integrate these higher-order concepts is associated with children’s ability to compare and contrast representations of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, a process that is tightly connected with children’s development of their overall self-worth at this stage in development (Harter, 1999). In conjunction with this process children entering late childhood also begin to use others as sources of self-reference in order to establish comparative assessments with individuals, like peers, who arguably represent the most influential role in their self development at this stage, continuing into adolescence (Harter, 1999).

Adolescence
Early adolescence (i.e., 11–13 years) marks a shift towards an increasingly differentiated self as individuals become more introspective and preoccupied with the perceptions that others hold towards them, particularly with respect to their peer group (Harter, 1999). Through comparisons with peers, early adolescents evaluate themselves in reference to the similarities and differences present in, what Baldwin (1897) described as, the ‘self’ versus the ‘other.’ Simultaneously, as cognitive-developmental advances at this stage allow for greater differentiation in representations of the different selves they embody, early adolescents also learn to distinguish between their ‘real’ and ‘ideal’ selves, ascribing meaning to the differences that exist between these two constructs (Harter, 1999). Most significantly at this stage, discrepancies between their ‘real’ and ‘ideal’ selves can leave adolescents vulnerable to decreased confidence, esteem, and overall self-worth as they evaluate themselves across critical domains of reference, including appearances, popularity, and educational competence (Harter, 2006). Further, consistent with Baldwin’s (1987) theory of change in the representation of the self, adolescents at this stage also begin to recognize the different selves they embody within and across varying relational contexts (e.g., trusting with one’s closest friends; distant with one’s sibling; frustrated with one’s mother). However, their inability to integrate opposing self-attributes (e.g., introvert versus extrovert, depressed versus happy, etc.) protects early adolescents from the inherent conflict that eventually arises in middle adolescence when they struggle in making sense of who they really are (Harter, 1999).

In middle adolescence (i.e., 14-16 years), individuals learn to adopt distinct ‘selves’ through their acquisition of new, and increasingly differentiated roles in their social environment (e.g., athlete, student, musician, mentor, coach, etc.). Further, as they develop the cognitive capacity to compare and contrast different self-attributes which they embody within and across different social roles, they are faced with the challenge of deciphering their true persona, a
concept articulated by James (1892) as the “conflict of the different Me’s” (Harter, 1999). Unequipped with the cognitive skills required to integrate the different selves they embody at this age, adolescents particularly struggle in attempting to create, define and differentiate among their many self-attributes, and understand why and how the self changes in response to varying situations and relational contexts (Harter, 1999).

In her research on the changes in the self during adolescence, Harter (1999) has highlighted distinct gender differences with respect to the distress adolescents experience with regards to their conflicting self-attributes. Most interestingly, overtly feminine girls, who reject stereotypical masculine traits (pertaining to appearance, dress and behaviour) have been shown to express the most distress in accordance with their conflicting selves across varying relational contexts, when compared to girls who endorse a more androgynous, less feminine orientation, and boys. Harter (1999) proposes two possible hypotheses that may explain these findings. One hypothesis postulates that an overtly feminine gender orientation, largely defined by attentiveness, nurturing and sensitivity towards others, results in greater preoccupation with relationships, thereby making conflicting attributes across different relational roles more salient for the individual. Another hypothesis postulates that consistency in the self across different relational contexts (e.g., one peer group versus another) is more salient for feminine girls who supposedly place greater emphasis on the importance of their relationships, thereby, creating internal tension between the different self-attributes significant others may selectively reinforce in varying social environments. Though neither hypothesis has been explored further, they highlight important questions in reference to the present study, particularly with respect to how these possible tensions within the self become expressed through one’s appraisals of, and experiences in, the body.
Further, given that adolescence marks a time of the body developing and embodying a more ‘adult’ physique, there is increasing concern in how others view the self, and the tendency towards self-evaluation and comparisons with others is significantly elevated, particularly in reference to attributes of physical appearance and perceived physical attractiveness (Harter, 2006). Already well accustomed to the culturally prescribed norms for appearances and behaviour, the socializing environment of the adolescent, predominantly the peer domain, offers many opportunities for validation and rejection with respect to one’s physical attributes. Consistent with the theory of social comparison, as adolescents evaluate one another across pertinent characteristics (e.g., appearance, behaviour, intelligence) they internalize the standards of others in their social environment, and become increasingly aware of the marked discrepancies between their ‘real’ and ‘ideal’ selves. During middle adolescence this process is especially heightened as the many cognitive advances that accompany this stage of development also result in distorted perceptions in how others view or interpret the self. Consequently, middle adolescents often find themselves preoccupied with concerns of how others may perceive the self (Harter, 1999). This form of egocentrism leads many adolescents to exaggerate the level of differentiation between their ‘real’ self and the self to which they believe others project as the ‘ideal’, highlighting the attributes to which they ‘fail’ to live up to; a process which has serious implications for their self-esteem, body image and overall sense of self-worth (Harter, 1999; 2006).

Interestingly, research addressing the distinct predictors of self-worth among middle adolescent girls demonstrates physical appearance as the strongest predictor, over and above scholastic competence, social acceptance, behavioural conduct and athletic competence (Harter; 1993; Harter 1999). Consequently, girls whose self-worth rests predominantly on their physical appearance, are demonstrated to possess lower self-esteem and report more depressive feelings
than girls whose self-worth is based upon various non-appearance-related qualities or characteristics (e.g., the quality of their relationships, scholastic achievement, etc.) (Harter, 1993, 1999). Particularly relevant among females in Westernized societies, where the unattainable ideals of beauty and attractiveness are widely disseminated across various social domains (e.g., through discourses of femininity present in the media and within the familial and peer environments), adolescent girls whose self-worth depends largely on their physical appearance are therefore believed to be at a heightened risk for the development of body dissatisfaction, weight and shape preoccupation, and disordered eating.

**Implications of Puberty**

The onset of puberty marks the beginning of vast changes in the adolescent’s physical appearance. Girls who reach menarche earlier are often distinguishable from their same-aged peers on the basis of observable physical changes of maturation (e.g., development of breasts, weight gain, body hair). Evaluating themselves in reference to their peers, early pubertal girls notice fewer physical similarities than those who retain their pre-pubertal bodies (Posner, 2006). Negative appearance evaluations are especially prevalent among this group of girls, making them susceptible to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Mousa, Mashal, Al-Domi, & Jibril, 2010; Striegel-Moore et al., 2001).

Additionally, research on adolescent maturation in reference to other important social variables, including ethnicity and social class, has further demonstrated the increased risk of negative appearance evaluations as a consequence of early pubertal timing. Latin-American and African-American girls, for instance, have been shown to reach menarche at significantly earlier ages compared to White adolescent girls, hypothesized to be the result of genetics and/or differences in nutrition (Herman-Giddens et al., 1997). However, when controlling for differences in socioeconomic status alone, ethnic differences in pubertal timing appear to be void, such that
little to no differences exist between Latin-American and White adolescent girls, and between Latin-American and African-American adolescent girls; thereby suggesting the significance of socioeconomic status as an important environmental stressor in the lives of adolescent girls approaching menarche (Obeidallah, Brennan, Brooks-Gunn, Kindlon, & Earls, 2000). These results highlight the need for greater consideration into the varying social factors that contribute to girls’ physically developing bodies and differentiating selves throughout adolescence, particularly with respect to girls’ perceived appearance appraisals by their peers, and the influence this has on their distinction between their ‘real’ and ‘ideal’ selves, and overall self-worth.

*Late Adolescence to Young Adulthood*

Maturing into late adolescence (i.e., 17 - 19 years) and young adulthood, (i.e., 20 – 25 years), individuals formulate their self-attributions in a way that reflects their personal values, beliefs, and moral standards they have acquired through their internalizations or interactions with significant others along development (Harter, 1999). The dilemma of the contradictions between the individual’s differing selves also resolves as the individual acquires the skills necessary to reconceptualize and integrate different attributes according to their relatedness with one another along varying social contexts (e.g., the ability to be both shy on a blind date and outgoing with one’s close friends) (Harter, 1999). Additionally, greater autonomy in judgment and insight afford individuals at this stage the opportunity to solidify their own internal representations of the self, independent of external sources of self-knowledge (Harter, 1999).

Overall, the development of the self, which is predominantly influenced by interactions with significant others throughout childhood and adolescence, is an important contributor to overall psychological well-being and self-esteem. Dependent upon individuals’ internalization of the perceived attitudes, opinions and beliefs others hold towards them, the self develops as people
navigate their way through a process of self-evaluation, comparing their ‘real’ self to their ‘ideal.’

Adolescence marks a time for the increasingly differentiated self as individuals embody new roles within different relational contexts that require them to modify their self-attributes accordingly. As concern in how others view the self escalates during early to middle adolescence, the tendency towards evaluation and comparisons with significant others is heightened, particularly in reference to attributes of physical appearance and perceived physical attractiveness among girls. The interconnectedness between one’s self-representations and domains of global self-worth also become increasingly apparent, as perceived ideals of physical attractiveness become a salient determinant for many adolescent girls’ self-worth, and place them at a heightened risk for body weight and shape preoccupation and disordered eating. Taken together, the theory of the construction of the self across child and adolescent development plays a critical role in our understanding of the peer influences that impact girls’ and women’s appraisals of, and experiences in their bodies.

Peer Interactions Across the Lifespan

The evolving nature of peer relationships across the lifespan is another important domain to consider in our exploration of the influence peers have on women’s experiences in their bodies over the lifespan. The changing composition of peer groups across development suggests that the strength of influence that peers exert on one’s attitudes and behaviours likely changes over time. As such, the present section will provide a review of the changes in peer experiences from early childhood, through to adulthood, with particular emphasis on the nature of peer relationships and the role they play along various stages of development.

However, it is first important to address the terminology that will be used to describe one’s relationships with peers across the lifespan. The term ‘friend’ is most often used to describe an individual with whom someone shares a close, reciprocal, and often self-disclosing
relationship. Conversely, the term ‘peer’ in the existing child and adolescent literature refers to individuals of the same age cohort, who may not necessarily share a close, reciprocal relationship, but who comprise a shared relational context (e.g., students in the same class, members of the same sports team, individuals in the same work environment). In this regard, the term ‘peer’ does not always afford us with information into the nature or quality of one’s relationship with significant others. For instance, two people may be a part of the same relational context (e.g., members of the same school), yet have little real contact or interaction with one another. However, as the literature will reveal, even without close relational contact, peers, like friends, are shown to have a profound impact on an individual’s internalization of critical norms for appearance and behaviour. As such, both friends and peers were used interchangeably throughout the interviews and analysis depending on the nature and quality of the relationship under discussion.

The Organization of Peer Experiences

Rubin and colleagues’ (2006) succinct review on the composition of peer relationships across child and adolescent development provides an important look at the complexity that exists within the organization of peer experiences. While their analysis rests purely on the organization of peer relationships across childhood and adolescence, parallels can most certainly be drawn among adult relationships, which will be addressed later. Their review begins by highlighting the interrelated levels of social organization that underlie all peer experiences: i) interactions; ii) relationships and friendships; and iii) groups.

Interactions

Interaction defines the process of social exchange that occurs between two individuals. At the simplest level of social organization, interaction provides the opportunity for direct communication, and allows peers to learn how to exert influence over one another (e.g., through
arguments, self-disclosure, gossip, support for one another, etc.) During interaction individuals vary their behaviour according to their own personal goals and intentions, their understanding of the thoughts and feelings of the individual(s) on the reciprocal end of the interaction, and the overall context of the social interaction (e.g., who is present within and external to the interaction) (Rubin et al., 2006).

Relationships and Friendships

Relationships represent the next higher-order level of complexity in peer experiences. Relationships define the meanings, expectations and emotions that are derived from a series of interactions between people. One’s degree of closeness in a relationship can be determined by the frequency and strength of the relationship itself, as well as the emotions that are elicited through interactions (e.g., love, attachment, affection). Typically, close dyadic relationships (i.e., between two individuals) create, what Rubin et al. (2006) refer to as, a “shared culture” that encompasses normative expectations for behaviour, activities and communication. Dyadic relationships provide a distinct bond of closeness that distinguishes them from other forms of peer interaction. The most frequently cited form of dyadic relationships is friendships. Characterized by reciprocity, friendships typically involve a shared sense of affection that binds two people together. The high degree of commitment, attachment and investment that frequently defines close friendships make them an especially meaningful, and powerful source of influence for the individuals who comprise them (Rubin, et al., 2006).

Important to note is the role that peer relationships play in the larger relational context of an individual’s environment. For, instance, children’s peer relationships are often influenced in many ways by the relationships they have with their parents and siblings in the home. Relationships with family members set the stage for children’s expectations of relationships in the outside world. Additionally, children’s first interactions with peers are often reflective of their
internalized norms for relationships depicted within the immediate family environment (Rubin et al., 2006).

Groups

Defined as a collection of individuals who interact to produce reciprocal influence over one another, groups represent the final higher-order level of complexity in peer experiences. Formed either spontaneously or through the association of common interests and/or circumstances, groups are often defined by cohesiveness (i.e., degree of closeness), hierarchy (i.e., status among group members), homogeneity (i.e., similarity across characteristics of the groups members), and norms (i.e., behaviours and patterns that define the members of a group and differentiate them from other groups) (Rubin et al., 2006). Group norms, as is particularly evident among peer interactions in middle childhood to adolescence, can serve as an important means of distinguishing separate crowds or cliques of people across peer networks. In this respect, the distinction of individual crowds or cliques among peer groups can give rise to tension for children and adolescents as they navigate their way through different status hierarchies, and confront the determinants of their acceptance or rejection within a peer crowd (Rubin et al., 2006). Of particular significance to an individual’s acceptance in a peer group or crowd is their degree of popularity among other group members, a construct, which in late childhood to adolescence, is often based upon attributes of physical appearance (Mafrici, 2009).

The Influence of Ecological Systems Theory

Lastly, an important component that Rudin et al. (2006) introduces is the impact of the larger “cultural macrosystem” in influencing the child’s interactions with his/her peers. Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological systems theory is particularly relevant to this analysis. According to Bronfenbrenner’s (1997) theory, development is influenced by the individual’s interactions with the changing environmental contexts in which he/she lives and grows.
Comprised of five distinct layers, the model begins with the microsystem, where the individual resides and interacts with the social contexts closest to him/her (e.g., family, peers, school, neighborhood). Following is the mesosystem, encompassing the connections that exist between structures in the individual’s microsystem (e.g., the relationship between one’s family and peers). The exosystem refers to a layer comprised of larger social systems in which the individual is not directly involved in, but nonetheless is influenced by (e.g., mother’s experiences at work influencing the child’s interactions with her in the home). The macrosystem, which is most relevant for the present explanation, defines the individual’s larger cultural context. Included in this layer are cultural values, norms and beliefs, as well as the defining constructs of gender, socioeconomic status, poverty, religion and ethnicity. And finally, is the chornosystem, which represents the timing of various transitions (e.g., puberty, marriage, etc.), or environmental and sociohistorical events (e.g., natural disaster, war, etc.)

In Rubin et al.’s (2006) review, the macrosystem, which is often neglected in the literature, is recognized as an especially important domain to consider when exploring peer relationships, particularly given the enormous influence of culturally-sanctioned norms and beliefs in regulating and permitting individual characteristics and the types of interactions or relationships individuals engage in. Extending into the present study, this idea allows us to consider the influence of various macrosystem constructs, such as gender or social class, on one’s experiences in the body within the context of one’s peer relationships across development.

Early Childhood

The remainder of this section will address the evolving nature of peer relationships according to various developmental stages in order to provide a foundation for which to begin to explore peers as they relate to girls’ and women’s experiences in their bodies over time.
Experiences with peers represent an important developmental context for children, upon which they acquire various skills, behaviours, attitudes and appearances that later shape their adaptation across the developmental trajectory (Rubin et al., 2006). In reference to social learning theorists, peers provide the platform for which children first come to acquire an understanding of normative social behaviour. In early childhood (i.e., 3 – 5 years of age), individuals’ transition from their engagement in unoccupied and solitary play in infancy to associative and cooperative play, whereby they learn to engage and share with others in their peer environment. They also begin to show preferences for some peers over others, particularly those whose behavioural tendencies are in line with their own. The development of true dyadic friendships marks an important developmental milestone for children at this stage, given that it rests on a distinct capacity for socio-cognitive understanding and emotional reciprocity. Preschool groups also begin to form, and operate on dominance hierarchies whereby group members are assigned status based on their capacity to overrule acts of overt aggression, such as physical attacks, threats, etc. Aggression is therefore regarded as one of the most important predictors of peer groupings among preschool-aged children (Rubin et al., 2006).

Middle Childhood to Adolescence

Beginning in middle childhood (i.e., 6 - 7 years of age) through to adolescence (i.e., 11 – 19 years of age), the time that is spent with peers increases by up to thirty percent (from ten percent in early childhood) (Rubin et al., 2006). Peer groups also become larger, and interactions among peers are supervised less closely by adults. Additionally, the settings of peer interactions shift to include a wider range of social contexts (e.g., school, sports teams, etc.). Domains of interaction also evolve into more highly coordinated activities, such as games that afford formal rules. Verbal and relational aggression also becomes more pronounced compared to the more overt forms of physical aggression seen among preschool-aged children (Rubin et al., 2006).
With respect to close relationships, children’s understanding of friendships develops in middle childhood (i.e., 6 – 7 years) through to early adolescence (i.e., 11 - 13 years of age). In particular, greater focus is placed on the relationship of best friends, and the importance of intimacy and loyalty in these friendships. The important role of best friends is highlighted by research demonstrating numerous psychosocial consequences for children who do not have a best friendship (e.g., peer victimization, social isolation) (Rubin et al., 2006). Further, numerous differences exist between the composition of best friendships among girls and boys. Girls’ friendships embody greater intimacy, validation, self-disclosure and co-rumination compared to boys; these same characteristics are believed to make girls’ friendships more fragile (Rubin et al., 2006).

The transition into adolescence also represents an important shift in friendships with other-sex peers. Particularly for girls, who begin developing friendships with their older male peers around this time (Poulin & Pedersen, 2007), romantic relationships become a primary focus for many adolescents. Further, interest in other-sex relationships represents an important influence on an individual’s sense of self-worth, power, and confidence as they proceed into early adulthood, particularly for girls, who are more prone to sexual objectification and body harassment by their male peers (Mafrici, 2009; Piran et al., 2009).

The structure of peer groups also changes in late childhood (i.e., 8 – 10 years of age) through to adolescence (i.e., 11 – 19 years of age) as bonds between friendships grow closer. For instance, cliques, of typically three to nine individuals, begin to emerge and represent an important means for establishing status among various other groups of peers (Collins & Steinberg, 2006). Most often comprised of individuals of the same gender and race, cliques are one of the most common domains of peer interaction in childhood through to adolescence (Rubin et al., 2006). The importance given to popularity also quickly escalates as cliques form, and
concern for acceptance intensifies. A powerful predictor of mental health and well-being in adulthood (Parker, Rubin, Price, & DeRosier, 1995), peer acceptance is a critical domain within the peer environment, particularly given that concern for acceptance marks one of the most significant changes among interactions with peers in middle childhood through to adolescence. Closely associated with girls’ developing preoccupation with their bodies, concern for acceptance is demonstrated to significantly influence girls’ internalization of peer appearance standards, particularly as they relate to acquiring and sustaining popularity status (Mafrici, 2009; Piran et al., 2009).

Along this domain, gossip, bullying and peer victimization emerge in response to popularity rankings. In particular, popular girls engage in the strict policing of appearances and behaviours of other girls in their peer environment. Conveying often harmful feminine ideals (e.g., thin body standard), popular girls actively reprimand and reject those who do not adhere to the norms of their clique or peer group (Mafrici, 2009; Piran et al., 2009). Incorporating the cultural macrosystem in this analysis, social class is shown to significantly interact with girls’ establishment of social hierarchies and popularity rankings within the peer group, particularly as it relates to popular clothing (Mafrici, 2009; Piran et al., 2009). Individuals unable to afford expensive clothing brands as a result of their financial situation may be at a heightened risk for peer victimization and bullying on the basis of their physical appearance (Mafrici, 2009; Piran et al., 2009).

The evolving nature of peer relationships from middle childhood through to adolescence demonstrates the strong influence peers command over one another at this stage of development, particularly with respect to the transmission of norms for behaviour and appearance that regulate access into social groupings or cliques.

Adulthood
Far less research has been devoted to exploring the nature of peer relationships in adulthood (i.e., 20 + years of age). Within the limited studies that do exist, explorations into adult friendships reflect more the changing structure of friendships, as opposed to the interaction between one’s relationship with friends and self-development (Sherman, Vries, & Landsford, 2000). In their review of the limited research on friendships across the lifespan, Blieszner and Roberto (2004) highlight important age-related changes in friendships as individuals proceed into adulthood.

Most notably, adulthood marks the emergence of numerous changes in roles and responsibilities, which largely impact an individual’s relationships with his/her friends. For instance, the rise in committed relationships in adulthood is shown to result in decreased reliance on friends for emotional support, particularly as people turn more towards their spouses or partners to seek assistance for their emotional needs (Carbery & Buhrmester, 1998). Additionally, adults reportedly spend less time with their friends as a result of constraints in their time due to changes in responsibilities, such as raising children or caring for elderly parents (Adams & Blieszner, 1996). Other constraints on friendships include the rise in illness, disability and death in older adults (Sherman, Vries, & Lansford, 2000).

Another important characteristic difference between adolescent and adult friendships is the flexibility inherent in friendship networks. In contrast to the highly rigid cliques defined by social hierarchies in adolescence, adults are more inclined to occupy diverse friendship networks; this is especially true among individuals who have been exposed to more diverse social communities in universities, colleges, or places of employment (Stearns, Buchmann, & Bonneau, 2009). Although little research exists on the nature of friendship groupings within adulthood, Blieszner and Roberto (2004) propose that as individuals reach middle adulthood, the introduction of new interests, hobbies, and activities as a result of impending retirement may
enhance the formation of new friendship circles as adults join various organizations, clubs and communities.

Further, with respect to the changing quality in friendships across adult development, adults are typically less likely to characterize their friendships according to the amount of face-to-face time they occupy (as is typical in childhood and adolescence), particularly as phone calls, e-mails and letters have become the more common means of staying connected (Johnson & Troll, 1994). As individuals reach older age they are also more likely to consider casual acquaintances as friends, as well as family members (Sherman et al., 2000), likely due to fewer opportunities for developing new friendships, along with the rise in deaths of one’s close friends in older age.

Apart from the aforementioned age-related changes in friendship structures, certain qualities of friendships remain consistent from adolescence through to adulthood. For instance, the gendered nature of friendships is as prevalent among adults as adolescents, with same-gender friendships between women characterized by greater levels of intimacy, self-disclosure and emotional support (Sherman et al., 2000). Further, friends continue to demonstrate a profound influence on an individual’s social and psychological well-being in adulthood (Sherman et al., 2000). However, a significant issue in the existing research on adult friendships is the limited information provided on interactions among different types and groups of friends, as is frequently documented in the child and adolescent literature. This is particularly important in light of the present study when considering the various risk and protective factors that arise through different relationships with one’s many friends across the life course. Additionally, research has largely neglected the influence of macrosystem variables, such as ethnicity, physical disability, health and social class, and their intersection with developing friendships in adulthood.

In sum, relationships with peers and close friends maintain a profound influence on the lives of individuals across the developmental trajectory. Beginning in early childhood (i.e., 3 – 5
years), children acquire an understanding of peer relationships through their initial interactions with same-aged peers in their immediate social environments. As children proceed into middle childhood (i.e., 6 – 7 years) through to early adolescence (i.e., 10 – 13 years), concern for acceptance intensifies as peers command strict norms for admission into groups and cliques. Though far less literature is available on adults’ evolving friendships, concern for acceptance is hypothesized to depreciate as a result of a stronger sense of self at this stage in life, greater appreciation for diversity within friendships, and increasing constraints on friendships as a result of changing roles and responsibilities. However, further research is needed to better understand the nature and influences of peer relationships in adulthood.

Overall, while the structure of peer experiences evolve across the developmental trajectory, peers maintain a significant role in the construction of an individual’s sense of self and their overall psychological wellbeing. Of particular relevance to the lives of young girls and women, who are most negatively impacted by the objectifying gaze, peers represent important transmitters of gender-based discourses and norms for physical appearance, which have a significant impact on how girls and women perceive, and live in, their bodies. The following section thus provides a detailed review of the existing quantitative and qualitative literature documenting specific peer influences on girls’ body image and disordered eating.

Peers in Connection to the Body

As outlined in the previous section, relationships with peers contribute to an important aspect of socialization in which one acquires norms for physical appearances, attitudes and behaviours. Research on peer influences in connection to the body is far more prevalent within the child and adolescent literature, largely due to the prominent role that physical appearances have been shown to play in peer acceptance and popularity at this stage in development. However, studies on young adult women’s experiences in connection to peers and their bodies do
highlight commonalities across several of the peer domains identified in the child and adolescent literature; though largely understudied is the influence of peer appearance-related victimization. The present review thus begins by outlining the abundance of quantitative studies that have explored the relationship between peers, and girls’ and women’s bodies, with respect to the internalization and adoption of appearance norms. The review concludes with a presentation of the few qualitative studies that have expanded upon the existing literature in providing the opportunity to listen to the voices of girls and women as they narrate their unique experiences with peers in their own social environments.

Quantitative Literature

Peers play an increasingly influential role as individuals proceed from childhood through to adolescence. Particularly important in the lives of young girls are the standards peers command and regulate for body size and physical appearance. Encompassing what researchers have referred to as a highly rigid “appearance culture” (Jones & Crawford, 2006), peers represent important transmitters for appearance-related values and ideals that exhibit a profound impact on girls’ sense of self and body image throughout development (Wertheim et al., 2004). Within this appearance culture girls quickly learn to adopt, reinforce and maintain norms pertaining to body weight and shape management, negative weight-related cognitions, and body dissatisfaction, each known risk factors for the development of eating disorders (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007; Eisenberg & Neumark-Sztainer, 2010; Stice & Whitenton, 2002).

For adults, the literature is much more sparse with respect to women’s attitudes, feelings and perceptions in and of their bodies in connection to their relationships with peers. Predominantly focused on young adults, or college-aged women, these studies resemble several of the peer processes demonstrated to influence the internalization of appearance norms in the child and adolescent literature, including direct peer pressure to conform to societal standards of
attractiveness, perceived importance of appearances to friends, and appearance based comparisons. However, a prominent domain of the child and adolescent literature that is largely absent in the adult literature is concern for peer acceptance in connection to upholding various body standards. This is not surprising given the increased flexibility inherent in adult friendship networks, and the significantly reduced focus in upholding highly rigid cliques; which we see in the adolescent literature is largely defined by strict appearance standards. Another domain largely understudied in the adult literature is current experiences of peer appearance-related victimization. Closely connected to young girls’ internalization of the rigid appearance standards upheld across various peer groupings, appearance-related teasing and harassment are predominantly studied in reference to children’s and adolescents’ experiences in their immediate social environments.

The following review thus explores several peer processes that have been demonstrated to have a significant impact on girls’ and women’s bodies, and specifically, their internalization and adoption of the dominant appearance norms within their peer environments.

The Internalization and Adoption of Appearance Norms Across Childhood, Adolescence & Adulthood

Through a method of what Jones (2004) has referred to as “appearance training”, young girls define and regulate the parameters for what is idealized and acceptable within their peer environments, a process which is closely associated with popularity and peer status hierarchies. Evident in a wide range of health-related behaviours, including smoking, drinking and sexual behaviour, conformity to peer norms plays an important role in girls’ acquisition of status among their peers (Mueller, Pearson, Miller, Frank & Turner, 2010). Girls therefore acquire an understanding of the values, ideals and behaviours most prevalent within their peer environment through their interactions with one another. Consistent with Social Comparison Theory
(Festinger, 1954), girls then utilize this information to evaluate their bodies in relation to one another, and to determine whether one adheres to carefully prescribed norms for clothing, body size and overall physical appearance (Nichter, 2000; Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999). Evident in children as young as 4 years of age who have been shown to endorse negative attitudes towards overweight peers (Holub, 2008), peer evaluation demonstrates a significant role in the concern for peer acceptance throughout childhood and adolescence.

Similarly within adulthood, women are largely influenced by their friends’ perceived standards of attractiveness (Krcmar et al., 2008) and direct modeling of weight-control behaviours (Gravener et al., 2008). However, less is known about the content and nature of the interactions that encourage the internalization and adoption of peer norms for body size and physical appearance among women.

According to the quantitative literature, the degree to which girls and women learn to internalize and/or adopt peer norms for body size and physical appearance is influenced by the following peer processes: i) appearance conversations and appearance-related pressure; ii) perceived importance of appearance to peers; iii) appearance-based acceptance; iv) appearance comparisons; v) appearance-related victimization; and vi) other relational constructs.

**Appearance Conversations and Appearance-related Pressure**

Appearance conversations and appearance-related pressure comprise two important and interrelated processes within the peer appearance culture that shape girls’ and women’s internalization and adoption of peer norms for body size and physical appearance.

Appearance conversations may take the form of both general appearance-related discussions (e.g., conversations about physical appearance, body weight, shape and clothing), as well as more specific ‘body change talk’ (e.g., conversations about dieting or weight loss behaviours) (Jones & Crawford, 2006.) Research on the influence of appearance-related
conversations among children and adolescents highlights the significant consequences of talking negatively about the body with one’s peers, such as increased body dissatisfaction (Nichter, 2000). Directly applying norms for acceptable body size and shape within their immediate social environment, appearance conversations convey to peers the importance of achieving and maintaining the thin ideal (Nichter, 2000). Particularly during adolescence, girls report significantly more conversations related to appearances compared to boys and pre-adolescent girls (Clark & Tiggemann, 2007; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Jones & Crawford, 2006; Sinton & Birch), placing them at a considerably higher risk for engagement in appearance comparisons, greater internalization of the thin ideal and greater body dissatisfaction over time (Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004). The effects also appear to be mediated by Body Mass Index (BMI), with one study demonstrating that girls with higher BMIs more frequently engage in body change conversations with their friends, particularly around topics of dieting and weight loss (Jones & Crawford, 2006). Additionally, while it remains unclear the extent to which appearance conversations permeate women’s peer environments in adulthood, research does highlight self-degrading “fat talk” as a normative dialogue among college-aged peers (Britton, Martz, Bazzini, Curtin, & LeaShomb, 2006; Nichter, 2000).

Further, direct social pressure to conform to appearance-related norms, typically expressed through messages transmitted via close female friends, has been shown to significantly predict adolescent girls’ engagement in body change strategies (e.g., dieting and exercising for weight loss) (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005; Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999). In a longitudinal sample exploring adolescent girls’ and their friends’ reported pressures to be thin, researchers demonstrated that while overt acts of criticism in relation to physical appearance were more recognizable within the peer environment, benign messages encouraging thinness occurred at a much greater frequency, and pressures to be thin were predictive of higher incidences of
disordered eating over time (Shomaker & Furman, 2009). Again, research has suggested that body size may moderate the influence of peer appearance pressure, demonstrating that overweight or at-risk youth are more prone to experiencing appearance pressure from their friends (Thompson et al., 2007). Additionally, highlighting important interactions that occur among other sociocultural pressures, Agras and colleagues (2007) studied 134 children from birth to 11 years of age, revealing that parental behaviours, such as over control of children’s eating, combined with later parental and peer pressure to be thin, were together related to higher levels of thin body preoccupation and appearance pressure among girls.

Further, while studies on peer appearance pressure among children and adolescents have utilized predominantly homogenous samples (e.g., Caucasian, middle class), a few studies exploring peer pressures and Chinese adolescents’ weight-related attitudes and behaviours have yielded similar results (Jackson & Chen, 2007; Jackson & Chen, 2010; Xiaoyan et al., 2010). Of particular interest are the noticeable gender differences that describe specific peer influences. In their study on both male and female Chinese students between 12 and 16 years of age, Xiaoyan et al. (2007) revealed that peer pressure among boys was directed more towards muscle building, whereas pressure among girls was directed towards weight loss, resulting in increased body dissatisfaction. This finding is consistent across research highlighting gender differences in the preoccupation with distinct aspects of socially constructed ideals for physical appearance (e.g., thinness among females versus muscularity among males) (see McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004).

With respect to peer appearance pressure in adulthood, one study examining the messages emerging adults (i.e., aged 18-25 years) from a university in the northeast United States received from the media, family, peers and school environment about physical appearance, demonstrated that although all message sources are important in the transmission of appearance norms, the school environment represented an especially prominent learning context for appearance
standards (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2009). This finding is particularly important with regards to peer relationships specific to the school context that may influence girls’ and women’s perceived body and appearance norms differently from the socializing context of their close female friends. Additionally, women were more likely than men to receive negative messages, as well as messages concerning the importance of thinness, and the association between thinness and success, particularly among those transmitted via peers and the media. Interestingly, however, positive appearance messages were most commonly reported from family and peers, highlighting the importance of studying the transmission of positive appearance communication in light of protective factors supporting girls’ and women’s body esteem. Lastly, while a particular strength of this study was the incorporation of ethnicity as a variable that may relate to differences in the transmission of appearance messages, few quantitative differences emerged. Most significantly, compared to Latino Americans, African Americans were more likely to perceive positive appearance messages from their family members, while no differences were noted among messages perceived by peers, the media or within the school environment. However, it is impossible to draw any conclusions with respect to ethnicity given that the study took place at a largely European American University, and differences in other critical social variables, such as level of acculturation, family heritage, and social class were not incorporated into the analyses. These results highlight the need for further research into the influence of ethnicity, in connection with other important intersecting social variables, on women’s body experiences in connection to their peers.

Overall, peers significantly reinforce body-related norms through appearance conversations and other forms of direct appearance pressure within childhood, adolescence and emerging adulthood. Further, specific to children and adolescents, research has demonstrated the profound impact of appearance conversations and/or direct forms of appearance pressure on girls’
internalization and adoption of dangerous weight-control behaviours. Unfortunately, the large majority of this research has relied exclusively on scale measurements to examine general peer comments, offering little insight to the specific content of more ‘benign’ forms of peer appearance pressure that have been shown to more frequently dominate the peer environment. Further, research has largely neglected the role of broader social variables, such as ethnicity and social class, in the way girls and women perceive and experience appearance pressure from their close friends and within their larger peer environment.

*Perceived Importance of Appearance to Peers*

The peer environment is believed to create a ‘subculture’ that reinforces societal standards of the thin ideal through modeling and direct reinforcement of appearance standards (Gravener et al., 2008). Peer modeling of appearance-related attitudes and behaviours is a key mechanism through which children and adolescents first come to recognize the perceived importance of appearances within their peer context. According to Bandura’s (1977) Social Learning Theory, individuals learn about highly valued socially prescribed norms within heir immediate social environments as they interact with, observe and reflect upon the behaviours of others. Further, individuals most often tend to model the behaviours of others who they view as similar to them in age, gender and ethnicity, as well as those who are perceived as highly competent, attractive and embodying social power. Thus, within children’s and adolescent’s immediate social environments, peers represent critical transmitters of highly valued appearance norms through their own modeling of appearance-related behaviours.

Perceived importance of appearance, particularly with respect to body weight and shape, is demonstrated to be strongly correlated with high levels of body concern and weight preoccupation among adolescent girls (Paxton, et al., 1999; Schutz & Paxton, 2007). Furthermore, perceived importance of thinness is associated with a greater drive for thinness,
increased body concern and greater likelihood to engage in dieting (Field et al., 2005; Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007). Prospective research lends support for the long-term implications of direct peer modeling, highlighting that friends’ dieting behaviours in early adolescence are significantly related to girls’ own engagement in chronic dieting, unhealthy and extreme weight control and binge eating five years later (Eisenberg & Newmark-Sztainer, 2010).

Research has also explored perceived importance of appearance in the context of peer groupings and crowds. A recent study examining peer crowd affiliation, perceived friend concern with weight, and weight control behaviours among a sample of ethnically diverse adolescent girls, demonstrated that girls’ own concern and perceived peer concern with weight was strongly associated with their level of identification across various peer crowds (e.g., ‘Jocks’, ‘Brains’, ‘Alternatives’) (Mackey & La Greca, 2008). For instance, girls who affiliated with crowds defined largely by attitudes and behaviours that were deemed characteristically distinct from appearance (e.g., ‘Brains’ or ‘Jocks’) reported less concern with their weight and fewer perceived norms about thinness from their peers, compared to girls who were part of crowds in which appearances were a defining characteristic of their group’s organization.

With respect to young adults, no studies exist on the importance of appearances in the context of peer groupings and crowds; however, recent research does highlight the influence of perceived peer norms of appearance in reduced body esteem and the increased likelihood of engagement in body change strategies among university-aged women (Krcmar et al., 2008; Lee, Damhorst, & Ogle, 2009). Interestingly, within a study by Krcmar et al., (2008), perceived norms of thinness from both parents and peers were shown to mediate the relationship between exposure to thin media images and body satisfaction, demonstrating the significant impact of one’s social environment in reinforcing or negating the negative effects of the media.
Additionally, in one of the few studies incorporating midlife women’s experiences with respect to peer influences, Gravener et al., (2008) surveyed both men and women’s perceived peer dieting behaviours across late adolescence, adulthood and midlife in connection to their eating and health behaviours. Significant associations were demonstrated between perceived peer dieting and drive for thinness among both women and men. Of significance, however, was the finding that women’s associations were strongest in late adolescence for their same-sex peers, potentially accounting for why drive for thinness may decline with age among women (Graverner et al., 2008). However, it remains unknown whether women are merely less exposed to peer dieting behaviour in adulthood, or whether they are simply less susceptible to the pressures due to other intrapsychic variables, thus representing an important avenue for future research. Overall, while the study offered an innovative exploration into women’s peer experiences in connection to their pursuit of thinness across a developmental trajectory, the measures were largely simplistic in nature and likely introduced some degree of bias or unreliability in participants’ self-reports. For instance, measures of participant and peer dieting were attained through a single question posed to each participant: “how often are you dieting?” and “what percentage of your female (or male) friends diet?” Utilizing a single, quantifiable measure to capture individuals’ experiences with peer dieting largely ignores the variability inherent in women’s perceived appearance pressures within changing peer contexts (e.g., differences across distinct peer networks and among friends themselves.)

Thus, the quantitative research on peer modeling and the perceived importance of appearance demonstrates important social influences on girls’ and women’s body esteem and engagement in weight-related behaviours throughout adolescence and into adulthood. However, the majority of studies have been correlational in nature, making it impossible to decipher the directionality of the relationship between girls’ and women’s concern with their bodies, and their
perceived friends’ concerns. For instance, individuals who exhibit high body concern and dieting behavior may immerse themselves in a peer culture that already fosters the high importance of body weight and shape, or they may project their attitudes and beliefs of appearance ideals on to the members of their peer circle (Paxton et al., 1999). This represents a critical area for future research, as it would allow for more focused prevention initiatives within the peer environment. In order to address this gap in the current literature, a life history methodology grounded in a qualitative approach is necessary to examine the complexity of peer influences on women’s life history body experiences, based upon their own unique reflections of the peer processes that encompass their immediate social environments.

Appearance-based Acceptance

Appearance-based acceptance concerns are particularly important in light of body-related norms that girls learn to internalize and adopt within their peer environments. Given that young girls in Westernized countries are demonstrated to promote a culture of thinness and dieting within their peer groups (Sinton & Birch, 2006), it is no surprise that acceptance into these groups is often based upon whether or not individuals conform to strict appearance standards regulated by their group members (Mafrici, 2009). The implications of appearance-based acceptance are detrimental to girls overall physical and mental well-being. For instance, girls who believe that conforming to the thin ideal is important and/or would improve their peer relationships, are at a significantly heightened risk for the development of body dissatisfaction and extreme weight-loss behaviors (Paxton, et al., 1999; Gerner & Wilson, 2005); this trend is particularly salient among girls with a higher BMI who are more prone to appearance pressure from their peers (Jones & Crawford, 2006).

Within the adolescent peer environment, popularity is particularly influential with respect to girls’ internalization of appearance-related norms, given that peer acceptance is frequently
based upon adherence to strict appearance standards (Mafrici, 2009). Longitudinal research demonstrates that girls who possess higher scores on popularity are more likely to experience increases in negative body and weight-related cognitions over time (Rancourt & Prinstein, 2010), possibly due to their constant vigilance in maintaining strict appearance standards in conforming to their peer group.

With respect to young adult women, there is some research indicating that women exhibit more restrictive eating in relation to fears of negative evaluation by others (Gilbert & Meyer, 2005). However this research has not been specific to peers, nor does it describe the social context of women’s fears of negative evaluation and its reference to their internalization of socially prescribed norms for appearance. No other quantitative studies have been conducted on women’s concern for peer acceptance in relation to their internalization and adoption of appearance-related norms.

Overall, concerns for peer acceptance play an influential role in girls’ internalization and adoption of appearance-related norms, particularly during adolescence. However, further research is necessary to uncover the role of concern for peer acceptance among adult women, particularly in reference to fears of negative evaluation and increased body concerns. Additionally, future research should examine concerns for peer acceptance within friendship groups over time to determine how development influences girls’ and women’s perceived concerns with acceptance in connection to their changing bodies and appearances.

**Appearance Comparisons**

Appearance comparisons encompass the judgments that individuals make concerning their physical appearance in reference to others (Jones & Crawford, 2006). These comparisons can be visually based (e.g., examining a friend’s body and evaluating it in reference to one’s own) or criterion based (e.g., comparing clothing sizes with one another) (Hildebrandt, Shiovitz, Alfano,
& Greif, 2008). Particularly among children and adolescents, social comparison is utilized to determine what is valued and socially rewarded within the peer environment (Jones, 2004; Mueller et al., 2010). Consistent with Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), individuals most often make appearance comparisons with individuals who are self-referent. Thus, for adolescent girls it is not surprising that female friends are the most cited source of appearance comparison, over and above comparisons with media figures or family members (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005). Comparing their appearances and bodies with one another, girls thereby internalize what is both acceptable and desirable within their peer environments. Further, appearance comparisons among adolescent girls have been demonstrated to result in serious health-related implications, including high levels of body dissatisfaction and engagement in dangerous weight-loss behaviours (Paxton et al., 1999; Schutz, Paxton, & Wertheim, 2002). Though prospective research is limited, one study has revealed that appearance comparison among friends mediates the influence of appearance related conversations on body dissatisfaction over time (Jones, 2004).

Among adult women, social comparison is one of the most researched peer processes influencing women’s attitudes and behaviours with respect to their bodies and overall physical appearances. According to Shomaker and Furman (2007), same-sex peer pressure to be thin significantly impacts body dissatisfaction among women who are characterized by high levels of social comparison. Further, Wasilenko et al. (2007) revealed that women in an athletic centre who were exposed to peers perceived as more “fit” than themselves, exhibited more negative social comparisons resulting in decreased body satisfaction and increased exercise duration. Interestingly, within each of these studies, peer pressure was exerted by women who were unacquainted with the study’s participants, thereby suggesting the significant influence of the general peer context, alone, in shaping women’s attitudes and perceptions towards their bodies.
According to research by Hildebrandt et al. (2008), body deception represents an important influence on appearance comparison among young women. Described as a process through which one purposefully misrepresents personal information about one’s appearance or body to others (e.g. disclosing an incorrect clothing size), body deception leads to a disruption in the accurate perception one is presumed to acquire through appearance comparisons with others (Hildebrandt et al., 2008). Across a sample of female and male college students, both women and men were shown to frequently utilize body deception among their peers; however, women’s body deception was most often driven by concern for thinness, whereas men’s was most often driven by concern for musculature. Further, participants’ degree of body dissatisfaction was significantly predictive of the degree to which they engaged in body deception, and was significantly related to their membership in a peer group (Hildebrandt et al., 2008).

However, all the existing quantitative studies on adult women’s engagement in peer appearance comparisons have relied exclusively on experimental manipulation, making these results difficult to translate more broadly to more authentic peer environments. Further, the research has only utilized young adult, undergraduate samples, shedding little light on the changing nature of appearance comparisons across development. Future research is thus necessary to determine the role of appearance comparison across different peer trajectories.

Appearance-related Victimization

In considering the peer processes that contribute to the development of one’s experiences in the body, the role of peer victimization cannot be overlooked. Most salient in middle childhood through to middle/late adolescence, experiences of peer aggression play a profound role in an individual’s self-esteem and overall sense of self-worth (Pepler, Craig, Jiang, & Connolly, 2008). Peer victimization, which is frequently used interchangeably with the term bullying, describes a subset of aggressive behaviours, typically involving repeated aggressive acts towards the intended
victim, thereby creating a power imbalance such that the victim is unable to defend him/herself (Fox & Farrow, 2009). Categorized as verbal (e.g., name-calling or teasing), physical (e.g., punching, hitting), or relational (e.g., spreading of rumors), peer victimization is utilized with the intention to produce social harm (Fox & Farrow, 2009). Researchers propose that as concern for peer acceptance and popularity escalate during adolescence, peers begin to exercise their power and control over one another through the use of verbal, physical and relational threats (Pepler et al., 2008). Especially prominent within the peer appearance culture in childhood and adolescence is peer victimization related to direct forms of appearance teasing and harassment.

In reference to girls’ developing bodies, appearance-related teasing and harassment represent two critical domains through which girls learn the power of the externalizing peer gaze, and the importance of adhering to carefully dictated appearance norms and behaviours (Mafrici, 2009). Important contributors to girls’ experiences of body shame and self-surveillance, appearance-related teasing and harassment place girls at an increased risk for the development of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Lieberman, Gavin, Bukowski, & White, 2001; Lindberg, Grabe & Hyde, 2007). Though many quantitative studies have been conducted in the area of appearance-related teasing among children and adolescents, limited research has explored the influence of current teasing experiences in connection with adult women’s attitudes to, and experiences in, their bodies.

Cross-sectional research exploring the relationship between appearance-related teasing and body image among adolescent girls has demonstrated that members of friendship groups which display higher levels of body concern and more body change strategies receive more weight and shape-related teasing from their peers (Paxton et al., 1999). Further, girls who are physically more mature than their peers have been shown to report more frequent overt forms of peer victimization, as well as greater concern with their weight and more depressive symptoms
(Compian, Gowen, & Hayward, 2009). Research has also highlighted the role of body weight and shape in one’s susceptibility to appearance-related teasing and body harassment (Fox & Farrow, 2009). For instance, overweight and clinically obese children report more verbal and physical bullying and harassment than non-overweight peers. Additionally, low self-worth and high levels of body dissatisfaction are demonstrated to mediate this relationship, thereby suggesting that individuals may be unconsciously communicating their vulnerability to their peers (Fox & Farrow, 2009).

However, the most striking research on childhood peer victimization describes the profound influence on individuals’ emotional well-being throughout adolescent development, and into adulthood. Among adolescents themselves, individuals who are teased about their weight and shape exhibit lower self-esteem and higher depressive symptoms (Quinlan Hoy, & Costanzo, 2009), and report considering and attempting suicide more often than their non-teased peers (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2003). Among adult women, individuals who have reported being a victim of appearance-related teasing and harassment in childhood and adolescence, are more likely to experience more negative body image and eating pathology as adults (Cash, 1995; Sweetingham & Waller, 2008). Further research is necessary to determine the influence of peer teasing within adulthood, and the influence this has on women’s current body experiences. Additionally, quantitative research has predominantly explored the influence of peer appearance-related teasing through the use of scale measurements that assess the frequency of teasing (e.g., “how many times have you been teased about your weight or appearance?”), largely ignoring the content of the actual messages girls receive.

More recently, limited research has emerged examining the role of racial teasing (i.e., teasing directed towards the distinct ethnic features or attributes of an individual) in the development of negative body image and disordered eating in girls and women. Believed to have
a profound effect on girls’ and women’s decision to internalize and adopt beauty norms and ideals of the dominant Western culture, racial teasing represents a critical domain of female body experience (Iyer & Haslam, 2003). In one of the first quantitative studies exploring the influence of racial teasing on the body, Iyer and Haslam (2003) surveyed a sample of 122 South Asian college-aged women in the United States on their reported history of racial teasing, self-esteem, eating behaviours and body image. Results revealed that a history of racial teasing was significantly predictive of women’s present body image distress and disturbed eating patterns. In a similar study surveying 74 South Asian women between the ages of 18 and 30 years, researchers discovered that racial teasing was associated with decreased body esteem and greater maladaptive eating behaviours (Reddy & Crowther, 2007). These findings highlight the need for further research investigating the influences of racial teasing among ethnically diverse samples of girls and women. It is also critical to note that while the aforementioned studies represent an important expansion of the literature on teasing and body image, the inclusion of a broader representation of ethnically diverse groups in the current research is needed. Additionally, consideration of the intersection of racial teasing with other influential social variables, such as level of acculturation, education, and social class, is necessary to understand the complexities of the influence of racial teasing on the body.

Other Relational Constructs

Along with the aforementioned peer processes that are closely associated with girls’ and women’s internalization and adoption of appearance-related norms, researchers have also highlighted the role of several relational constructs in connection to girls’ and women’s experiences in and of their bodies. In their study on the quality of same-sex peer relationships in adolescence Schutz and Paxton (2007) revealed that social anxiety, social insecurity and feeling alienated or rejected by one’s friends were associated with greater levels of body dissatisfaction
among adolescent girls, although the significance of these effects were diminished when controlling for depressive symptoms. Further, contrary to their proposed hypothesis, positive relational constructs, such as communication and trust, were not associated with any increases in body satisfaction, thereby highlighting the need for future research examining the quality of peer relationships in connection to girls’ and women’s body experiences.

Interestingly, research on adult women has highlighted greater levels of body esteem within the context of friendships with gay men (Bartlett, Patterson, VanderLaan, & Vasey, 2009), thereby suggesting that certain friendship characteristics may enhance women’s positive experiences in their bodies. Given the dearth of literature on positive relational qualities in connection to girls’ and women’s body experiences, it is essential that future research specifically address the influence of positive aspects of peer relationships on girls’ and women’s experiences in their bodies over time.

Overall, the existing quantitative literature on peers in connection to the body across development reveals the significance of a number of peer processes that shape girls’ and women’s attitudes, feelings and experiences in and of their bodies. While more direct forms of peer appearance pressure, including appearance conversations and appearance-related teasing, are more observable within the peer appearance culture, the perceived importance of appearance to one’s peers, in connection to concerns for acceptance and appearance comparisons, represent equally important factors to consider in light of our understanding of the role peers play in girls’ and women’s experiences in their bodies. However, many of the existing quantitative studies are limited in their ability to reflect the complexity of peer processes in relation to body experiences. In addition, many of these studies have narrowly defined and quantified girl’s and women’s experiences according to discrete levels of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviours, thereby neglecting the inherent complexity in women’s diverse body experiences.
Qualitative Literature

Qualitative research affords us with the opportunity to listen to the voices of girls and women as they narrate their experiences with peers in their own unique environments. This allows for greater exploration into the dynamic peer processes that may shape and/or influence girls’ and women’s body experiences. Within the research on peer relationships in connection to the body, a handful of qualitative studies have supported and expanded upon many of the same findings revealed in the quantitative literature (see Krayer, Ingledew, & Iphofen, 2008; Mooney, Farley, & Strugnell, 2008). Additionally, several key qualitative studies, which are discussed following, have significantly enhanced our understanding of the inherent complexity of peer factors that influence girls’ and women’s body experiences. However, it is particularly important to recognize that no qualitative studies exist on adult women’s current relationships with peers in connection to their body experiences, supporting the great need for further research in this area.

‘The Teen Lifestyle Project’

In the early nineties, Mimi Nichter, professor of anthropology at the University of Arizona, together with her colleagues, initiated a three-year longitudinal study designed to examine the relationship between girls’ body image, dieting, smoking and advertising. ‘The Teen Lifestyle Project’ recruited 240 girls from grades eight and nine (i.e., 13 – 15 years) in two high schools from Tucson, Arizona, who were asked to reflect on issues pertaining to their body image, smoking and dieting practices, and other general topics related to teen behaviour. Based on the emergent themes from individual interviews, participants were invited to participate in focus groups with several of their close friends, where they had the opportunity to elaborate upon their responses. ‘The Teen Lifestyle Project’ marked an important shift in utilizing qualitative methodologies to explore girls’ unique lived experiences in connection with various sociocultural influences (e.g., peers, family, media, school, etc.).
Findings from ‘The Teen Lifestyle Project’ have been discussed extensively in Nichter’s book, entitled *Fat Talk* (2000), in which she explores the critical influence of the peer and school culture on girls’ developing body image. A prominent theme among the girls interviewed was their internalization of the ‘ideal’ girl: tall (around 5’7), thin (between 100 and 110 pounds), with long blonde hair, clear skin, perfect teeth and beautiful clothes. Despite the girls’ recognition of the media’s role in promoting this idealized image, friends were regarded as the most significant influence upon which girls felt pressure to adhere to the ‘ideal.’ As is frequently documented in the quantitative literature, social comparison and concerns for acceptance were reported to dominate the school environment as girls compared their bodies in reference to those who they perceived to embody the ‘ideal.’

Nichter’s (2000) work from ‘The Teen Lifestyle Project’ also elaborated upon the existing quantitative literature across several important domains. Firstly, Nichter (2000) expanded the notion of the peer appearance culture by documenting some of the explicit ways in which girls patrol one another through appearance standards. Targeting one another’s flaws, criticizing and comparing body parts, and expressing resentment towards one another, girls were demonstrated to quickly establish strict norms for appearance within their peer environments, profoundly impacting their status within their peer groups. Rising from concerns of acceptance and popularity, girls also frequently labeled one another on the basis of their appearance, using derogatory terms such as “slut” to reinforce the rules of dress and behaviour (Nichter, 2000).

Nichter (2000) also described the “watchful gaze” of which girls were perceived to be under. Attuned to the gaze of their peers, particularly in reference to males, girls were acutely aware of their degree of adherence to ‘feminine rules’ of behaviour. For instance, eating represented a particular challenge for many girls who were embarrassed and ashamed to consume food in a way that was deemed uncharacteristic of feminine ideals. In this respect girls learned to
carefully monitor their caloric intake and the speed at which they consumed their food, embodying an evaluative external gaze in reference to their peers.

Additionally, Nichter (2000) expanded upon the role of appearance conversations in highlighting the predominance of “fat talk” in the female peer environment, upon which girls frequently announced their dissatisfaction with their bodies and appearances to one another, thereby creating a culture of thinness dictated by anti-fat attitudes. Nichter (2000) proposed that “fat talk” is especially prevalent among females as it assists girls in establishing group identity. By drawing attention to parts of their bodies and appearances which they disliked or were self-conscious of, girls protected themselves from the possibility of their peers being the first to call attention to their ‘flaws’. Even among peer groupings that typically rejected prevailing appearance norms (e.g., ‘Nerds’, ‘Mods’, ‘Stoners’), “fat talk” was evident across every aspect of the peer environment, highlighting the prevailing concern of body weight and shape that plague girls’ relational contexts throughout high school.

Though Nichter’s original group of participants were predominantly Caucasian, a significant strength of the research was the inclusion of an African American sample of girls in a year-long cross-sectional study that was undertaken in the final year of the project (see Parker et al., 1995). Results from the African American sample yielded striking differences in the nature of their peer relationships and the focus of their appearance standards. Contrary to the Caucasian sample of girls, African American adolescents embodied a more fluid perception of beauty that encompassed qualities of movement in the body as opposed to strict appearance-based characteristics. Additionally, girls were regarded as more supportive of one another in their appearances, frequently conveying to one another positive appearance-related feedback (Parker et al., 1995). The salience of appearance standards in the lives of girls’ from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds remains an understudied realm of the qualitative literature. A recent Doctoral
dissertation examining the effects of race on Mexican American and Caucasian adolescent girls’ body image, highlighted the important role of one’s social context in shaping girls’ ability and inability to resist body and beauty standards (Gonzalez, 2007). The findings of the study revealed that regardless of ethnocultural membership, Mexican American and Caucasian girls shared the notion that appearance is a salient aspect of their everyday lives, and that peers are perceived to evaluate and prioritize their appearances and attractiveness over and above other important qualities, such as intelligence.

Taken together with Nichter’s work from ‘The Teen Lifestyle Project’, these results demonstrate the great need for qualitative research examining the influence of complex social variables (e.g., ethnicity, social class) on girls’ and women’s body experiences in connection to their peer relationships. Additionally, these studies are limited in their exploration of only adolescent girls’ experiences, suggesting the need for future research across a larger developmental trajectory (e.g., pre-adolescence through to adulthood), whereby researchers may examine changes among friendship groups or peer processes that influence girls’ and women’s experiences in their bodies over time.

Weight Watching Among Adolescent Girls

Elaborating upon Nichter’s work, Eleanor Wertheim and colleagues (1997) explored the relentless pursuit of thinness among adolescent girls in relation to a variety of sociocultural pressures that are known to influence girls’ engagement in weight loss behaviours (e.g., media, family, peers). The study included a sample of thirty, 15 year-old Australian-born girls who were interviewed with respect to their dieting and weight-related practices and concerns. Of particular significance to this study was the emphasis placed on the factors that protect girls against weight-related disturbances, a subject which is largely ignored in the quantitative literature. Self-acceptance, family influences on body acceptance, positive peer influences and knowledge about
the dangers of dieting were cited as the most influential protective factors among the sample of participants.

However, consistent with many of the existing quantitative studies, Wertheim et al. (1997) revealed high rates of appearance comparison and appearance-based conversations that were closely associated with girls’ perceived pressure to engage in dieting, appearance-related teasing and concerns for peer acceptance. Status hierarchies based upon popularity were also demonstrated to exert the greatest pressure on girls to adopt dangerous weight-related behaviours to conform to the thin ideal. Further, contrary to what many quantitative studies have proposed, no girls reported experiencing direct pressure to lose weight from their close friends; rather, weight-related pressure appeared to arise more from the general peer environment, highlighting the importance of studying differences in the influence of peers across the various social contexts that girls embody.

Male peers were shown to represent a particularly strong influence on girls’ experiences in their bodies. Along with Nichter’s finding of the “watchful gaze”, girls acknowledged that appearances were particularly important in attracting male peers, and that being thin was especially desirable in this regard. This finding is consistent with more recent qualitative research demonstrating that boys’ perceived opinions of girls’ bodies play a fundamental role in adolescent girls’ maintenance of strict appearance norms (Mafrici, 2009; Mooney et al., 2004).

Lastly, strengthening the existing quantitative research on peer victimization in relation to the body, Wertheim et al. (1997) highlighted the role of different relational contexts in the rates of appearance-related teasing. Girlfriends were cited as the most frequent perpetrators, followed by boys, ‘popular’ girls and boyfriends. Though rarely used to deliberately hurt someone, appearance-related teasing was reported to result in increased concern with the body; a finding that has been supported by existing quantitative studies.
Though Wertheim et al.’s (1997) research contributed to the peer literature in several important domains, the content of the interviews did not afford further exploration into more complex peer processes, such as the specific influences of different friends or peer groupings in promoting social comparison, appearance dialogues and appearance-related pressure. Additionally, though consideration to protective factors marked an important addition to the peer literature, little information was gleaned with respect to the specific nature of positive peer experiences, and how these factors influenced girls’ experiences in their body over time. Lastly, the sample was largely homogenous with respect to ethnocultural diversity, making it impossible to generalize the results to more diverse populations.

‘Girlfighting’ and Body-based Harassment

Psychologist Lyn Mikel Brown documented the critical role of girlhood aggression in her book entitled *Girlfighting* (2003). Elaborating upon the existing quantitative work on peer appearance-related victimization, Brown’s (2003) book explored the interviews of 421 girls, of different economic, racial and geographic backgrounds, in childhood and adolescence. Highlighting the great extent to which girls depend upon their close, intimate relationships with one another to provide emotional and psychological support, Brown (2003) also revealed the precarious nature of girlhood friendships, and the significant rise in aggression among female peers. Particularly through adolescence, girls’ bodies and appearances became the most significant source of judgment, criticism and harassment. Acutely aware of one another’s insecurities, girls engaged in what Brown (2003) refers to as “verbal vandalism.” Through the policing of one another’s bodies via “body gossip” girls established important parameters for acceptance within their friendship circles (Brown, 2003). Of particular significance in Brown’s (2003) work was her inclusion of the ways in which girls promote the dominant cultural ideals of femininity through the policing of rigid appearance norms. These norms conformed strictly to
White, middle-class ideals, maintaining what Brown (2003) has termed “a hierarchy of beauty” that perpetuates racist and classist attitudes within the peer environment, discriminating against girls who embody diverse social locations.

Brown’s research has been largely supported by several earlier qualitative studies that have highlighted the prominent role of body-based harassment among girls in their peer environments. For instance, Piran’s (2001b) research on a participatory action project in a dance school revealed the significance of body weight and shape preoccupation in relation to experiences of social inequity. Frequently objectified by their peers, girls reported disrupted ownership of their bodies. Grounded in the prejudicial experiences of weightism, racism and sexism, body-based harassment within the peer environment resulted in girls’ significant disconnection from their bodies. Research by Larkin and Rice (2005) has lent further support for the critical role of racial teasing in the internalization and adoption of prevailing standards of thinness in the peer environment.

Thus, qualitative research on peer victimization expands the traditional notion of appearance-related teasing and harassment from the existing quantitative literature through its inclusion of critical social factors (e.g., ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation) that are frequent sources of teasing and criticism within the peer environment. However, little remains known about adult women’s experiences of peer appearance-related victimization in connection to the body, and the critical social factors that shape their influence. Further research is also necessary to uncover the influence of peer victimization in relation to the body across different developmental stages. Life history qualitative research would allow for such an exploration, while considering the influence of critical social factors known to impact girls’ and women’s connections to their bodies.

Girls’ Agency and the Discourse of Individuality
Aside from the qualitative research on negative implications of peers processes that perpetuate girls’ dissatisfaction and disconnection from their bodies, more recent research has begun to highlight the role of agency and empowerment in protecting girls from the influence of rigid appearance norms. Conducted by sociologists at the University of British Columbia, one qualitative study sought to understand the ways in which girls make sense of the pressures towards conformity within their peer environments, and the mechanisms through which they distance themselves from these pressures (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2006). As part of a larger research project\(^1\), the study interviewed twenty-one girls between the ages of 12 and 15 years, who actively positioned themselves against the “emphasized femininity”\(^2\) most frequently embodied by their popular peers (Currie et al., 2006).

All girls who expressed resistance towards peer appearance-related pressure also described the prevalence of gender-based social discourses that infiltrated their school environment, prescribing unto girls the ‘appropriate’ norms for behaviour and appearance. Supporting Nichter (2000) and Wertheim et al.’s (1997) research, girls were particularly attune to the influence of their male peers who monitored and evaluated girls’ appearances and behaviours in reference to the feminine ideal. Female peers were also perceived to augment this pressure, through the use of derogatory name-calling (e.g., “slut”). Referred to by the researchers as “double monitoring”, girls’ bodies, unlike the bodies of their male peers, were continuously at the

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\(^1\) *Girl Power* was designed to investigate girls’ attitudes towards school, their membership in peer groups, activities endorsed by particular peer groups, expressions of girlhood, their sense of empowerment and ideas surrounding feminism. A total of seventy-one girls between eleven and sixteen years of age from various schools in the Vancouver area were interviewed once in pairs of friends; several girls were then asked to participate in follow-up interviews.

\(^2\) Sociologist, R.W. Connell refers to “emphasized femininity” as a type of femininity that describes individuals who willingly comply with the subordination of women, and are “oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men” (Connell, 1987, p.183). “Emphasized femininity” is believed to contribute to reduced self-esteem, body dissatisfaction and disordered eating among girls and women (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2006).
disposition of other’s objectifying evaluations and appraisals, placing them at a heightened risk for body dissatisfaction and reduced self-esteem.

Most striking among the results were the voices of the girls who actively distanced themselves from the emphasized feminine ideal. In their adoption of a discourse of individualism, girls distinguished themselves from their peer group through the use of language that centered on characteristic differences between the self and the dominant feminine ideal. For instance, girls highlighted the importance of their individual style of dress that was distinct from the overtly feminine clothing styles adopted by the large majority of their female peers. Opting for clothing that was less constrictive and less sexualized, girls also discussed their freedom in the choice of activities they engaged in, particularly those that challenged feminine ideals, such as skateboarding.

Currie et al.’s (2006) research highlighted the importance of girls’ agency, subjectivity and empowerment in their active positioning against the dominant peer appearance culture in their school environments. Further research is necessary to uncover how girls’ agency is shaped and cultivated by positive peer processes, along with other social influences, such as the family, and prominent role models. Additionally, future research should examine the influence of adolescent agency, empowerment and the adoption of a discourse of individualism on later life experiences with peers in connection to the body. This research would significantly contribute to the research on protective factors that shape girls’ and women’s experiences in their bodies across the lifespan.

A Prospective Investigation of Girls’ Lived Body Experiences

Seeking to better understand the evolution of the peer processes which contribute to girls’ experiences in their bodies across development, Mafrici (2009) examined the interviews of ten girls’ pre- and post-puberty as part of a larger prospective research study exploring girls’
connection and disconnection to their bodies in relation to a wide range of social influences (e.g., family, peers, media, sexuality, school, physical activity) (Piran et al., 2009).

Two highly integrated domains of the peer environment were highlighted in contributing significantly to girls’ internalization and adoption of appearance norms: the evaluative external gaze and concern for peer acceptance. The evaluative external gaze, representing the feeling of living in one’s body from a place of evaluation, was demonstrated to encompass the explicit appearance comparisons girls engaged in with their close female peers, while extending the traditional notion of ‘appearance evaluation’ by taking into account the internalized gaze girls continuously maintained, even when distanced from external perpetrators of the gaze. The evaluative gaze was demonstrated to be closely associated with girls’ experiences of derogatory labeling (e.g., “slut”, “whore”), as well as other explicit forms of body harassment by male and female peers alike. Further, comparisons across girls’ experiences pre- and post-puberty revealed a significant increase in body objectification as girls’ transitioned into adolescence. Concerns for peer acceptance also escalated post-puberty as the relentless pressure girls experienced to maintain their bodies and appearances intensified. Elaborating upon the existing quantitative research, Mafrici (2009) also illustrated the critical role of macro-social variables, including ethnicity, religion, and social class which significantly impacted both pre- and post-pubertal girls’ experiences in their bodies in relation to the strict norms for physical appearance that their peers commanded.

In addition, the study contributed to an understanding of several factors that protect against the negative influence of peers in connection to the body across development. For instance, supportive peer networks were demonstrated to significantly reduce the strength of the evaluative external gaze and girls’ perceived pressure to adhere to strict norms for appearances. Building upon the findings in Currie et al.’s (2006) study, girls who were part of friendships groups that
allowed for greater diversity and individuality exhibited greater confidence, and were better able to withstand external appearance-related pressure. Engagement in creative play and/or physical recreation activities with one’s peers was also closely connected to girls’ experiences of freedom, joy and comfort in their bodies. However, these experiences significantly diminished as girls entered into adolescence (Mafrici, 2009).

Overall, the study revealed the relentless peer processes that act to perpetuate girls’ internalization and adoption of unrealistic standards for appearances in their immediate social environments. Further, puberty marked a significant shift in the peer appearance culture, whereby girls’ developing bodies became the dominant focus of peer evaluation, comparison, acceptance, and harassment. A significant strength of the study was the inclusion of a diverse group of participants who demonstrated the importance of macro-social variables, such as ethnicity and social class, in shaping girls’ experiences with their peers in relation to their bodies across development. However, further research is necessary to explore these processes among women throughout adulthood.

Women’s Recount of Their Relational Experiences During Adolescence

To-date, no known qualitative studies exist that have specifically explored adult women’s current relationships with their peers in connection to their bodies. However, one Doctoral dissertation has revealed some insight to the impact of body-related changes during adolescence on peer relationships and adult women’s current experiences in their bodies (Havill, 2006). Adopting an empirical existential-phenomenological approach, Havill (2006) interviewed six Caucasian women across three different age groups (three in their twenties; two in their thirties; and one in her fifties), asking them to reflect on the ways in which they believed their changing bodies in adolescence may have affected their relationships with others (e.g., parents, siblings,
friends, peers, teachers etc.); as well as whether these changes affected their lives since adolescence.

Havill’s (2006) analysis revealed that for several of the women, familial and social relationships played an important role with respect to the way in which they experienced the changes occurring in their bodies during adolescence. For instance, women with less social support during puberty reported a more negative self-concept and body image during adolescence. Further, feelings of low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction were demonstrated to persist through to adulthood. However, women who appeared less vulnerable to low self-esteem and negative feelings about their bodies, reported more supportive peer networks that were dominated by close female friends during adolescence. Female friendships, in particular, appeared to act as a buffer against negative interactions, such as appearance-related teasing among family members or male peers. In addition, the physical changes accompanying adolescence (e.g., menstruation) were perceived particularly anxiety provoking among women who did not have a close, supportive female peer network to whom they could seek information and acquire comfort during this developmental transition.

Of particular significance was the finding that among all relationships (e.g., mother, father, sister, etc.), those with peers were cited as the most significantly affected by adolescent bodily changes. In general, women reported that their relationships with friends changed from being a source of security and certainty to that of increased anxiety and distress throughout adolescence. However, perceptions of friendships appeared to change post-adolescence. For instance, one woman acknowledged how entrance into a new peer group at university significantly enhanced her acceptance towards her body, and her overall sense of confidence. Additionally, one woman recalled how differently she felt about her relationships with friends during adolescence, compared to the present. However, the study did not explore the processes
that led to these changed perceptions, or the intrinsic meanings they held for participants themselves.

Overall, Havill’s (2006) study offered a unique exploration into women’s experiences of their bodily changes that occurred in adolescence and the impact this had on their former peer relationships and current ways of being. However, the study neglected to explore how peer relationships, themselves, affected women’s experiences of living in the body. Further, little attention was paid to peer relational factors in adulthood, including corrective relational experiences that may have helped to support or reconstruct past damaging experiences from childhood or adolescence (e.g., teasing, harassment). Lastly, the group of participants was small and homogenous. Despite these limitations, Havill’s (2006) study affords us with several avenues for future research, including an exploration into adult women’s life history experiences with peers in connection to their bodies.

Overall, one of the most significant contributions of the qualitative literature is the re-conceptualization of the methodology that is used to explore girls’ and women’s bodies in connection to a wide variety of sociocultural influences. Often guided by methods of experimental manipulation, the existing quantitative studies produce a “discourse of body image problems” to explain girls’ and women’s distressing experiences in their bodies (Blood, 2005.) Even within the qualitative literature, girls and women frequently narrate their experiences within the context of “negative body image” and “disordered eating”. While important conceptualizations, these constructs tend to objectify and label women’s experiences along a narrowly defined spectrum of ‘body image problems’. As is evident in the majority of the literature, the concept “body image” dominates our understanding of girls’ and women’s perceptions of their bodies, however the use of this concept simultaneously neglects our understanding of the dynamic influences of society and culture in shaping girls’ and women’s
subjective experiences of living in their bodies. In relation to peer relationships, it is thus necessary that research encompass a more inclusive understanding of girl’s and women’s body experiences within the context of their diverse social locations, to shed important light on how peer processes interact with critical social factors to produce or inhibit experiences towards embodiment.

Critical Social Perspective

The following section provides a theoretical framework for the present study by highlighting the role of the critical social perspective and the Developmental Theory of Embodiment (DTE; Piran & Teall, 2012) in expanding our conceptualization of women’s body experiences. This outline serves to problematize much of the existing research on peer relations by neglecting the role of critical social factors that shape girls’ and women’s lived experiences in their bodies.

Body Image Discourse

In our attempt to understand a woman’s lived experience in her body, we must go beyond the objective measure of her “body image”; that being her perceptions of her body size and shape and/or her degree of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with her body (Bloom & Kogel, 1994). According to Blood (2005), mainstream psychological body image research has promoted the idea of the body as an objective entity, easily observable and quantifiable. Depicted as a mere “object of perception” the body is characterized as completely separate from social meanings, desires and the unconscious (Blood, 2005). Largely contested by critical social theorists who understand the body as imbued in social meaning and integrated within the individual’s social and cultural context, mainstream body image research has instead promoted a “body image discourse” whereby women are categorized and classified according to psychological norms that offer treatments for their ‘body image problems’ (Blood, 2005). This mentality significantly
undermines women’s experiences of their relationships with their bodies, along with the complexity of ecological factors that influence their degree of embodiment.

The construct of embodiment has largely been discussed within the philosophical literature. Guided by the work of the phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, embodiment plays a significant role in our understanding of women’s subjective experiences of living in their bodies. In contrast to mainstream psychological research, Merleau-Ponty (1962), first described the body as the “lived body”, a pre-reflective phenomenological notion of the body that affords us an inherent subjective understanding of our body, allowing us to interact with the world and its surroundings without conscious thought. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962) children first acquire an understanding that their bodies are their own when they come to recognize their self-reflections. As highlighted earlier in regards to the development of the self, the recognition of self-reflections takes place within the context of our social interactions and relationships with others. In this respect, our perception of the body is not simply what we see exists on a physiological level, but rather, is influenced by our relationship with the world and the people who inhabit our immediate social surroundings (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Through this process we come to understand that we are observable by others. Within the study of female embodiment, this notion has significant implications for the ways in which women learn to live in their bodies.

Towards the Developmental Theory of Embodiment

Building upon Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological perspective of the body, the term embodiment affords us the opportunity to explore one’s experiences in the body according to the inherent connection between the body and mind (Piran & Teall, 2012). Thus, in relation to the study of girls’ and women’s diverse experiences in their bodies, the concept of embodiment allows us to incorporate an understanding of how the body is shaped by our relationships with
others, and the larger social and cultural environment of which we are a part of. Additionally, unlike the existing quantitative literature that measures discrete variables in relation to one’s ‘body image’, thereby promoting the definition of the body as an object, more recent research adopting a critical social perspective has shed important light on the complexity of women’s experiences in relation to gender-based discourses and the objectification of women’s bodies in connection to the development of disordered eating and disrupted embodiment.

Highlighted by feminist researchers (e.g., Blood, Bordo, Bartky, Gilligan, Piran, Orbach, Young), women’s bodies are imbedded with social and political meaning. In this respect, socially constructed norms of femininity that dominate Westernized societies, create a preoccupation with appearances and self-image for girls and women as they internalize the objectifying gaze to which they are constantly subjected. Grounded in Foucault’s conceptualization of the body as a site of social power, Bartky (1988) emphasizes how women’s bodies, as a result of patriarchal power, are significantly more restricted than men’s in their ability to move and live, perpetually under the gaze and judgment of others. According to Bartky (1998), the relentless self-surveillance young girls (and women) learn to adopt through their careful adherence to strict norms of femininity promotes them as “self-policing subjects.” Persistent self-monitoring and surveillance have further been demonstrated to remove girls from tuning in to their own internal states, including their desires, needs, wants and feelings, contributing to their loss of voice and experiences of disconnection from their bodies (Gilligan, 1982; Levine & Smolak, 2006; Piran et al., 2002, 2006, 2009).

Highlighting the processes of connection and disconnection, Piran and her colleagues have articulated the nature of one’s state of embodiment in relation to one’s experiences in the body and within one’s surrounding social environment (Piran, 2001b; Piran & Teall, 2006; Piran & Thompson, 2008; Piran et al., 2002, 2006, 2007, 2009). The Developmental Theory of
Embodiment (DTE; Piran & Teall, 2012) explains how these social and relational factors influence individuals’ experiences in their bodies along three core domains: physical freedom (Piran & Teall, 2012), mental freedom (Piran & Teall, 2012), and social power. Developed through the thematic analysis of narratives from qualitative studies with both girls (Piran, 2001b; Piran et al., 2006, 2007, 2009) and women (Piran et al., 2002, 2009), and validated through quantitative studies (Piran & Cormier, 2005; Piran & Teall, 2006; Piran & Thompson, 2008), the DTE helps to explain the factors that contribute to the complex constructs of Positive/Connected Embodiment and Disrupted Embodiment.

Described by Piran and Teall (2012), Positive/Connected Embodiment is characterized by the ability to live subjectively in the body with little external consciousness. It encompasses physical freedom (Piran & Teall, 2012), feeling safe, respected, unrestrained and connected with one’s appetites, needs and desires; mental freedom (Piran & Teall, 2011), freedom to express one’s identity while unrestrained by oppressive feminine discourses that dictate ways of living in the body; and social power, embodying agency, power, and privilege associated with one’s social location, including gender, social class, and ethnocultural group membership. Conversely, Disrupted Embodiment includes feelings of disconnection from the body and the self, whereby the body is characterized by a state of disempowerment, confinement, and vulnerability. In this state the body is characterized by physical corseting (Piran & Teall, 2012), feeling violated, unsafe and constrained in one’s ability to move, and the expression of one’s appetites, needs and desires; mental corseting (Piran & Teall, 2012), maintaining an external consciousness attune to the evaluative gaze, preoccupied with adhering to socially prescribed standards and confined by oppressive feminine discourses that dictate ways of living in the body; and social disempowerment, feeling loss of one’s agency and power, as well as inequity in relation to one’s social location.
According to the DTE, social and relational factors that exist within the individual’s changing environmental context, contribute to an individual’s experience of Positive/Connected Embodiment through each of these domains of physical freedom, mental freedom and social power (Piran & Teall, 2012; Piran et al., 2002, 2009). Through shaping peer and family relations, as well as social institutions such as schools and the larger community, macro-social variables, including gender, social class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, significantly influence the body experiences of women (Piran & Teall, 2012).

In relation to the study of peers, the DTE offers a unique perspective into the exploration of girls’ and women’s relationships with their friends in connection to their experiences in their bodies. For instance, social experiences of physical corseting (Piran & Teall, 2012) have been demonstrated to arise through gender-based norms in the peer environment that shape engagement in physical activity, clothing, the disciplining of the body through one’s appetite and desires, as well as body-based harassment and violation (Mafrici, 2009; Piran et al., 2002, 2009). In the area of mental freedom (Piran & Teall, 2012), gender-based discourses of femininity lead to the enforcement of stereotyped expectations of femininity in peer groups. These include, for example, promoting the evaluative gaze of the body, harsh appearance norms, as well as penalizing sexual activity or other ways of inhabiting the body that are deemed not to comply with stereotyped feminine/masculine dichotomy (Mafrici, 2009; Piran et al., 2009). Lastly, disconnection from others through experiences of body valuations related to one’s social privilege (e.g., financial, ethnocultural), and through peer appearance-related victimization and bullying, has been demonstrated to impact girls’ embodied agency and sense of power (Mafrici, 2009; Piran & Teall, 2012; Piran et al., 2002, 2009). Although less research has explored the impact of social location on experiences with peers; gender, social class, and ethnocultural group
membership have been shown to influence pressures to adhere to socially prescribed norms for appearances within the peer environment (Mafrci, 2009; Piran et al., 2009).

Further, Piran et al. (2002, 2009) has highlighted the complexity of these experiences in relation to girls’ development, particularly throughout puberty, when girls tend to experience marked increases in physical and mental corseting (Piran & Teall, 2012) as well as social disempowerment. Gilligan (1982) has similarly noted these challenges as girls become increasingly invested in maintaining relationships with their friends in adolescence and disconnect from their own feelings, thoughts and opinions. However, through early adulthood, women have been demonstrated to engage in a process of reconnection with their bodies along these domains (Piran et al., 2002). Of particular interest is their reported establishment of new modes of relationships that enhance their physical and mental freedom (Piran & Teall, 2012), and social power (Piran et al., 2002). However, little remains known about the nature of peer relationships and friendships, and their influence in shaping these critical processes of embodiment across adulthood.

One exception is a recent Doctoral dissertation by Antoniou (2009) exploring women’s life history experiences in relation to their food and eating practices. Antoniou’s (2009) study demonstrated that a number of peer socialization processes shape the specific context of women’s food and eating experiences across development. For instance, socializing messages related to appearance domains were demonstrated to be particularly influential in highlighting the importance of attaining or maintaining the socially prescribed body ideal. This was especially prominent during adolescence, when girls experienced direct peer pressure to restrict their eating. Social comparisons were also noted as a predominant factor disconnecting some girls from their appetites, particularly those who developed earlier in comparison to their peers. These findings are consistent with quantitative research highlighting the role of social comparison and direct
appearance pressure in the internalization of socially prescribed appearance norms (Paxton et al., 1999; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005). However, Antoniou (2009) also noted several protective factors that helped women to maintain connection to their appetites for food and eating, including being a part of peer groups that reject body ideals, and instead promote the value of food and eating as pleasurable. This finding is consistent with earlier research highlighting the protective role of memberships in peer groups that reject dominant discourses of femininity (Currie et al., 2006; Mafriuci, 2009; Piran et al., 2009). Additionally, one woman described entrance into university as a particularly pivotal experience in which her new peer crowd assisted her in challenging the traditional socio-cultural messages, thereby helping her to reconnect with her appetite and desire for food. Antoniou’s (2009) research demonstrated how peer experiences significantly shape girls’ and women’s connection and/or disconnection to their appetites for food and eating. However, further research is needed to uncover other domains in which peer and friends influence girls’ and women’s experiences of embodiment across the lifespan.

The Importance of Social Location

Grounded in a critical social perspective, the Developmental Theory of Embodiment (Piran & Teall, 2012) highlights the important influence of social, political and economic factors that shape girls’ and women’s experiences of power and privilege in connection to their bodies. As described previously, this domain has been largely neglected from the literature on peer relationships in connection to girls’ and women’s body experiences. In her research on the DTE, Piran et al. (2002) has stressed the importance of the body as a central domain through which social inequity is expressed. In this regard, inequitable social systems directly target the body through their objectification and exploitation of girls and women whose bodies are deemed less privileged based on their ethnocultural group membership, social class, sexual orientation and disability (Piran et al., 2002; Piran & Teall, 2012). Thus, within these inequitable social
conditions, girls’ and women’s identity is acquired through, and equated with their adherence to socially constructed appearance norms. As previously noted, this process contributes to girls’ and women’s constriction of, and disconnection from their appetites, voices, relational needs and desires in order to maintain the status quo (Piran et al., 2002; Piran & Teall, 2012). Thus, from a critical social perspective, it is essential that attention be paid specifically to girls’ and women’s experiences within their diverse social locations and the many macro-social variables that interact within the context of their relationships with peers, in order to enrich our understanding of how these experiences translate into their expressions of embodiment across the lifespan.

Rationale for the Present Study

A review of the literature on the development of the self and girls’ and women’s body image in connection to peers, highlights the significant role peers play in shaping girls’ and women’s internalization of appearance standards and their subsequent feelings, attitudes and behaviours in and of their bodies. However, the existing research has been limited across several important domains.

Firstly, the majority of research has focused predominantly on peer risk factors that contribute to girls’ and women’s dissatisfaction in their bodies and the development of disordered eating. As such, we have yet to fully understand the peer factors that serve to protect girls and women from the internalization and adoption of negative appearance-related norms, and promote positive experiences in the body. This research is particularly important in light of developing successful prevention initiatives for body dissatisfaction and disordered eating.

Most significantly, the large majority of research on peers has been conducted within a quantitative framework. While offering important insight to the role peers play in connection to expressions of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, these studies have tended to categorize girls’ and women’s experiences according to objective and discrete measures that promote the
evaluative discourse of body image. This methodology has often neglected the inherent diversity in girls’ and women’s subjective experiences of living in their bodies as they are shaped by factors that enhance and/or restrict their experiences of physical and mental freedom and social power (Piran & Teall, 2012). In relation to this limitation, little research has been devoted to the many dynamic social factors that are known to influence girls’ and women’s connection and disconnection to their bodies. For instance, the underrepresentation of girls and women from diverse social locations in the majority of the existing literature disregards the complexity of women’s unique lived body experiences as they are influenced by the interaction with social factors that afford or deny them with experiences of power and privilege.

The present study thus adopted a critical social perspective to acquire an understanding of the role of peer relationships in contributing to women’s connection and/or disconnection from their bodies over time. Specifically, the study aimed to delineate the range of peer processes (both adverse and protective) that affect women’s body experiences, as well as the meaning women make of these processes and their internalized reactions to peer influences across a developmental trajectory.

Given that no quantitative measures presently exist to retrospectively explore the unique constructs of body connection and disconnection, a life history approach was used. This approach afforded the opportunity to consider changes over time, including how past experiences with peers may have been influential in shaping current ways of living in the body. Further, a life history qualitative approach allowed for an exploration pertaining to how the diverse social locations of participants interacted with their experiences with peers and their current ways of living in their bodies.
CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research

The purpose of the present study was to acquire an understanding of the role peer relationships play in contributing to women’s connection and/or disconnection from their bodies across the lifespan. The study adopted a critical social perspective to explore the diverse social factors that interacted with women’s life history experiences with their peers in connection to their bodies. As highlighted previously, there is a dearth of qualitative research exploring girls’ and women’s peer experiences in relation to their bodies. Providing women with the opportunity to voice their personal thoughts and feelings about their peer relationships afforded a unique understanding of the influential role peers play in shaping girls’ women’s body experiences, and the meaning they make of these experiences.

Qualitative approaches to research have played an increasingly important role in scientific inquiry within the social sciences field (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Offering a unique window into the complexity of human experience, qualitative studies collect data through a number of empirical methods including case studies, introspection, life histories, interviews and artifacts, that help formulate an understanding of individuals’ experiences and social processes grounded in their own lived environments (Camic, Rhodes, & Yardley, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Of particular importance to qualitative research is uncovering the personal meanings that individuals ascribe to their experiences (Charmaz, 2006; Morrow, 2007). Establishing these meanings requires the study of individuals within the context of their own social environments (Morrow, 2007). In qualitative research, context refers not only to an individual’s physical location within his/her environment, but also to the larger social, political, economic, and
ethnocultural domains within which the individual is situated (Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2005). It is therefore expected that the qualitative researcher consider the many ways in which individuals interact with their diverse social locations through their narratives of their experiences and histories.

Data Collection

The collection of data in qualitative research is typically acquired through in-depth interviewing. In-depth interviews are particularly beneficial in their ability to uncover the complex meanings that individuals ascribe to their diverse experiences. In-depth interviews are most commonly designed as an informal conversation between the researcher and the participant (Miles & Gilbert, 2005). Although a questioning guide is typically developed to ensure the exploration of specific topics, the qualitative researcher is advised to remain attuned to, and respectful, of the diverse ways in which individuals frame their responses and naturally reveal their perspectives of the phenomena of interest throughout the interview (Miles & Gilbert, 2005).

Other important considerations for qualitative data collection include the number of participants and the sufficiency of the data. Contrary to experimental designs, the number of participants in qualitative research is significantly smaller, given that the richness of detail within each individual interview is valued over and above the sheer volume of participants. The selection process in qualitative research is thus guided by “sufficiency of the data” as opposed to the number of participants involved in statistical analysis (Morrow, 2007). Qualitative researchers therefore determine the degree of sufficiency by measuring the point at which no new findings or themes are generated, otherwise known as “redundancy of the data” (Morrow, 2007).

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is a flexible process that facilitates the development of relationships among various categories of data, providing meaning to the data that has been
collected (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Unlike in quantitative studies, where data is converted into measurable units and statistically analyzed, qualitative researchers are confronted with an abundance of complex narratives that must be divided into meaningful units, or ‘codes’ that are grouped together to compare and contrast meanings (Glaser & Straus, 1967; Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

According to Glaser and Straus’ (1967) Grounded Theory approach to qualitative analysis, the generation of descriptive codes, categories and themes offers an emergent methodology that continuously allows new meanings within the data to surface. Through a method of constant comparison, a key component to Grounded Theory, researchers are constantly engaged with the data through the process of comparison among emerging codes, categories and themes. As comparisons are made, researchers then begin to critically examine and test emergent hypotheses within the data. Eventually, emergent hypotheses develop into an interpretation that affords meaning to the themes, and constructs a chronicle for the narratives under study (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Life History Approach

A life history approach to qualitative inquiry seeks to highlight the intersection between human experience and one’s social context (Cole & Knowles, 2001). It affords an extensive exploration into psychosocial phenomena as they develop throughout time and are shaped by a multitude of factors within the individual’s social environment (Haglund, 2004). Contrary to other developmental methodological approaches, the life history perspective examines changes in individual lives across large periods of time and across a multitude of domains (e.g., within the family, at work, at school, and through one’s social activities, etc.) Most significantly, an individual’s life course development is understood not only in reference to changes in one’s actions and personal characteristics, but also in relation to transformations in one’s culture and
various structural conditions, which directly impact individual-level changes. Within this framework, the life course perspective highlights the importance of studying individuals within the context of the many collective units they embody (e.g., families, partnerships, etc.) (Mayer, 2010).

A core assumption of life history research is the ability to acquire an understanding of the complexity of human condition through a systematic study of the experiences of a small select group of individuals (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Through an exploration of the ways in which individuals interact with their social and cultural environments, life history research allows us to address how changes in one’s environment influence an individual’s thoughts, feelings and perspectives (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Thus, data gleaned through a life history approach is rich in contextual information and contributes to an intricate understanding of the complexities of human thought and behaviour (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

Further, life history methodology involves comparisons among participants’ narratives to determine relationships across phenomenon that are often not gleaned through quantitative inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). To acquire richness of the data, qualitative researchers engage in a collaborative partnership with their participants as they express and uncover meaning behind their experiences (Haglund, 2004). Qualitative researchers are especially careful in attending to participants’ responses, guiding them through memories and encouraging the expression of their interpretations and insights to their experiences (Haglund, 2004). The research relationship in the life history approach is thus considered fluid and authentic (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Attuned to the emergence of, sometimes painful, emotional reactions that surface as participants recollect their life experiences, life history researchers are faced with the added challenge of encouraging depth and insight to their participants’ unique histories while remaining respectful and empathic (Cole & Knowles, 2001).
The importance of life course research thus rests in its unique ability to characterize human development in light of an individual’s interaction with his/her social environment, including the social roles he/she embodies, interpersonal relationships, and past and current life events (Macmillan, 2005). The present study was thus particularly well suited for a life history approach given its purpose to uncover how relationships with peers evolve across the lifespan and interact with women’s diverse experiences in their bodies.

Situating Oneself as the Researcher

A particularly important component to life history research is the extent to which the researcher offers her unique experiences, insights, values and beliefs with respect to the phenomenon under investigation. As Cole and Knowles (2001) highlight, to disregard our own personal invested interest and underlying assumptions behind what we study neglects a fundamental aspect of our research. Thus, as researchers we must first come to understand ourselves, our relationship to our topic of study, and the experiences that have fostered our desire to pursue this line of research, if we are to truly appreciate the experiences of those whom we interview (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

My interest in the area of peer relationships in connection to the body arises from my experiences with friends throughout childhood and adolescence. Reflecting upon my own journey of embodiment I have come to appreciate the profound role friends and peers have played in shaping my connection and disconnection to my body’s needs, wants and desires throughout development.

Growing up in a family of European heritage, my parents immigrated to Canada as adults from their respective countries and raised me in a way that supported a significant sense of agency and empowerment in my body. Largely sheltered in childhood from the dominant discourses of femininity that infiltrated my external social environment, I retained a strong
connection to my body until I reached adolescence and became acutely aware of my developing body and the inherent differences in my social location in reference to my friends. These distinctions and experiences with friends contributed to my feelings of vulnerability, shame, and objectification. As I proceeded through adolescence and into early adulthood, I learned to distance myself from relationships that led me to feel disconnected from my body, and through a process of reconnection I fostered many positive relations that contributed to a sense of love, respect and security in my body. My many relationships and experiences with peers across development have maintained a strong influence both in terms of my current ways of living in my body, as well as the ways in which I connect with those around me today. I acknowledge that my own thoughts, beliefs and perspectives have guided me towards this topic and they continued to emerge throughout the interviews I conducted with the women, as well as the meanings that I uncovered within their narratives.

Data Collection

Selection and Recruitment of Participants

Fourteen women between the ages of 25 and 35, and of diverse social and ethnocultural backgrounds were recruited to participate in the present study. The age range of 25-35 was selected to allow for exploration across various important developmental trajectories while also minimizing the possible influence of cohort effects within the diverse group of participants. Additionally, women both with and without histories of eating problems were included in the present study order to explore differences in the impact of friends and peers on women’s experiences in their bodies over time. With respect to exclusion criteria, women with current severe eating problems were unable to participate in the present study due to health-related risks. This included women who were presently bingeing and vomiting twice per week or more for the past three months, and/or women who had lost more than 15% of their body weight due to
extreme dieting and are experiencing loss of menses as a result. In addition, women needed to have enough fluency in the English language to engage in a verbal interview. Apart from this, no other exclusion criteria were applied.

Recruitment took place over the course of three months within urban and suburban areas of Southwestern Ontario to acquire diversity among the group of participants. Advertisements (Appendix A) were placed on community notice boards, through listservs, well as through online public posting sites (e.g., Kijiji, Craigslist). Interested participants were required to either telephone a local number or email the researcher for further information regarding the study, and to set up an appointment for a telephone screening (Appendix B). The telephone screening was used to ensure that individuals met the inclusion/exclusion criteria, as well as to inform interested individuals about the nature of the study, and the commitment that would be required of their participation. Interested individuals who met the inclusion criteria were informed that participating in the study would involve one, 2 to 3 hour interview, and the potential for a second interview, as well as 1 to 2 hours following the interview(s) for the review of the interview transcript and summary. They were also informed about receiving compensation in the form of a $20 gift card to Indigo following completion of the interview. Following the telephone screening, contact information was collected from each individual who expressed interest in participating, and an electronic copy of the Consent Form (Appendix C) outlining the limits of confidentiality, plans for file storage and security, risks and benefits associated with their participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, was e-mailed to them. Interested individuals were asked to review the Consent Form carefully, and to contact the researcher once they had made an informed decision regarding their participation and had any questions for the researcher. Individuals who agreed to participate established an interview time and meeting place together with the researcher.
Interview Process

Prior to the start of each interview, participants were provided with a hard copy of the Consent Form to read and sign. Participants were also provided with a ‘Request for Summary of Research Findings’ form (Appendix D) should they wish to receive a written report of the research findings upon completion of the study. All participants made such a request. After questions were addressed, participants were then asked to choose a pseudonym to protect their anonymity throughout the research process. Participant pseudonyms were used throughout the transcripts and summaries and any identifying information was changed to further ensure the protection of participants’ anonymity.

All interviews were conducted in a quiet and private room at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education; or at a location chosen by each of the participants. Interviews ranged in length from 1.5 to 3 hours, with the average interview just over 2 hours. All interviews were recorded using an mp3 digital recorder.

During the interview participants were asked about their relationships and experiences with peers and friends in childhood, adolescence, emerging adulthood, and their current experiences with friends and peers. Participants were also asked how these experiences have influenced their relationship with their body over time. An ‘Interview Questioning Guide’ (Appendix E) was used to ensure adequate probing and collection of information, however, the researcher followed each participant through their own discussions and recollections in order to acquire greater breadth and insight to their experiences (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

Immediately following the interview, participants were thanked for their time and contribution, and provided their $20 gift card. Digital recordings of the interview were immediately transferred to a password protected and encrypted computer file on the researcher’s computer, and the original recordings on the mp3 device were deleted. One professional
transcriptionist was hired to transcribe the interviews. A written summary for each interview that outlined the participant’s story in a chronological order was then prepared by the researcher and e-mailed to each participant, along with their transcribed interview for feedback and/or corrections. The summary was utilized to ensure the accuracy of the information presented and understood by the researcher, and also for the researcher to ask any further questions for clarification, and to determine the need for a possible second interview. Summaries received minimal changes from the participants regarding demographic information or the timing of certain events and experiences described. Furthermore, the participants and researcher together decided that a second interview was unnecessary due to the depth of information acquired within the first interview.

Summary of Participants

A total of fourteen women participated in the study. This number was based upon Glaser and Straus’ (1967) natural saturation point; the point at which no new themes emerge within the data. According to Glaser and Straus (1967), saturation is typically achieved within ten to twelve interviews. In the present study, no new themes emerged following the analysis of the eleventh interview.

Of the fourteen women who participated in the present study, eight participants identified themselves as being either first or second generation Canadians with East Asian, Southeast Asian, African, Caribbean, Middle-Eastern or Latin American cultural backgrounds. Six Caucasian participants identified themselves as being first to sixth generation Canadian with European heritage. Participants’ religious affiliations included Christian, Jewish and Muslim. Schooling experiences included co-ed and same-sex public schools, co-ed and same-sex private schools, boarding schools, and religious-affiliated schools. Participants’ level of education ranged from the partial completion of college degrees to completion of graduate degrees. As well, their
socioeconomic status growing up and currently ranged from working-class to middle-upper class. Seven participants identified as married. Twelve identified as heterosexual; one participant identified as lesbian; and one participant identified as bisexual. Three participants reported having children. Five of the fourteen participants reported having past serious eating problems (e.g., clinically diagnosed eating disorders). All but two participants identified times in their lives when food was used in unhealthy ways (e.g., restricting or dieting to lose weight, overeating, etc.).

Following is a brief summary of each participant to provide a general context for which to understand participants’ differential experiences in their bodies across the lifespan as they are shaped by multiple social influences.

Lisa

Lisa is a 28-year old single woman who lives in an urban city in Southwestern Ontario with her mother and sister. Lisa comes from an East Asian background, and does not have a religious affiliation. Lisa identified her socioeconomic status at the present time, and growing up, as middle class.

Regarding her educational background, Lisa attended a relatively homogenous Catholic, co-ed elementary school. In grade seven, she attended a public, co-ed junior school where she was placed in the gifted program, and struggled to fit in with her peers. After high school, Lisa pursued a Bachelor’s degree in business at an Ontario university. Upon graduation, she travelled to East Asia where she worked in the field of business for two years. Upon returning from Asia, Lisa made a career change and pursued her passion for food through a degree in culinary arts.

Lisa describes herself as a highly ambitious person who enjoys being surrounded by peers who push her to succeed and challenge herself, academically and professionally. She attributes her experiences in her junior high, when she did not fit in with her peers, to shaping her into a strong and independent person who has learned to embrace her individuality. Throughout,
childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, Lisa denied ever being surrounded by friends who were dieting or struggling with their bodies or eating. She has maintained a healthy relationship and attitude towards food and her body, and enjoys eating with her friends. She believes that having a passion and appreciation for food has been a positive influence on her life and may have protected her from concerns about her body, as well as the fact that Lisa and the large majority of her friends are all thin and have never had to worry about their weight.

Jen

Jen is a 31-year old married woman of Euro-Canadian decent who currently lives in an urban city in Southwestern Ontario with her female partner. Jen was born and raised in Southwestern Ontario. Her father, mother and step-mother are of European decent and all immigrated to Canada prior to Jen’s birth. Jen’s family is Catholic, but she does not currently have a religious affiliation. Jen has one younger sister, three half-sisters and two half-brothers. Jen identified her socioeconomic status growing up as middle, and her current socioeconomic status as low-middle.

Regarding her educational background, Jen attended a co-ed Catholic elementary school. She then attended a Catholic all-girls’ public high school between the ages of 14 and 19, during which she reported a period of time that she was closest with peers who were invested in their academics more so than their appearances and popularity. After high school Jen enrolled in an Ontario university where she pursued courses towards a general arts degree. Presently she works full-time in administration.

Jen came out as gay in university, and has become very integrated within the gay community since. While Jen still remains friends with some women from her high school, she acknowledged that her current peer group is comprised of mostly gay males and some gay
females that she has met over recent years. Jen feels particularly comfortable, understood and accepted by her new group of friends.

Jen describes herself as an emotional eater, and acknowledges struggling with her weight; a struggle that she shares with her wife. Jen has dieted and restricted at various times throughout her life as a means to lose weight.

Paige

Paige is a 30-year old single woman of Canadian and East Asian decent who lives alone in an urban city in Southwestern Ontario. Paige’s parents were born and raised in Canada. Her father is Euro-Canadian decent, and her mother is of East Asian decent; they divorced when Paige was 16 years of age. She has two younger brothers. Paige does not have a religious affiliation. She recognized her socioeconomic status growing up as middle-high, and her current socioeconomic status as low-middle.

Regarding her educational background, Paige attended a public, co-ed elementary school and public, co-ed high school. Immediately following high school Paige completed a Bachelor’s degree, followed by a Master’s degree in the social sciences field at an Ontario university. For the past five years she has been pursuing clinical research.

Following her parents’ separation Paige began severely restricting her food intake, and was diagnosed with anorexia. She spent two months in an in-patient psychiatric program where she was weight restored. After returning to school in grade eleven Paige began bingeing and purging for approximately six months until her father intervened and Paige sought medical treatment again. Paige continued to struggle with her eating in the first year of university and moved back home to receive professional treatment. Paige returned to university the following year and completed her Bachelor’s degree.
Paige described instances peer teasing because of her “mixed” heritage as a child and adolescent. Although none of Paige’s peers reportedly engaged in dieting or disordered eating during adolescence, after receiving treatment for her eating disorder, Paige recalled engaging in many self-comparisons with other female peers, which significantly influenced how she felt about her body at the time. Presently, Paige reports that she has recovered from her eating disorder. She enjoys food and is focused on maintaining a healthy and active lifestyle.

Ellie

Ellie is a 28-year old woman of European decent who currently lives alone in an urban city in Southwestern Ontario. Ellie was born and raised in a rural city in England. Her parents are both of European decent, and divorced when she was 11 years of age. She has one younger brother. Her family is Catholic, but she is non-practicing. She identified her current socioeconomic status as middle class.

Regarding Ellie’s educational background, she attended a co-ed public elementary school and a co-ed public high school. Immediately following high school Ellie completed a Bachelor’s degree in general arts at a university in England where she lived in residence with friends. She moved to Canada in 2007 to pursue a career in human resources.

Ellie denied any current or past problems with eating. She recalled noticing her female peers becoming more concerned about their bodies and eating around the time of adolescence. Though she described herself as always being physically larger than her friends, she reported never actively dieting to control her weight during adolescence. As Ellie and her friends entered into adulthood they became more conscious of healthy eating and exercise. Ellie regards this shift in her lifestyle, where she engages in exercise and is conscious of her eating, as a positive influence that has supported her in feeling better about herself and her body.

Zoe
Zoe is a 34-year old bisexual single woman who lives alone in an urban city in Southwestern Ontario, where she was born and raised. Her parents are of European decent. She has two sisters. Zoe denied any current religious affiliation. She identified her socioeconomic status growing up as middle-high, and her current socioeconomic status as low-middle.

Regarding Zoe’s educational background, she attended a co-ed public elementary and a co-ed public high school. She attended the gifted program in her schools from grades three to eight. Zoe recalled being severely bullied and teased by her peers in late childhood into early adolescence. In high school Zoe began associating with peers from a nearby school specializing in the arts. The ‘alternative’ crowd at this school was a welcome change for Zoe who was inspired by their confidence and their liberating appearances and lifestyle. Immediately following high school Zoe completed her Bachelor’s degree in the arts from an Ontario university. As a young adult she travelled to East Asia where she worked for three and a half years. Currently, she works in the field of education. Zoe describes her current peer group as her “happy hippie friends”, who are colourful, fun-loving people that are very accepting of one another.

Zoe reported feeling largely disconnected to her body throughout adolescence. Zoe stated that she is presently learning to become more aware of her body.

Sandra

Sandra is a 32-year old married woman of Southeast Asian decent who lives with her husband, of Euro-Canadian decent, in an urban city in Southwestern Ontario. Sandra was born and raised in Southeast Asia where she lived with her mother, father and older brother. In late childhood, Sandra and her family moved to East Asia as a result of her father’s employment, and returned to Southeast Asia again in middle adolescence. Sandra eventually moved to Canada in 2005 to pursue her education. Her family is Christian, although she is non-practicing. Sandra identified her current socioeconomic status as low.
Regarding Sandra’s educational background, she attended a co-ed public elementary school in Southeast Asia. At the age of 9, when Sandra’s family moved to a large urban city in East Asia, she attended a co-ed private international school, which was very diverse in comparison to her former elementary school. Upon returning to Southeast Asia at the age of 14, Sandra attended an all-girls’ public, Christian mission school for two years, and then pursued two years at a co-ed public junior college. Upon graduating from high school Sandra completed a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree at a large university in Southeast Asia. She moved to Canada in 2005 to pursue her Doctorate in social sciences, which she is in the process of completing.

Sandra denied former serious issues with eating; however, she stated that for many years, starting in her early teens, she had a persistent feeling of needing to be on a diet. Sandra became very conscious of her body around the time of late childhood to early adolescence, particularly in relation to ethnocultural differences among her peers. Sandra acknowledged feeling more comfortable in body today as a result of fewer pressures to conform to societal ideals. She states that she and her husband are both ‘health conscious’, in that they enjoy being physically active, eating well, and taking care of their bodies.

Simone

Simone is a 35-year old woman of East Asian decent, who lives with her husband, of European decent, in an urban city of Southwestern Ontario. Simone was born and raised in a rural area of the Caribbean. She has two younger sisters and one older brother. Simone’s parents immigrated from East Asia to the Caribbean before she and her siblings were born. When Simone was 12 years of age her entire family immigrated to Canada. Simone recognized her socioeconomic status growing up, and currently, as middle class. Simone was raised Catholic, but she denied any current religious affiliation.
Regarding Simone’s educational background, she attended a co-ed private kindergarten, a co-ed Hindu elementary school, and an all-girl’s Catholic elementary school. When Simone’s family moved to Canada she attended a co-ed Catholic middle school and a co-ed public high school. Upon graduating from high school Simone completed a Bachelor’s degree from an Ontario university. For the past eight years Simone has worked part-time in the field of education.

Simone denies her friends having a direct influence on her body, stating that body size and appearance was never an area of great importance to her close friends growing up. Although she denied any current or past several problems with eating, Simone is vigilant about keeping her body weight within a particular range, and she has weight cycled and dieted several times throughout her adult life.

Mary

Mary is a 29-year old single woman of European-Canadian decent, who lives alone in an urban city in Southwestern Ontario, where she was born and raised. Her parents divorced when she was 11. She has one younger sister. She denied any religious affiliation.

Regarding Mary’s educational background, she attended a co-ed Catholic elementary school and a co-ed public high school. Upon graduating from high school, Mary completed a degree in social sciences at an Ontario college. Presently, Mary works full-time in administration. She is also pursuing a degree in nutrition, and works part-time in personal training. She recognized her current socioeconomic status as middle.

Mary reported a history of binge eating disorder. She began emotional eating around the age of 11, just prior to her parent’s divorce. She described binge eating throughout high school and into adulthood, and using exercise as a means to purge calories. Mary sought treatment through a naturopathic doctor, who reportedly helped her to attain a more balanced lifestyle. Although she admitted to occasional emotional eating today, she acknowledged the importance of
connecting with a new peer network who are open, trusting and respectful, and who have supported her in sustaining a healthier attitude towards her body.

Sarah

Sarah is a 25-year old single woman of African and Caribbean decent, who lives with her mother in a city suburb of Southwestern Ontario, where she was born and raised. Sarah and her parents moved to Africa in 1995 to pursue missionary work. After two years living in Africa, her parents separated and Sarah and her mother moved back to Canada. She has no siblings. She identifies as a practicing Christian. Sarah recognized her socioeconomic status growing up as middle, and her current socioeconomic status as low-middle.

Regarding Sarah’s educational background, she attended a public elementary school in a city suburb of Southwestern Ontario. When her family moved to Africa, Sarah attended a co-ed, international private boarding school from grades six to seven. When Sarah and her mother returned to Canada she attended a co-ed public school from grades eight to nine, and an all-girls’ Catholic high school from grades ten onwards. Sarah recently completed her Bachelor’s degree in the field of social sciences at an Ontario university. She volunteers in the field of mental health.

Sarah reported a difficult cultural transition moving to Africa and back to Canada. She recalled being teased by her Caucasian peers when she returned to North America. While she denied any past issues with eating, she acknowledged struggling with her body image throughout high school, particularly in early to middle adolescence when she was teased by her peers about her weight. Sarah currently describes herself as an emotional eater. She remains cognizant of her eating, and exercises regularly to stay physically healthy.

Michelle

Michelle is a 27-year old married woman of Euro-Canadian decent who lives in an urban city in Southwestern Ontario with her husband and 9-month old son. She was raised by her
mother and father in Southwestern Ontario. She has one older brother. Michelle identified as Jewish. She identified her socioeconomic status both growing up and currently as middle-high.

Regarding her educational background, Michelle attended various co-ed public schools and a performing arts school from grades six through eight. Upon graduation from high school Michelle pursued her Bachelor’s degree at an Ontario university, and a Master’s degree at a university in the Northeastern United States. She worked full-time as a mental health practitioner following her graduation. Presently Michelle is a stay-at-home-mom.

Michelle disclosed a history of anorexia, diagnosed in grade ten. Michelle received treatment through an eating disorders outpatient clinic. By the end of grade ten, Michelle was weight restored, but continued to experience eating and body image issues up until the third year of her Bachelor’s degree. Presently, Michelle states that she is fully recovered from her eating disorder, and reports feeling confident in herself and in her body. Through her recovery she has come to recognize the powerful influence of key friends in her life that have shaped how she felt about, and treated her body throughout adolescence and young adulthood.

Anna

Anna is a 31-year old single woman of East Asian decent, who lives with her mother and younger sister in an urban city in Southwestern Ontario. Anna’s parents were born and raised in East Asia and moved to Canada prior to Anna being born. Anna’s parents separated when Anna was 26 years of age. She identified her socioeconomic status growing up as middle, and her current socioeconomic status as low. Anna denied any religious affiliation.

Regarding Anna’s educational background, she attended a number of different co-ed public schools as a child and teenager. Following graduation from high school, she completed a Bachelor’s degree in the field of social sciences at an Ontario university. Presently, she is a full-time student at a private career college. She also works part-time.
Anna denied any current or past issues with eating, though she reported not being the healthiest of eaters and having a “lifelong addiction to sugar.” Growing up, Anna recalled being physically larger than most of her peers, and feeling self-conscious of her body, particularly during physical recreation activities. Anna also endorsed a strong internalization of the ‘White Ideal’, beginning in early adolescence, which continues to shape how she views her body today.

Layla

Layla is a 35-year old married woman of Middle-Eastern decent who lives with her husband and three children in a rural area of Southwestern Ontario. Layla was born in England where she lived with her mother and father, both of Middle-Eastern decent. Layla’s parents are both health care professionals. She has one younger sister and one younger brother. At the age of 6, Layla’s entire family moved to the Middle East, where she remained until the age of 21, when she married her husband (also of Middle-Eastern decent). Together, she and her husband moved to North America to pursue graduate education. For the first few years in North America Layla lived in a large urban city in the United States, and eventually moved to Canada, where she and her husband have raised their three children. Layla is currently a full-time graduate student. She identifies as Muslim. She recognized her current socioeconomic status as middle-upper class.

Regarding Layla’s educational background, she attended a co-ed private kindergarten in England, which she recalled being very homogenous with respect to ethnocultural diversity. After moving to the Middle East at the age of 6, Layla attended a private all-girls’ school from grades one to nine. She then attended a co-ed private high school from grades nine to twelve. Following graduation, Layla completed her Bachelor’s degree at a large university in the Middle East. When Layla and her husband moved to the United States she completed a Master’s degree in business. She is presently completing a second Master’s degree in the field of social sciences at an Ontario university.
Layla has struggled with eating and body image issues throughout most of her life, and has restricted her food intake quite severely in order to lose weight. Beginning in childhood, Layla also internalized significant ethnocultural differences among her peers, which have continued to influence how she lives in her body today. Presently, Layla remains very conscious of what she eats in an attempt to control her body size and shape. She regards her friends and peers as the strongest influence in terms of how she lives and feels in her body.

Hillary

Hillary is a 29-year old recently married woman who lives with her husband in Southwestern Ontario. Hillary was born and raised in a large urban city in Eastern Canada. She recently moved to Southwestern Ontario to pursue graduate studies. She has one younger brother. Hillary identifies as Jewish. She recognized her socioeconomic status growing up as middle, and her current socioeconomic status as low-middle.

Regarding Hillary’s educational background, she attended a co-ed Jewish private elementary school and a co-ed Jewish private high school. Following high school, she attended a two-year university preparatory school. Upon graduating, Hillary completed a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree in social sciences and education at a university in Eastern Canada. Following completion of her degrees she worked in the field of education. Currently, Hillary is a full-time student pursuing a one-year education degree. She also works part-time in personal training.

Hillary reported a lifelong struggle with eating and body-related issues. In late childhood Hillary began gaining weight, which continued throughout high school and young adulthood. She attempted to diet frequently throughout adolescence, which was largely encouraged by her mother. At the age of 25, Hillary enlisted the support of a private eating disorders clinic where she was diagnosed with binge eating disorder. Since this time, she has lost a significant amount of
weight and reports that she feels more in control and comfortable in her body. She admits that her weight and eating represent an ongoing struggle for her.

Leena

Leena is a 28-year old married women of Latin American decent, who currently lives in an urban city of Southwestern Ontario with her husband and 6-year old son. Leena was born and raised in South America. She moved to Canada in 2010 to pursue graduate studies. Leena has one younger sister. She recognized her socioeconomic status growing up to be low, and her current socioeconomic status as low-middle. Leena identifies as Christian.

Regarding Leena’s educational background, she attended a co-ed public elementary school, a co-ed independent middle school, and an all-girls’ independent high school from grades nine to thirteen. Upon graduation, Leena attained a Bachelor’s degree in education and worked in the field of education prior to moving to Canada. Currently, Leena is pursuing her Master’s degree.

Leena reported past problems with eating, beginning around the time of early adolescence. Leena stated that she severely restricted and exercised to lose weight throughout high school and into her twenties. In her late teens, Leena engaged in extreme dieting and purging of food. She recognized she had a serious problem when she experienced amenorrhea, and sought the help of a physician. She acknowledged that remaining healthy continues to be a conscious effort for her. Over the past several years, with the support of her husband and a new, diverse group of friends, Leena has adopted a more balanced approach to eating, and has acquired more confidence in herself and her body.

Data Analysis

Employing a Grounded Theory approach to analyzing qualitative data (Charmaz, 2006), analysis began by assigning descriptive codes to line-by-line units of text within the margins of
the interviews in order to capture as many possible meanings of the information presented. Throughout this process, the researcher stayed closely connected to the data and kept detailed notes of her thoughts and impressions while reading the interviews to understand how they shaped and informed the data analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

Upon completion of this initial coding phase, the researcher generated a coding tree highlighting all lower level themes that emerged across the fourteen interviews (Appendix F). Following the creation of the coding tree, related sections were examined more closely to identify emergent categories, themes and patterns among the participants’ narratives related specifically to peers and friends, and associated experiences. Using the constant comparison method (Marshall & Rossman, 1995), the researcher then generated a list of higher-level themes by reflecting upon similarities and differences across emergent lower-level themes, and evaluating these in relation to the research questions and alternative patterns and explanations that surfaced while coding. The initial coding scheme (Appendix G) evolved several times as higher-level themes were continuously examined in relation to lower-level themes. After several structural changes the final coding scheme was developed, and then discussed and validated by the thesis supervisor (Appendix H).

Interviews were then coded into categorically similar data according to the final coding scheme using Microsoft Word. Further, to illicit comparisons of categories across distinct age groups, each content category was also simultaneously coded according to the following developmental stages: early childhood (3-5 years); middle childhood (6-7 years); late childhood (8-10 years); early adolescence (11-13 years); middle adolescence (14-16 years); late adolescence (17-19 years); young adulthood (20-25 years); and adulthood (beyond 25 years). As categories were compared to one another slight revisions were made by adding new codes and eliminating existing ones in order to best represent the themes and sub-themes pertaining to the influence of
peers and friends on participants’ body experiences over time. This final stage of analysis required the researcher to carefully examine and test categories and patterns among participants’ narratives in order to integrate themes along a hierarchical model of women’s experiences with peers across a developmental context. The terms ‘themes’, ‘categories’, ‘core categories’ and ‘domains’ were used throughout the results to depict the hierarchical structure of the emergent models (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Hierarchical Structure of the Emergent Model

Ultimately this hierarchical structure of categories resulted in the development of two interrelated models that serve to showcase how relationships with friends and peers shape girls’ and women’s lived experiences in their bodies over time. The first model, titled “Peer Processes Related to Dominant and Alternative Norms, Ideals and Expectations” examines the transmission and internalization of norms, ideals and expectations within the peer environment pertaining to two domains relevant to women’s body experiences: i) The Ideal Body Appearance, presented in chapter three; and ii) Idealized Ways of Inhabiting the Body as Girl and Woman, presented in chapter four. The second model, presented in chapter five, titled “The Implications of Peer Processes on Social Power and Acceptance”, explores how widely sanctioned norms, ideals and expectations pertaining to participants’ bodies and appearances, are expressed and internalized through concerns for status, power, belonging and acceptance.
While the two models, and their associated domains, categories, themes and subthemes captured the range of peer processes shared by participants, the study examined, in addition, the impact of these peer processes on changes in participants’ internalized experiences of their body.

The life history approach, which involved a chronological inquiry of peer processes and internalized reactions to these processes, all the way from earliest memories to the time of the study, allowed for an examination of shifts in internalized experiences over time. The description of the different themes of peer processes therefore also involves an exploration into girls’ and women’s internalized body experiences as they are shaped by friends and peers.
CHAPTER THREE

PEER PROCESSES RELATED TO THE IDEAL BODY APPEARANCE

The first model of peer processes that influence body experiences, entitled “Peer Processes Related to Dominant and Alternative Norms, Ideals and Expectations”, encompasses the shaping of peer processes by widely sanctioned idealized norms and expectations of girls and women. It is comprised of two main domains: Ideal Body Appearance and Idealized Ways of Inhabiting the Body as a Girl and Woman (see Figure 2). These two domains, in turn, include a number of core categories, categories, themes and subthemes, and are therefore described in two different chapters.

Figure 2. Domains of Model One, Peer Processes Related to Dominant and Alternative Norms, Ideals and Expectations

Chapter three explores the first domain of model one, namely: Ideal Body Appearance, while chapter four explores the second domain: Idealized Ways of Inhabiting the Body of a Girl and Woman. The Ideal Body Appearance domain addresses idealized norms of appearance and includes peer processes that promote the ideal and those that challenge the ideal. Specifically, the core category of Peer Processes Promoting the Ideal includes the two categories of Social Comparison, and Evaluative Messages and Appearance-based Conversations. The core category of Challenging the Ideal includes the two categories of Promoting Alternative Body Norms, and Messages that Challenge and Resist Preoccupation with the Ideal (see Figure 3).
Figure 3. Categories that Promote and Challenge the Ideal Body Appearance

Peer Processes Promoting the Ideal Body Appearance

Among the fourteen women interviewed, two categories that emerged in relation to Peer Processes Promoting the Ideal Body Appearance were: 1) Social Comparison; and 2) Evaluative Messages and Appearance-based Conversations.

Social Comparison

Social Comparison was a prevalent category across all participants’ interviews from the time of childhood through to adulthood, whereby women reported engaging in direct physical comparisons with their friends and peers. Through their engagement in Social Comparisons, women demonstrated the widespread transmission and internalization of appearance norms and ideals relevant to the female body within their peer environments. In particular, these norms, ideals and expectations emerged most frequently in relation to the peer processes themes of: i) Differences in Body Size and Shape; ii) Pubertal Changes; and iii) Ethnocultural Differences and Cultural Transitions (see Figure 4).
Differences in Body Size and Shape

Observed Differences in Body Size and Shape was the first of three themes of Social Comparison that highlighted the progression of women’s internalized norms and ideals for thinness across development. Emerging through women’s engagement in comparisons with their friends and peers, observed Differences in Body Size and Shape was demonstrated to first surface in relation to an external awareness of the body beginning towards the end of early to middle childhood (5-7 years), whereby participants expressed viewing their bodies from an external perspective. This external awareness was shown to then manifest into an evaluative external gaze of the body, which for most participants, was quite pronounced by late childhood, around the age of 10, whereby women inhabited their bodies from a place of external evaluation and surveillance. As norms and ideals for thinness escalated within the peer environment towards the end of late childhood and into early adolescence (9-13 years), and as the evaluative external gaze intensified, Social Comparisons in relation to Differences in Body Size and Shape were shown to contribute to expressions of body dissatisfaction and subsequent preoccupation with adherence to body norms and ideals (see Figure 5).
The development of an external awareness of the body, whereby participants described viewing their body from an external perspective in relation to their friends and peers, was discussed by all participants beginning towards the end of early to middle childhood. Thus, for the large majority of women interviewed, under the age of five marked a time of complete unawareness or unconsciousness, contributing to a sense of overall comfort and freedom in their body.

I just wasn’t even conscious of a body image in young childhood. I wasn’t really conscious of differences between us at all….Honestly at that time I don’t even think that I was aware of my own body image, so I don’t think my peers actually really had any influence then. (Paige, early childhood)

I don’t remember perceiving my body or not perceiving it as a young child so I don’t even know [that] I thought that way as a kid…being pretty happy being with friends, I just remember that, because afterwards I felt so terrible in my body later. Before then, it just seems like it wasn’t something I thought about or cared about…We were just happy little kids in our bodies for the most part…I remember just being kind of blissfully unselfconscious. (Zoe, early childhood)

Towards middle childhood, participants’ Social Comparisons with their peers, particularly in relation to Differences in Body Size and Shape, resulted in the development of an external awareness of their body. For many of the women, height was their first observed difference in relation to the bodies of their friends and peers.
I was one of the tallest people in my entire class when I was seven, and after [that] everyone else grew and I stayed really small. *And how did you feel about being tall in comparison to you peers at that age?* At the time I didn’t feel different. It wasn’t until a few years later… it just didn’t occur to me then. (Mary, middle childhood)

Additionally, several women, including Ellie, Hillary and Simone, all spoke of being heavier than their friends and peers in childhood. With the exception of Layla, who was the only participant to demonstrate a pronounced evaluative external gaze of her body as early as six years of age, in middle childhood most participants did not ascribe any judgment or evaluation in relation to these observed differences in body size.

I remember being conscious at a very early age that my thighs were too fat, and when I think about it now, even though my thighs are much fatter I think they’re fine, but I don’t know where I got that impression from…I was mortified in kindergarten when we were playing and running around, that the kids were going to see my knickers and my thighs….I just remember looking at [my thighs] when I was sitting down and noticing that they were not as thin as the girls I could see around me. (Layla, middle childhood)

I was bigger than most of my friends, just like naturally bigger, but I don’t remember it ever bothering me at all to be honest. I think I just felt quite comfortable and happy with myself and I think at that point I never gave much thought to sort of body issues or anything like that. (Ellie, middle childhood)

Further, several participants recalled appearing thin in relation to their peers in early childhood, however, there was no awareness of the significance of thinness at this stage in development. This is largely contrasted with many participants as they approached late childhood
when being thin suddenly afforded social status and power within the peer environment; a theme that will be explored in chapter five.

I actually don’t remember having too much of an awareness of my body at that time. It’s interesting because I really just don’t have any memories of it. I remember just loving bikinis and clothes and not really thinking much about my body until sort of grade six was creeping up…I was skinny in comparison to others…I think I noticed it but I don’t think it meant anything to me then. (Michelle, early-middle childhood)

Most significant across all interviews, was around the age of 9 and 10 when Social Comparisons with female peers heightened considerably, and participants’ external awareness of their body manifested into a pronounced evaluative external gaze, whereby they demonstrated living in their bodies from a position of external evaluation and almost constant self-surveillance. For all women in the study, the emergence of the evaluative external gaze coincided with the onset of strong norms and ideals for thinness within their peer environments, which continued to remain pronounced throughout adolescence and adulthood.

It is significant to note that regardless of participants’ actual body size in late childhood, all participants reported body comparisons with peers who they perceived as smaller or thinner than them, contributing to heightened body consciousness in reference to the ideal.

In grade five a new friend came along; she was very worried about her body and that’s the only way I was made aware of it. So we weighed ourselves and believed we should be worried about that. [She was] super skinny. I remember noticing that she was skinny but not myself…And I didn’t understand what she meant when she said, “I’m so cool that my
waist measures the same as my head”…I didn’t understand [if] that was supposed to be good or bad. (Leena, late childhood)

I knew that I was heavier than most girls…that was something that I was self-conscious of…It was me noticing that I was heavier than other girls, and that’s something that’s always been in the back of my mind I guess. Nobody ever said anything or implied anything that affected me in any way. It was just my own observations. Like compared to everyone else I definitely have a stomach and stuff. (Anna, late childhood)

Parents were also shown to play an important role in participants’ propensity to engage in body comparisons with friends and peers in late childhood, as well as their internalization of the evaluative external gaze. For instance, several women spoke about their parents’ beliefs regarding the importance of thinness, accentuating their own processes of surveillance and body consciousness in relation to their friends and peers.

I think the time when I really started not being able to belt my tunic was the time I started to feel very different [from my peers]…Mine wouldn’t belt anymore and so I wore mine without a belt, which luckily for me became an in-style thing. But I remember telling my friend that my belt didn’t fit and hers did. She was thinner than I was but her parents were also willing to buy her bigger clothes and mine were not…They didn’t believe I should be that big…I started wearing my [gym uniform] every day cause I didn’t feel comfortable in the tunic. And people would say, “why are you wearing your gym uniform again?” I would definitely feel that they obviously noticed my size. (Hillary, late childhood)

My mom was the chief influence in me realizing my body image and my ideas about my appearance…I had this one friend who was the daughter of one of my parents’ Chinese
friends and I was always compared to her because she was so thin and so pretty.... Apparently, in [Asian culture] it’s their form of parenting to always compare you with other people. My mom would always just compare me to her and say you should strive to be like her. (Simone, late childhood)

Further, for the large majority of participants, entrance into early adolescence represented the beginning of a highly integrated ‘appearance culture’, where judgments about appearances, body comparisons, and the transmission of norms for the ideal body infiltrated their social environments. Thus, as participants internalized an evaluative external gaze of their body in late childhood, and as norms and ideals for thinness became even more pronounced within their peer environments, expressions of body dissatisfaction were demonstrated to surface as participants compared themselves negatively in relation to their friends and peers.

Specifically, in early adolescence, all participants expressed comparisons with friends and peers, predominantly in relation to body size and shape. For many of the participants who described being unconcerned with their bodies in childhood, the cusp of early adolescence represented a significant shift in their awareness of how their body appeared physically different in comparison to their peers, resulting in distinct expressions of body dissatisfaction.

I was a little bit pudgy, and the other girls they were much thinner and cooler…. I became aware that I didn’t look like other people…[It] upset me a lot. I started to become dissatisfied…I felt like if my body looked the same way [as them] it would solve my problems. (Layla, early adolescence)

From a young age if someone’s heavier than you feel like, well at least I’m not that bad, but then two of my friends were skinnier than me. So definitely a strong memory I have is
when we’d go shopping for clothes and they can go to any store and have tons of choices and everything looks good. And then for me, it’s not going to fit or it’s not going to look good. You know, just being jealous of them…It just made me feel upset a lot of the time afterwards. It was a discouraging experience. (Anna, early adolescence)

For several of the participants, negative body comparisons with peers in early to middle adolescence contributed to feelings of embarrassment and the desire to hide or conceal their body because of dissatisfaction with their appearance.

At that time I wasn’t tall and I wasn’t skinny. I guess I had an athletic body. I always have and I always will, but in that group of tall, skinny girls, [it] kind of made me look different. And how did you feel about that? Not great. I remember a period of time where everything I wore was baggy cause I just wanted to hide. (Mary, middle adolescence)

I had a thing about my arms; I thought I had fat arms… I hated wearing sleeveless things. …The summer school uniforms were these cap sleeve blouses that showed off most of your arms and I hated that. I was like, ‘I got to cover this up.’ I made my mom buy me the school jacket, and it’s so hot [where we lived], but I wore that jacket the entire two years I was there because of my arms…Other girls would dress up and I thought they looked so nice but I figured they just had nicer bodies than I did. They didn’t have my problem of big shoulders and fat arms...[I] adopted that method of trying not to sit with your arms against your body…it just felt like I had to hide these-huge ugly bits of me. (Sandra, early-middle adolescence)
Additionally, in response to feeling dissatisfied with their body, several participants described restricting their participation in activities previously enjoyed with friends throughout middle to late adolescence.

I dropped out of swimming club because they always tell you swimming makes your shoulders big. And you’re always so hungry after swimming, like you just wanted to eat a horse after you were done with swim training, so towards the end of grade nine I think I just said like I’m done with swimming club. (Sandra, middle-late adolescence)

[My friends] had their own little mini parties in the basement and they’d be like, “oh Sarah just dance, just relax”, and I refused to dance cause I was so self-conscious….They were thinner than me…I felt that I may be judged because they were the popular girls… I felt disconnected from my body. I felt awkward and uncomfortable, because deep down inside I wanted to dance, but when you looked at me from the outside, it didn’t matter how I felt on the inside. (Sarah, middle-late adolescence)

Further, as expressions of body dissatisfaction became pronounced throughout adolescence, so did pressures associated with adhering to the thin ideal.

My friend would have her jeans taken in cause they were too big. So I really started feeling conscious about my body and being aware of sizes. Before I was just buying what fit. Now it wasn’t good enough; it wasn’t good enough until I needed my jeans taken in …things just sort of fell from there. (Michelle, early-middle adolescence)

I started noticing the judgments between girls and it was really fast. Even if you were really close with a girlfriend there was that judgment of, maybe not so much jealousy, but
you could see the [physical] features that you had, that they wanted or vice versa. That became really apparent...You would talk about food, which is weird, because before food was just what you ate, but that’s kind of when I started noticing that. Girls started to assert their own beauty, their own sense of style, and some people would wear make-up. *Do you remember how you felt in your body at that time?* …They made me aware of how you should judge yourself which now I see is wrong but they were judging themselves so much so I thought I should be doing the same thing, and holding myself by the same standards. (Jen, early-middle adolescence)

As participants recounted their experiences throughout adolescence and into young adulthood (20-25 years of age), body comparisons with female friends and peers continued to remain pronounced. For several women, entrance into young adulthood represented a time of particularly heightened body surveillance and fear of evaluation in the context of new peer environments.

In [university], I felt like I was on surveillance. I was an object on surveillance. (Sarah, young adulthood)

University was an especially difficult time for several of the women in the study who were exposed to a larger peer environment and new female peers to compare with.

I put a lot of pressure on myself to compare myself against other people and when I [was] out in this whole new environment where I’ve gone from a high school of several hundred to a university of thousands, I [was] like, ‘whoa like there’s a lot of people out here.’ I started to focus in on the girls that I perceived to be much thinner or much prettier than me. And in my mind, those were the only girls that existed out there and the girls that
were maybe frumpier or bigger, they didn’t even register. So in my mind I was the worst of all the girls. (Paige, young adulthood)

I wasn’t really looking like [my peers] in university…and I blamed my body for it. (Layla, young adulthood)

For several of the women interviewed, like Paige and Layla, who struggled with disordered eating at the time, being thin in the context of their peer environments was an important contributor to their sense of identity. Entrance into a new, and unknown peer group thus served to significantly heighten their dissatisfaction with their body appearance.

Further, among women who experienced disordered eating throughout adolescence, the period of young adulthood, particularly the transition into university and a new peer environment, significantly contributed to heightened Social Comparisons, resulting in body dissatisfaction and also the preoccupation with adherence to ideals and norms for thinness, as expressed by Paige and Michelle.

I felt that I needed to be ‘the skinny girl’ among my friends, like that was going to be my thing…And I probably started off at university at a very average weight…I remember when I got there two of my roommates were a bit heavier, but one of them was really thin and I realized, ‘oh, I’m not going to be the thinnest girl here’…With my high school group of girls I was a bit thinner than them so I don’t think I’d ever felt any real competition before…But I went downhill fast, oh so fast. I got really depressed. I was drinking a ton…definitely started binging and purging again, and had to drop out so I only did four months of [my] first year. (Paige, young adulthood)
A lot of my influences about my body came from the girls I saw around me, but I wasn’t [close] friends with them. I just sort of observed [them] and thought, ‘oh that person looks great, I need to do that, I need to look like that…I need to be skinnier’, so I would take that and do it myself. (Michelle, young adulthood)

Additionally, as many participants reached their mid to late twenties and early thirties, Social Comparisons with female friends continued to remain prominent, once again reinforcing the evaluative external gaze of their body.

When we’re playing beach volleyball in the summer and it gets really hot and I take my shirt off, I notice people giving you the side eye, and for that moment I just feel a little conscious, you know, are people judging? Are my friends judging me? So there’s still that awareness there? Yeah. It’s those little moments where I’m worried about [my body]. (Sandra, adulthood)

My friend who is quite overweight, she got married and I kept her picture in my phone before my wedding because I swore that I wouldn’t look like that at my wedding…My husband thinks I’m extremely judgmental and critical, and I am for sure, but that’s the way I was brought up, to judge people, to criticize them for the way they look and to keep them as reminders that you shouldn’t want to look like that. It’s not good. I mean I’m honest about it for sure…I know it sounds so bad but that’s just unfortunately the way I was brought up. I don’t look at that as being very attractive, and I would be embarrassed [to look like that]. It’s embarrassing to be overweight. (Hillary, adulthood)

I’m still always comparing myself to whomever I see… I’m still really looking to other people for approval…I realize that there is still a desire to be approved of and accepted
and found attractive…There’s this constant kind of comparing and assessing, which, when I’m conscious of it, I think I want to do a lot less of that cause there’s no point and it just makes me unhappy. But it’s pretty automatic I guess. It’s pretty engrained. (Zoe, adulthood)

Particularly among participants who described being heavier than their peers throughout adolescence, young adulthood, and presently, being surrounded by thinner friends further served to accentuate their processes of Social Comparison, contributing to dissatisfaction with their body.

I’m definitely more self-conscious now. Like childhood was no problem. I didn’t feel anything, but junior high to now, I’ve always been pretty self-conscious. Having had those skinny friends in high school that’s always something that weighs on me…Going to the beach, two of my skinny friends wear their bikinis and then me and my other friend are in our t-shirts and long pants. And not that I would ever wear a bikini even if I was thin, but it makes that opposition all the more clear; that thin people can wear it if they choose and the heavy people have to stay covered up…It’s like the comfort of having had that one heavier friend wasn’t enough to combat the feelings of inadequacy from being around those skinny friends…You definitely feel the fat a lot more…Its upsetting but once again, no matter how upsetting that is I still eat the way I want. (Anna, adulthood)

Like many of the women interviewed, Anna’s comparisons with thinner friends have significantly shaped the way she inhabits her body from a position of external evaluation today. Notably, unlike the majority of women interviewed, while Anna adheres to certain expectations of dressing for her body size, she rejects changing her eating in order to conform to the thin ideal.
Conversely, as many participants compared themselves in reference to their friends and peers from adolescence through to adulthood, and as expressions of body dissatisfaction became more pronounced, so did the pressure to adhere to the thin ideal.

Further, although body dissatisfaction and preoccupation with adherence to body norms and ideals remained pronounced throughout adolescence and into adulthood, late childhood and early adolescence represented a particularly critical period for women’s internalization of the evaluative external gaze, promoting Social Comparisons with friends and peers on the basis of Differences in Body Size and Shape. In addition to the increase in transmission of norms and ideals for thinness around this time, changes associated with pubertal development were also shown to accentuate women’s engagement in Social Comparison at this stage.

Pubertal Changes

Evident in several of the previous descriptions, early adolescence represented a time for many participants when Social Comparison was heightened and the evaluative external gaze gave rise to body dissatisfaction. Thus, the second theme that emerged under the category of Social Comparison was Pubertal Changes. Specifically, Social Comparison with friends and peers in relation to Pubertal Changes was demonstrated to result in heightened body surveillance developing into body discomfort for the majority of women interviewed around the time of early to middle adolescence (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Internalized Body Experiences Related to Social Comparison of Pubertal Changes
Reflecting upon the physical changes that accompany puberty, all participants spoke about becoming acutely aware of their body physicality in reference to others, creating an overall sentiment of heightened body surveillance.

I guess moving into adolescence I became sort of more aware of myself and my body I think maybe I started caring more what others said or what others thought, more than I would care in childhood...probably around about the age of twelve because I think that’s around the point where a lot of girls’ bodies start changing...I was aware of [that] especially [because] other people grew up a lot faster than I did at that age. While I was quite a big child, I still looked very much like a child when I was eleven or twelve, whereas I think a lot of other girls started looking much older than me and more like a teenager so I was more aware of that....I felt self-conscious and more convinced that everybody was looking at me. (Ellie, early adolescence)

[My friend] had breasts and I didn’t and I didn’t even think about [breasts] before...In this gym class a bunch of the girls were wearing those sports bras and I didn’t wear one because I had nothing to wear one for...I was very shy about changing because these girls were all were very serious dancers...I remember it was me sort of observing these other girls and [thinking] they’re some sort of foreign entity. I’d never met people like this before. (Michelle, early adolescence)

As body surveillance heightened around the time of early adolescence, so did expressions of body discomfort in relation to observed differences between participants’ bodies and those of their friends and peers. This was particularly pronounced among women who developed either earlier or later than their friends and peers. Specifically, for women who developed earlier than
their peers, discomfort arose primarily in relation to their body deviating from the norms and ideals for appearance that dominated their peer environments.

I hit puberty a year earlier than the other kids; I was 10 or 11. And so I started developing breasts and I got a training bra and I was a really tall kid. I had been the tallest in my class for many years and I just became really ugly and awkward almost overnight. I had really bad skin, my hair became crazy, and I had these huge plastic glasses. When I look at pictures of me I look like a really ugly, awkward, miserable kid and the other kids picked it up too and they bullied me. They weren’t kind. Kids teased me and called me names and it was tough…[I felt] horrible in my body. I mean I started wearing really baggy clothes. The bigger the better. I mean t-shirts that came down to my wrists. (Zoe, late childhood)

There were some very petite girls in our grade who I know did not get their period up until grade 9 or 10 and they had no chests, they didn’t have their period. They were still very young. They shopped in the junior departments. They got made fun of as well, but I almost wished I was on that side; that was so much better to me than having to shop in the adult or plus size section. (Hillary, early adolescence)

Participants who described developing later than their peers expressed similar discomfort, particularly in reference to acquiring a new objectified awareness of their body in relation to its physical maturation, as expressed by Michelle and Leena.

When we started having Sex Ed at school that had a big impact on me…That started [an] awareness [of my] body. Co-ed Sex Ed sort of made me feel very exposed didn’t like that boys were hearing about those things cause I was learning about them at the same time, since at home we didn’t really talk about those things…I think I was just very scared and
anxious about everything like that…At times I was feeling like my body was very vulnerable. (Michelle, early adolescence)

Having my first period was awful because that’s when I noticed that I had to cover up. That’s where I didn’t feel carefree anymore. I felt like a woman, not anymore like a girl… I started choosing what to wear very carefully to not show this or to cover this up or things like that… particularly my legs and my belly a little bit; I didn’t even have one, it was so stupid. But [the other girls] were doing the opposite… My mom would always tell me that if you dress like that you may look like a whore. (Leena, middle adolescence)

The summer before grade seven I decided to go to [camp], and be in this cabin of [girls] who all knew each other and they were all very comfortable walking around naked. This is at a time when everyone’s starting to develop and everyone’s at a different point. I had no breasts, I had no pubic hair, I had nothing and everyone’s showering naked….It was a terrible experience…I felt horrible. I felt embarrassed. I showered in a bathing suit and there were no shower curtains… I felt so alone... It was the worst experience of my life. I felt like, where have I come from that I’m so different from these people who are supposed to be just like me? …. I lasted three days and I threatened to drown myself and they called my mom and let me come home. (Michelle, middle adolescence)

While at the most severe end of the spectrum, Michelle’s feelings of her body in relation to her peers’ norms of physical maturation showcase how Social Comparison in relation to Pubertal Changes accentuated women’s heightened body surveillance, contributing to discomfort in their body during early to middle adolescence.

Ethnocultural Differences and Cultural Transitions
In conjunction with Differences in Body Size and Shape and Pubertal Changes, the third and final theme related to the category of Social Comparison was Ethnocultural Differences and Cultural Transitions. Described by nine of the fourteen women interviewed who looked physically different than many of their peers because of their ethnicity, and/or who travelled to different countries that highlighted differences in their physical appearances, ethnocultural differences were demonstrated to accentuate processes of comparison among friends and peers throughout development. These comparisons were shown to contribute to an internalization of inherent physical differences and cultural norms of attractiveness, resulting in heightened body surveillance and body consciousness within the context of friends and peers who appeared physically different. (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Internalized Body Experiences Related to Social Comparison Across Cultural Transitions and Ethnocultural Differences

Beginning in middle childhood (6-7 years), several participants described their internalization of inherent physical differences between them and their friends and peers, contributing to heightened body consciousness. For some participants, like Lisa, who is of East Asian background and attended a predominantly Caucasian elementary school, the implicit awareness of differences with her peers emerged playing with dolls that appeared physically different in skin, hair and eye colour.

[My sister and I] were the only Asian kids in the schoolyard...There was this whole thing about playing with the dolls in the yard; I remember everyone else had Cabbage Patch dolls, or sort of more like ‘normal’ dolls… I just never really identified with [them]… And
then I had a Miss Piggy doll, which I still love to this day. And I remember bringing her in and it being a bit different than everyone else, but I was trying to make it fit in with the group. So that probably made me feel less secure than the rest of them. (Lisa, middle childhood)

Most participants by late childhood (8-10 years) however, disclosed being made explicitly aware of their ethnocultural background by peers who directly targeted their differences, as articulated by Paige who is half-Asian and half-Caucasian and attended a predominantly Caucasian elementary school.

Growing up my mom is my mom and my dad is my dad and I’m just me and I didn’t even notice that there was a differences between [my friends and I] until probably around 10 when kids started to point out the differences. When I was younger I had very olive skin and I tan very easily and they would always say stuff like, “oh you’re brown”, or “you don’t bathe” and stuff like that. I never really understood it. And where I grew up too was quite White so once I became aware of that difference I was fairly self-conscious about it. …I didn’t get, like why I’m any different than you. I don’t think I’m a bad person. It didn’t feel good. (Paige, late childhood)

Further, moving to different countries as children and adolescents significantly heightened Layla, Sandra and Simone’s comparisons with peers, and their internalization of differences in relation to others in their immediate social environment, as articulated by Layla who is of Middle Eastern descent and attended a predominantly Caucasian school in England throughout early to middle childhood.
When I think back there were a lot of questions about identity and how I fit in and why I was seen as different even though I looked, or I thought I looked like everybody else. [I felt] uncomfortable then. I played my [cultural background] down as much as I could. (Layla, middle childhood)

Similarly for Sandra, who is of Southeast Asian decent, moving to an urban city in East Asia where she attended a large international school with many Caucasian peers, introduced an awareness of how she was perceived different from many of her peers, heightening her body surveillance and body consciousness at the time.

Moving to East Asia was probably my first brush with, and I would use this term loosely, with multiculturalism…[At my former] school you’re surrounded by people who look the same as you, speak the same as you. But when I went to East Asia I realized that I had a very strong accent and that not everybody understood me…At first I was completely unconscious of the whole thing. I’m making new friends. People are so friendly and this is cool and then out of the blue somebody’s like, “I love your accent”, and you’re a nine-year old kid and you’re like, I have an accent? So I go home and I look up in the dictionary, what’s an accent? And then you sort of become really conscious of things like accents, and of how people look, cause it was the first time I started hanging out with people who I’d only seen on TV, like White people for example. (Sandra, late childhood)

Thus, having internalized cultural norms of female attractiveness, social comparisons with friends and peers contributed to expressions of body surveillance and consciousness for several participants beginning around the time of middle to late childhood and early adolescence. Particularly reinforced among the women interviewed of Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds,
the internalization of the ‘White Ideal’, representing the female body appearance considered most desirable within their peer environments, resulted in negative self-evaluations, and body consciousness. For instance, Sandra, who is of Southeast Asian background, expressed body consciousness in relation to the ‘White Ideal’ and comparisons with Caucasian peers at the international school she attended.

As a child I wondered if I hung out with White people long enough if my hair would turn blonde or something of if I’d ever have blue eyes? It would be nice. So I always sort of looked up to the girls who were White and who were pretty, or who were deemed prettier than everybody else, like the girls who weren’t White. It was interesting because suddenly you become aware that, I’m not as pretty as her; she’s blonde, she’s got blue eyes. I wish I was blonde and had blue eyes, and that sort of thing. And you’re ten years old, you know, like why should you have to care about that sort of thing? (Sandra, late childhood)

As participants entered into adolescence, and as questions surrounding desirability began to surface within their peer environment, their comparisons in relation to the ‘White Ideal’ were shown to intensify and result in strong and negative opinions about their body, as highlighted by Paige who is half-Asian and half-Caucasian.

I noticed I was different from the other girls, and they all had boyfriends…the only thing I could attribute it to was my race. I just remember thinking, why did I have to be born this way? When I get married I’m only marrying a White guy so I can breed this out of me, like I would never ever date an Asian guy then. I remember playing Spin the Bottle in high school once and there was this one guy who I’m actually quite good friends with now but in high school he was the only other Asian guy and I refused to kiss him because I was
not going to be associated with another Asian. I felt very strongly about that. (Paige, early-middle adolescence)

In addition to cultural norms and ideals that were internalized within participants’ peer environments, several women described the influence of the media in promoting Western ideals of female attractiveness, ultimately reinforcing comparisons with friends and peers, as expressed by Anna, of East Asian decent, and Layla, of Middle Eastern decent.

Media has definitely affected me more than regular people in terms of body issues…I've been a TV addict from a young age and not much has changed in terms of what is considered beautiful and desirable. It’s so easy to see why a person would become self-conscious if you don’t look like what you see on TV…Throughout my school years I was lucky enough to always be in schools with different nationalities, but even though I had that it didn’t combat what I saw on TV, like there is nobody who looks like me. …And it didn’t deter me from comparing myself to other thin girls…It’s totally influenced me in terms of seeing what is the most beautiful. I really feel affected by that, my whole life watching skinny, pretty White people on TV. (Anna, early adolescence-adulthood)

I remember visiting the US when I was around fourteen. I came back to the Middle East with a really different sense of how I should look and that’s the time I became really conscious of dieting in the context of my peers…that’s when I kicked into overdrive…I had bought ‘Teen Magazine’, and every girl in it was perfect. That was probably one of the defining moments for my body image…I had no idea of airbrushing so I thought their bodies were all like that naturally…That magazine impacted my body image more than
anything else in my life… It was big for me to realize that if I looked like them I would have the same life as them, which seemed perfect. (Layla, middle adolescence)

Further, in young adulthood, several of the women interviewed described how their internalization of cultural norms of female attractiveness, fuelling comparisons with female peers, contributed to heightened body surveillance and body consciousness as they travelled or lived in different countries. For instance, Sandra and Lisa, who are both of Asian decent, and Zoe, who is of European decent, all expressed the prevalence of the thin female body standard when they lived in Asia.

When I came [to Canada] I felt small in comparison with people here. When I go back to Southeast Asia each year I feel like a giant, just stomping around. Its just little environmental things, like the sinks are lower, the counters are shorter and things like that. Here I feel like a really small person. When I go back to Southeast Asia the girls are so small. They’re like twenty-seven years old and they all have the bodies of thirteen year-old girls for some reason. (Sandra, young adulthood)

Asia affected how I saw my body and myself… Everything’s just slightly too small cause the average body size there is just slightly too small… I felt larger and maybe a little bit overweight… I came back feeling a little bit more unattractive… It really depended on my friends. I had some really tiny, petite, feminine friends. And I’d never been close friends with women like this… I felt really frumpy and unattractive compared to them. (Zoe, young adulthood)

Summary of Social Comparison
Social Comparison represented the first of two categories of Peer Processes Promoting the Ideal Body found among the women who participated in the study. Under the category of Social Comparison, three important themes emerged: i) Differences in Body Size and Shape; ii) Pubertal Changes; and iii) Ethnocultural Differences and Cultural Transitions. Across these three themes, participants’ Social Comparisons with their female friends and peers resulted in the transmission and internalization of important norms, ideals and expectations promoting the Ideal Female Body Appearance within their social environments.

Beginning with the first theme of Differences in Body Size and Shape, Social Comparisons with friends and peers first resulted in the development of an external awareness of the body starting towards the end of early to middle childhood (5-7 years), whereby participants expressed first viewing their body from an external perspective as they compared differences in their body with their peers. This external awareness was shown to manifest into an evaluative external gaze of the body, which became quite pronounced for most participants by late childhood, as strong norms and ideals for thinness began to infiltrate their social environments. Acquiring an evaluative external gaze of their body, which continued throughout adolescence and adulthood, participants’ comparisons with their peers in reference to Differences in Body Size and Shape, resulted in body dissatisfaction and subsequent preoccupation with adherence to body norms and ideals towards the end of late childhood to early adolescence. Expressions of body dissatisfaction and preoccupation with adherence to body norms and ideals continued for several women through their comparisons with peers into adulthood, particularly among women who struggled with their body weight throughout adolescence.

Intensifying the peer process of body comparisons among female peers, was the onset of Pubertal Changes; the second theme under the category of Social Comparison. Beginning for most participants around the time of late childhood to early adolescence (10-13 years), women
discussed puberty as a time when they became acutely aware of their developing body in reference to their peers, resulting in heightened body surveillance that developed for many women into body discomfort as they witnessed their body deviating from the norms and ideals that dominated their peer environments.

The third and final theme that accentuated participants’ processes of Social Comparison was Ethnocultural Differences and Cultural Transitions. In particular, comparing with peers across this domain contributed to participants’ internalization of inherent differences in their body, contributing to heightened surveillance and body consciousness beginning in middle childhood (6-7 years) and intensifying in late childhood/early adolescence (8-13 years), particularly in reference to the ‘White Ideal’. Processes of comparison and resulting body consciousness were especially pronounced among the women of Asian or Middle Eastern decent, who attended elementary or middle schools comprised predominantly of Caucasian peers. Further, as several participants travelled or lived in different countries in young adulthood, Social Comparisons with other women, fuelled by their internalization of cultural definitions of female attractiveness, similarly contributed to heightened body surveillance and body consciousness.

_Evaluative Messages and Appearances-based Conversations_

Encompassing the second category that emerged in relation to Peer Processes Promoting the Ideal Body Appearance was Evaluative Messages and Appearance-Based Conversations. Described by all fourteen women in the study, Evaluative Messages and Appearance-based Conversations emerged in relation to two themes: i) Messages That Socially Rewarded Conforming to the Ideal Body; and ii) Messages that Disapproved or Criticized Deviating from the Ideal Body (see Figure 8).
Based on the women’s interviews, Evaluative Messages and Appearance-based Conversations typically began to emerge towards the end of late childhood or early adolescence (10-14 years), resulting in the internalization of an evaluative external gaze of their body. As these messages and conversations strengthened considerably for most participants throughout middle to late adolescence (14-19 years), women expressed body esteem in instances where they were socially rewarded for conforming to the ideal, or body consciousness in instances where they were criticized for deviating from the ideal. In each of these instances, many of the participants developed a preoccupation with adherence to body norms and ideals, particularly in relation to sustaining or attaining thinness (see Figure 9).
Further, regardless of participants’ ethnocultural background, Evaluative Messages and Appearance-based Conversations were prevalent across peer environments from late childhood through to adulthood. However, Leena, of South American decent, and Layla of Middle Eastern decent, expressed slightly higher incidences of evaluative appearance dialogue among their friends and peers throughout development, which they each attributed to their distinct cultural backgrounds.

Especially with regards to my Middle-Eastern friends, I mean the first thing everyone comments on is weight. Everyone has a carte blanche to comment on your weight. “You put on weight”, “you lost weight”, “you’re too fat”, “you’re too thin.” (Layla, early adolescence – adulthood)

I think its cultural in Latin America, that women must be aware of how they look and try to look as skinny as possible, or not fat…[My peers] were all concerned about that. It was kind of something that you discuss and you worry, and you’re looking for a diet to do, and you’re passing on tips to your friends about how to keep yourself skinny, and that’s kind of it. So that’s just a normal part of peer culture there? Yep. (Leena, early adolescence – adulthood)

Messages that Socially Reward

Messages that Socially Reward reflected the first theme of the category of Evaluative Messages and Appearance-based Conversations. Specifically, eight of the fourteen women reported receiving messages from their friends and peers that socially rewarded their conformity
to the thin ideal body appearance. Typically, these messages emerged in early adolescence when norms and ideals for thinness became especially pronounced within their peer environments, as expressed by Mary who was thin in comparison to many of her female peers at the time.

My closest friends never thought anything bad of me. In fact quite the opposite and they would say that they wished they looked like me so there was never anything negative. (Mary, early adolescence)

Among the women interviewed who reported receiving messages that socially rewarded their conformity to the thin ideal body appearance, all expressed the influence of their friends’ opinions as particularly important to their self-evaluation of their body. For instance, embodying an external evaluative gaze of her body in early to middle adolescence, Leena, who grew up in South America and was immersed in a peer environment that embodied strict norms for female thinness, spoke about the importance of her friends’ opinions about her body at the time.

Having [my friends’] support was very important. If they told me I was okay then I felt I was okay...my friends were all the time saying, “you’re so lucky you’re so skinny”, so that was more powerful than my mom and dad saying that I was too skinny at home. My friends’ opinions about my body were the most important to me at the time. (Leena, early-middle adolescence)

Specifically, for several of the women interviewed who lost weight throughout various periods in their life, particularly in middle adolescence through to young adulthood, moving closer to the ideal and receiving socially rewarding messages about their appearance from friends and peers, reinforced the external evaluative gaze of their body, resulting in heightened body esteem, as expressed by Sarah, Ellie and Paige.
I felt good after I had actually lost thirty to forty pounds. My friends who say, “oh Sarah you look really good”…they were always complimenting me. So I was actually feeling really good about myself then. (Sarah, late adolescence)

I became aware that I’d lost weight because people back home would notice when they hadn’t seen me for a while or something. It made me feel good about myself…I just felt more secure in myself. (Ellie, young adulthood)

In university I remember actually hearing comments about my body. Like if I was shopping with a girlfriend and she’d be like, “oh you’re so lucky that you fit into those sizes!”…It felt really good. (Paige, young adulthood)

Further receiving these socially rewarding messages and internalizing an evaluative external gaze of their body, promoted participants’ preoccupation with adherence to body norms and ideals for thinness, as expressed by Sandra, Hillary and Sarah, who have all actively engaged in dieting to control their weight.

Three months into my new school my best friend was like, “oh my dear look at you, you’re so skinny.” In my heart I was like, ‘oh I’m skinny! Yah! I have lost weight! I’m so pleased with myself”, and I thought I should keep this up…Having somebody else tell me that I’m skinny, I was very happy about that…It was important that she thought I was skinny because skinny is good, right? (Sandra, middle adolescence)

A lot of friends had come over to me and said how nice I looked and, “good for you”, and all that. Everyone said, “you know just keep up the good work, you look so amazing”, and it felt nice… I felt like I’d really done something…I continued to lose after that cause I
had only lost forty pounds….Realizing well I’d already lost forty, you know, I could totally lose another forty or fifty and just kept doing that. (Hillary, young adulthood)

It’s annoying because sometimes I feel like women, and peers particularly, are their own mechanisms of surveillance in the sense that we’re quick to say, “you’ve lost weight”… People feel they can keep tabs on one another…If somebody is telling me that I have lost weight, the next time I see them I still want to look like I’ve lost weight and I know it’s a really terrible thing to internalize…People are getting way too comfortable about surveying other peoples’ bodies. (Sarah, adulthood)

Disapproving and/or Critical Messages

Disapproving and/or Critical Messages represented the second theme of the category Evaluative Messages and Appearance-Based Conversations. Significantly, all fourteen women reported receiving Disapproving and/or Critical Messages at some point in their lives as a result of deviating from the ideal body appearance. In contrast to the theme of Messages that Socially Reward, Disapproving and/or Critical Messages emerged slightly earlier in development, around late childhood, yet similarly continued for many participants well into adulthood. In particular, Disapproving and/or Critical Messages evolved predominantly in relation to the sub-themes of: Diet and Appearance Talk; and Appearance-based Teasing and Harassment (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. Sub-themes Pertaining to Disapproving and/or Critical Messages
Diet and Appearance Talk

The sub-theme of Diet and Appearance Talk was reported by all participants in reference to their dialogues with friends and peers, with the exception of Simone, who despite receiving critical comments from her mother about her body, denied that dieting and judgmental messages about appearances were ever a topic of conversation among her friends in childhood, adolescence, young adulthood or presently.

I don’t think I’ve ever had a single friend who ever made those types of remarks, like, ‘look at her, she’s trying to squeeze her size eight butt into a size six’, like those types of critical comments. I don’t think I’ve ever had anyone say that out loud. No none, not one of my friends… I guess I’m lucky in that respect knowing that I’m not being judged. (Simone, adulthood)

For several of the women interviewed, however, dialogue about bodies and norms for thinness and attractiveness surfaced within their peer groups predominantly in late childhood, giving rise to an evaluative external gaze of their body and subsequent body consciousness as a result of deviating from the ideal.

I remember one of the boys commenting on how skinny this girl in our class was, and she was considered one of the more ‘popular’ girls in school. She was blonde and blue-eyed, and she was skinny. She was tall and skinny and he was making remarks about how she was so skinny he could put his hands around her waist…In that moment obviously I was like, I can’t put two hands around my waist. I was a kid right? We had this huge mirror in our bathroom and I would stand on the toilet so I could see my entire self and I’d be like, man, I never thought about this before. It had never occurred to me before. But that’s
when I started thinking I’m fat because a guy can’t put two hands around my waist.

(Sandra, late childhood)

For the majority of women interviewed, the start of communication about bodies, the thin ideal and dieting coincided with entrance into early adolescence as norms and ideals for thinness became more pronounced within their peer environments. Significant to note was the heightened internalization of the evaluative external gaze, accompanied by a persistent fear of judgment and body consciousness as women reported receiving Disapproving or Critical Messages from their friends and peers in early adolescence.

I spent a lot of time at this girl’s house. All they talked about at their house was fat, fat, fat. “You shouldn’t eat that, you’re going to be fat.”; “You have a fat ass.” I’d never experienced anything like that at home. Everything [there] was low-fat and they drank Crystal Light and I’d never seen a diet drink in my life…And she would see me eating my chips and everything and say, “oh you’re going to get fat!” She wouldn’t eat any chips, so that made me feel weird about what I was eating, and I’d never thought about what I was eating before. (Michelle, early adolescence)

Somebody says, “I’m fat”, and you say, “I’m fat too”, and then you go home and you look in the mirror for hours and just pick out all these things you don’t like about yourself. You become aware of all these things that can be wrong with your body. (Sandra, early adolescence)

Middle adolescence represented a time of particularly heightened Diet and Appearance Talk among female friends and peers. Specifically, for many participants who communicated about pervasive ‘fat talk’, messages about the importance of thinness became ingrained in their
peer environment during this time, significantly influencing their preoccupation with adherence to strict body standards. Expressed by Jen and Ellie, who were largely sheltered from norms and ideals for thinness in elementary and middle school, witnessing the increase in their peers’ critical self-evaluations of their bodies accentuated their own insecurities and drive for thinness.

I remember specifically in grade nine I was with a group of great girls for a short time. They were all either my size, which at the time was an eight, and they all said they were fat. And we were all talking about our kilt size, and my parents didn’t want to get me a tight one. They got me one that was a little bit looser because they had the foresight to know, she’s a child, and will [grow]. But my friends would all put [their kilt] on the tightest loop and they would just talk about how they were fat and what they ate, and that’s kind of when it started…It made me feel like if they think they’re fat maybe I’m fat too and that’s actually when I started skipping meals. (Jen, middle adolescence)

In high school, that’s where a lot of my friends would make comments like, “oh I need to go on a diet”; “I look fat in this.”…[They] certainly influenced me in sort of my eating habits more, I guess sort of stressing that people who are thinner look better….It made me feel kind of fat because I’ve always been like a big person. Well I was never skinny, but a lot of my friends were much skinnier than me and were complaining that they were fat, so I would kind of feel, oh what must they think of me then? (Ellie, middle adolescence)

Significantly, nine of the fourteen women interviewed expressed that ‘fat talk’ and communication about the body, weight cycling and dieting continued to remain especially prevalent with friends and peers upon entrance into young adulthood.
There was more open body comparisons in the sense of... “Oh I don’t like this”, or “oh I don’t like that”, or “oh I just wish there was a little bit more tone”, or “oh you look really good, like I wish I had this.” (Sarah, young adulthood)

“I lost this many kilos”, “I had too much to eat today”, “I’ll eat less tomorrow.” (Layla, young adulthood)

Many participants thus described these types of Disapproving and Critical Messages about the body as a normative discourse among their female friends and peers in young adulthood and presently, as expressed by Paige.

Really in my twenties is first time people in my life had been really open about like body talk. That’s really when I first remember this is part of every day discourse, this kind of like self-deprecating nature females have in general. (Paige, young adulthood-adulthood)

Similar to the effects of Socially Rewarding messages, these Disapproving and Critical Messages were therefore demonstrated to heighten women’s external evaluative gaze of their body, while promoting internal pressures to adhere to ideals for thinness, as articulated by Layla.

My best friend is always on some diet program or another, and she tells me whenever I put any weight on. She notices right away and I feel like when I lost weight this spring that’s really a standard that I have to keep up now…She helps me keep my standards high. (Layla, adulthood).

*Appearance-based Teasing and Harassment*

In addition to Diet and Appearance Talk, Appearance-based Teasing and Harassment emerged as the second sub-theme of Disapproving and/or Critical Messages, which reinforced
strict norms regarding the ideal body appearance across several participants’ peer environments, especially throughout early to late adolescence. Directed most commonly towards differences in body size and shape, teasing and harassment was also expressed by some of the women interviewed in regards to visible ethnocultural differences.

*Body Size and Shape.* Peer teasing directed towards body size and shape was reported by ten of the fourteen participants, beginning for several of the women in late childhood, around the age of 10, and increasing substantially in early to middle adolescence. Specifically, in late childhood, a few participants reported being teased for appearing smaller in size than their peers. Though some of the participants at this age had not yet internalized the thin ideal, being teased about their body size introduced an external evaluative gaze of their body, as expressed by Mary.

[My friends] were always bigger than me, physically bigger than me. And I did get teased a lot from them for being little…It was awful…It was not fun. It made me question myself, like I’d never thought there was anything wrong with me and then I mean like any kid being teased that’s awful. It’s an awful feeling and for something that you can’t control. (Mary, late childhood)

Most often, however, participants disclosed being teased in late childhood as a result of being heavier than their peers, as described by Ellie.

I was always teased for being bigger than the other kids…Much taller than my friends, taller than a lot of the boys in my class. I wasn’t fat, but I was just solid and tall and so I guess I got teased for being big then. (Ellie, late childhood)
Further, for many of the participants, merely witnessing the weight-based teasing of their peers beginning as early as 10 years of age, established important norms and ideals about the female body appearance, as expressed by Anna.

I remember noticing later in elementary school there was always one really obese kid, and they sort of become the focus of how you look, and you just feel glad that you’re not them kind of thing. They’re the ones who were always bullied. (Anna, late childhood)

Significantly, six of the ten women who reported being teased on the basis of their body size and shape reported male peers as the primary perpetrators; whereas none reported teasing specifically by female peers. Beginning in late childhood for a few of the women, teasing from male peers contributed to a profound awareness of their body in relation to the ideal, contributing to severe body consciousness.

This was the first time someone ever made a comment directly to me about my body. In grade five, it was the start of a very pivotal time in my life. A boy said to me, I’ll never forget, “roses are red, violets are black, and you’re chest is as flat as my back.”… I had no awareness of my body at all before. I felt like people could see my body. This was the first time I ever had any awareness of my body. [It felt] horrible. It’s something that you can’t control…I didn’t know I was supposed to have breasts, and I was concerned about who might have heard and why this person is talking about it. Why are they even looking at me? Why are they noticing? I felt very uncomfortable and exposed…That one little poem changed me…I felt like I was shocked into an awareness, like a huge culture shock. And it weighed very heavily on me. (Michelle, late childhood)
For most participants, however, teasing by male peers in relation to their body size and shape intensified considerably in early adolescence, as peer norms and ideals for thinness became more pronounced within their social environments, and as intimate relationships and questions of desirability began to surface.

I think I still have a ruler where somebody wrote, ‘Simone is a porkster.’ Somebody actually wrote that and it’s interesting but it’s mostly the guys…I guess at that point, I’m sure not all the boys were like that, but I just realized that there are people who are cruel and who would judge you for your weight…It was the first time that I just realized that other people other than my mom would judge me on how my body looked. (Simone, early adolescence)

Several participants described withdrawing from their peer environments as a result of severe body consciousness from being teased by their male peers.

[The boys] would call me names or just not talk to me. I remember I was walking down the stairs, and I heard giggling behind me and I looked around and there were two boys there; one who I had crush on, and I said, “what are you guys laughing about?” and he said, “oh you don’t have to worry, we just measured your behind, and your friend’s is bigger than yours but you’re not that far so you might want to like think about going on a diet.” …I hardened so much then…It made me feel ashamed and I hated walking into rooms by myself because others would look at me. I did my best to arrive to class with someone, or arrive early and find a spot quickly. I didn’t trust people. When I saw people whispering or laughing I just assumed it was about me. (Hillary, early adolescence)
A bunch of guys in my class were really out to make life difficult for me … They came up to me and said, “oh we voted you an award, you’re the girl most unlikely to get AIDS”, because no one would ever want to sleep with me… They [also] called me names, “Big Beastie”, "CN Tower”… They made fun of my hair, my clothes, my acne, how I walked, talked, everything about me… I just put my head down. (Zoe, early adolescence)

Significantly, only four of the women interviewed spoke about appearance teasing and/or discrimination occurring in adulthood. Further, in all instances teasing was not instigated by close friends or peers, but rather, by family members or other individuals in women’s social environments (e.g., a student, general acquaintances, etc.) For all the women, teasing and discrimination on the basis of their bodies, contributed to heightened body consciousness.

Sometimes my mom will tease me, but that’s about it… she teases me and my brother and my other sister and we’re all on the heavier side and then all the other siblings are pretty thin… She just doesn’t understand it. How does it make you feel? Not good because, you know, they should be accepting. (Jen, adulthood)

I did a presentation on appearance in the class I was [teaching], and I went up to the board and I said, “throw out any words you think are associated with being overweight”, and you know someone said “couch potato”, “lazy”, “unmotivated”, and I wrote them all down and we were trying to demystify the stereotypes. And this one girl said “stupid”, “never going to get a boyfriend”, “never going to get it.” She started like ranting… I was so shocked, like how does my weight influence my brain? Why am I stupid… It was the first time since high school that I felt targeted again as a fat person. (Hillary, adulthood)
Ethnocultural Differences. Three of the fourteen women interviewed also spoke of distinct incidences of peer teasing based on observed ethnocultural differences, which reinforced an evaluative external gaze of the body contributing to heightened body consciousness in relation to the norms and ideals that dominated their peer environments. Significantly, all instances of peer teasing on the basis of ethnocultural differences occurred between the ages of 10 and 14.

Michelle, who is Jewish and attended a diverse elementary school, disclosed teasing on the basis of her religious and cultural heritage.

I wore a Star of David necklace and we were playing the soccer field and I lost it. And there was a kid who started saying really bad things, anti-Semitic thing, about Jewish people when I lost my necklace and how he was happy I lost it…That was actually my first experience with anti-Semitism. I had never felt so exposed and confused before, and embarrassed around my peers…I wasn’t sure if I was the person who was doing something wrong or if he was the person who was doing something wrong. I felt different. My elementary school was very multicultural, but I think that was the first time I ever sort of felt like I there was something different about me…that I’m a different person than these other people. (Michelle, late childhood)

Paige, who is half-Caucasian and half-Japanese, described being teased by her Caucasian peers on the basis of her skin colour.

When they’d say to me, “you don’t bathe”, like it was weird because, like I said, I’m just me. Every morning I look up in the mirror and that’s just me and my mom is my mom and I truly did not see any difference between my mom and anyone else’s mom. So it was weird. It was kind of like, have I been like totally blind to this the whole time?...I was
probably more passive then than I am now so I definitely never told anyone [about it].

(Paige, late childhood)

Lastly, Sarah, who is of African and Caribbean decent, recalled being teased by her peers when she returned to Canada at the age of 14, with a new hairstyle she acquired while living in Africa.

I had cut my hair really, really short, like how the locals would wear it and nobody said anything to me [there] as they saw the locals wearing it. It was more out of convenience, like even up to this day I hate having to manage my hair, and my mom lived so far away from me then so she couldn’t be coming around to do it. But when I came back [to Canada] with that short hairstyle I remember some of the people in grades seven or eight, they’re like, “oh are you a boy or are you a girl?!”…And back in Africa I didn’t feel self-conscious…It had been really liberating there. (Sarah, middle adolescence)

Summary of Evaluative Messages and Appearance-based Conversations

Evaluative Messages and Appearance-based Conversations represented the second category of Peer Processes Promoting the Ideal Body found among the women in the study. Under the category of Evaluative Messages and Appearance-based Conversations, two important themes emerged which significantly reinforced the internalization of dominant norms for the ideal body appearance within these women’s peer environments: i) receiving Messages that Socially Reward as a result of conforming to the ideal; and ii) receiving Disapproving and/or Critical Messages as a result of deviating from the ideal. Significantly, few distinct developmental trends emerged in relation to receiving either socially rewarding or disapproving/critical messages, in that once these messages emerged around late childhood (10-11 years), they continued to remain prevalent throughout adolescence, and into adulthood.
Beginning with the first theme of Socially Rewarding Messages, which emerged for most participants around the time of early adolescence (11-13 years), receiving messages from friends and peers that rewarded their thinness, served to reinforce their evaluative external gaze of their body and contribute to enhanced body esteem as a result of conforming to the ideal. These messages also contributed to participants’ preoccupation with sustaining thinness, particularly throughout middle and late adolescence (14-19 years), and into adulthood.

The second theme of Disapproving and/or Critical Messages encompassed two sub-themes: Diet and Appearance Talk; and Appearance-based Teasing and Harassment, which each promoted an external evaluative gaze, heightening participants’ surveillance of their bodies, while also contributing to strong feelings of body consciousness. Firstly, Diet and Appearance Talk emerged towards the end of late childhood (10-11 years) for some participants, but heightened considerably for most around the time of early to middle adolescence (11-16 years), as norms and ideals for thinness were widely disseminated across the peer environment. Self-deprecating dialogue about the body was especially pronounced among female friends at this time, but continued well into young adulthood (20-25 years) and beyond, where it has become a normative discourse across many peer groups, contributing to a preoccupation with attaining thinness. Secondly, Appearance-based Teasing and Harassment further served to reinforce strict norms regarding the ideal body appearance for many of the women interviewed. In particular, teasing directed towards body size and shape beginning in late childhood, around the age of 10, was demonstrated to increase substantially in early to middle adolescence (11-16 years), promoting an external evaluative gaze of the body. Further, most participants reported male peers as the primary perpetrators of teasing in relation to their body size and shape. Additionally, three of the participants disclosed teasing in relation to visible ethnocultural differences between the ages of 10 and 14. Only four women reported appearance teasing in adulthood; although these episodes
of teasing were not instigated by close friends or peers. In all instances reported by participants across development (i.e., late childhood to adulthood), Appearance-based Teasing and Harassment contributed to strong feelings of body consciousness.

Peer Processes Challenging the Ideal Body Appearance

In contrast to Peer Processes Promoting the Ideal Body Appearance within women’s peer environments, which encompassed the two categories of Social Comparison, and Evaluative Messages and Appearance-based Conversations, Peer Processes Challenging the Ideal Body Appearance occurred most frequently among women in the study during young adulthood and beyond (20+ years). Among the fourteen women interviewed, the two categories that emerged in relation to Peer Processes Challenging the Ideal Body Appearance were: 1) Promoting Alternative Body Norms; and 2) Messages that Challenge and Resist Preoccupation with the Ideal (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. Categories Pertaining to Challenging the Ideal Body Appearance

Promoting Alternative Body Norms

Encompassing the first category that emerged in relation to Peer Processes Challenging the Ideal Body, was the promotion of Alternative Body Norms within peer and friendships groups. Described predominantly by women in young adulthood and beyond (i.e., 20+ years), The category of Alternative Body Norms included three themes: i) Diversity in Appearances; ii)
Expressions of Body Comfort; and iii) Shaping Life Experiences that have placed preoccupation with body weight and shape less central (see Figure 12).

Figure 12. Peer Processes Themes Related to Alternative Body Norms

Based on the women’s interviews, the three themes of Diversity in Appearances, Expressions of Body Comfort and Shaping Life Experiences that Promote Alternative Body Norms, contributed to women’s own sense of comfort in their body, as well as their resistance to the preoccupation with adhering to strict norms and ideals of appearance (see Figure 13).

Figure 13. Internalized Body Experiences Related to the Promotion of Alternative Body Norms

Diversity in Appearances

Witnessing Diversity of Appearances within their peer groupings represented an important theme for several participants with respect to Promoting Alternative Body Norms that challenged a single ideal body appearance. For several women interviewed, beginning towards the end of early to middle childhood (5-7 years), and continuing throughout adolescence and into adulthood, being a part of peer environments with considerable ethnocultural diversity contributed to a sense of overall comfort in their body. This was particularly pronounced among participants who were not of Caucasian, and/or European backgrounds. Further, peer diversity in other important peer
appearance domains, such as ways of dressing in middle to late adolescence (14-19 years), and body size and shape in young adulthood and beyond (20+ years), also contributed to body comfort, and resistance to preoccupation with adherence to dominant norms and ideals for appearance.

Specifically, eight of the fourteen participants described their exposure to peers of diverse ethnocultural backgrounds as an important means of establishing alternative norms for appearance, which appeared to allow for greater comfort in their body. In particular, several women of Asian decent spoke about the importance of ethnocultural diversity among their peers towards the end of early to middle childhood, as expressed by Simone who attended a highly diverse elementary school in the Caribbean.

People in any large urban center in Canada like to think of themselves as very cosmopolitan and diverse, but this is actually the norm in most other parts of the world. I mean I grew up in a fairly Indian part of the Caribbean, so most of my classmates were of Indian or Muslim background, but of course there’s a large portion of people who are mixed so I had Sikh classmates, friends, and peers who were pretty much from every corner of the world. Looking back, it felt good to be around such diversity then. (Simone, middle childhood)

Further, a few of the participants who are not of Caucasian and/or European backgrounds, and were raised in Canada, also spoke about the comfort they experienced being immersed in diverse elementary and middle schools where they were surrounded by peers who shared their ethnocultural background, as expressed by Sarah who is of African and Caribbean decent and attended a diverse boarding school in Africa between the ages of 12 and 14.
What was that like being a part of a really diverse group of peers? Oh I welcomed it. I definitely welcomed it. Because there were some locals there from the part of Africa my family is from, so I felt that I could even relate to them because I was half-African, so I was actually quite happy…I sort of felt like a sense of attachment in the sense that…there’s a sense of camaraderie. (Sarah, early adolescence)

Beginning in young adulthood, several participants who moved from their countries of origin (e.g., Southeast Asia, Middle East and South America) to Canada described new peer groups with considerably more ethnocultural diversity. For most of these women, exposure to diverse groups of peers had a profound impact on their internalization of Alternative Body Norms, contributing to greater comfort in their body and resistance to preoccupation with adherence to norms and ideals for appearance, as expressed by Leena who described moving from South America in her mid-twenties to pursue graduate studies in Canada.

I have friends from all over the world now, and with different body shapes. And I can’t lie to you, I pay attention to that, and I think it’s been very good because here I’ve seen that everybody’s so different, that it makes no sense to just pursue one kind of body. There are lots of kinds of bodies and they’re all beautiful…I’ve just realized that I am a Latino, I’m never going to have the kind of hips [my Asian friends] have because my hips are always going to be wider, so I started kind of loving that. I have started feeling more comfortable here…My friends here are not complaining about their bodies and I’m learning from them, that I should do the same. (Leena, young adulthood)

In addition to ethnocultural diversity, three women highlighted the importance of witnessing diversity in other important appearance domains, such as alternative ways of dressing,
beginning in middle to late adolescence (14-19 years). Being a part of peer groups that promoted such diversity served to challenge dominant appearance standards and contribute to these women’s comfort in their body, and resistance to the preoccupation with adherence to body norms and ideals at the time, as expressed by Zoe.

The kids at the alternative school I became friends with saved my life….They had their dyed hair and all their piercings and wore crazy clothes…I think there was a lot of courage to them and I think they felt more confident in making in their own choices and I saw that there were alternatives to that pretty all-together girl that I was trying to be and was failing miserably at. Here was maybe something else I would be more successful at…It was another way of being…There was still a lot of awkwardness, I still carried a lot of negative feelings but I felt much better. I felt much happier. I often felt freer…they gave me options because trying to fit in with the Gap crowd just wasn’t working so well. (Zoe, middle-late adolescence)

Further, only in adulthood (20+ years), did participants reference the importance of diverse body shapes and sizes among their peers, which challenged strict norms of thinness, and contributed to expressions of body comfort and resistance to the preoccupation with adherence to body norms and ideals. Specifically, eleven of the fourteen women interviewed spoke about transitioning to a new peer group in adulthood where they observed greater diversity in body shapes and sizes compared to their former peer groups.

Having friends that were both thinner than me and bigger than me, it just became less of an issue and I just felt a lot more comfortable in my body…I felt more secure in myself. (Ellie, young adulthood)
Living in the US I had a great group of people at work…They just wanted to have fun, and they were also all different shapes and sizes. There wasn’t as much emphasis on weight in that group. And how did it make you feel about your body when you were with that group of friends? My body didn’t enter my mind then. (Layla, adulthood)

Expressions of Body Comfort

The second theme contributing to the promotion of Alternative Body Norms was Expressions of Comfort by friends and peers who avoided preoccupation with adherence to dominant appearance norms and ideals. This represented a particularly important theme for participants in adulthood who disclosed struggling with their body in the past.

With the exception of Zoe, who referenced specific friends in middle to late adolescence, this theme emerged almost exclusively among participants in adulthood. In particular, among Sandra, Leena, Paige, Michelle and Mary, who all struggled to some degree with their body throughout adolescence, being surrounded by female friends who exuded comfort in their body and appearances has contributed to them feeling more comfortable and less preoccupied with adhering to ideals for thinness in adulthood.

It helps that I have friends who don’t have perfect bodies, who don’t seem to care that they have cellulite or big bums or whatever…To see them so unconcerned about it really helps me out too, like they don’t care and therefore I shouldn’t care either…Definitely their comfort and confidence about who they are helps me out a lot…They’re like, ‘that’s just me and I’m really happy about who I am.’ And I feel should be like them, like why should I care so much? I am happier with my body now. That I should not care so much makes me happy; it makes my body happy. (Sandra, adulthood)
I feel like I’m in a healthier environment now. I don’t feel pushed or pressured …Everybody’s just feeling comfortable among themselves. Like I’ve seen some of my friends have gained weight and they’re not making a big deal about it…the friends I have here [in Canada] have helped me to relax about the [my body] because nobody’s really concerned about it…It feels like everybody’s confident in their own bodies so that makes me feel comfortable about it as well. (Leena, adulthood)

Shaping Life Experiences

In addition to relationships with friends who exhibit Diversity in Appearances and Expressions of Body Comfort, the final theme demonstrated to promote Alternative Body Norms, was participants’ Shaping Life Experiences that challenged pressures of adherence to the thin ideal body appearance, which dominated many women’s peer environments from early adolescence to young adulthood. Discussed exclusively by participants in adulthood, the theme of Shaping Life Experiences included recovering from mental health issues, the experience of pregnancy and motherhood, and sharing similar body struggles with significant others. Seven of the fourteen women spoke about such Shaping Life Experiences.

In particular, five women spoke about their own personal struggles with mental health issues, including depression, addiction and eating disorders, which have helped reduce their preoccupation with adherence to a single ideal body, as well as their concern about appearances within the context of their friends and peers. For example, after struggling with alcohol for several years, becoming sober for Zoe has cleared mental space to consciously think about the implications of her own thoughts and comparisons with others in relation to how she feels in her body. In doing so, Zoe has now been able to live more comfortably in her body, and less focused with trying to conform to other people’s ideals and norms for appearance.
There’s this constant chatter in my head comparing me and other people, and how I look, and me judging how I look and thinking, oh probably this person’s thinking this about my clothes or how I look, or whatever… I internalized these things years ago but I realize now either people don’t care, or in general, I don’t think anyone finds the way I look offensive…and that’s been really freeing. As I’m sober longer, as I work through my stuff the biggest difference seems to be there’s just more mental space…to look at those feeling[s] and realize them. (Zoe, adulthood)

Further, Paige, Mary and Michelle, who have all recovered from eating disorders, spoke with a new awareness about the comfort they feel in their body today, and their ability to resist preoccupation with the ideal that they each endorsed among their friends and peers in the past.

I feel good about myself and I feel confident in my body….I feel sort of wise beyond my years…I don’t think I could feel as comfortable in my body as I do today if I hadn’t had these struggles with in the past. Because I hear some of these other girls I’m with talking, and they’re older than me even, and they’re still so worried about their bodies…I wish I hadn’t had to go through all of that, but I’m thankful that I did because I see myself being so far ahead of these other people in terms of how comfortable I am. I don’t know many people who are as confident in their body and as comfortable with themselves as I am. So I’m thankful for the experiences that I had because I don’t think I could be where I am in my body and also in my life without them. (Michelle, adulthood)

Two of the three mothers in the study (e.g., Leena and Michelle) also spoke about shifting their norms and ideals about their bodies after having gone through pregnancy and becoming mothers. For Leena, the experience of pregnancy provided her with the opportunity to embrace a
new, healthier image of herself; one that did not conform to the thin ideal she and her peers had been focused on attaining throughout much of her adolescence.

I felt beautiful when I was pregnant. I was feeling just super good and my body changed positively after. It became more like an hour glass after I had my son. It felt so good to be a mom. It’s something that I never had because I was so square and too skinny [before]. I never had any curves, and it felt really good to have them now. (Leena, adulthood)

Further, since having her son, Michelle has exhibited a significant shift from her former struggles with her body throughout adolescence and into young adulthood. Motherhood has thus contributed to Michelle’s comfort in her body, and her ability to currently resist preoccupation with adherence to dominant body norms and ideals in the context of friends who continue to promote them.

I think I just have too much going on in my life right now to be worried like that about my body. I’ve come too far. Having a baby; its everything I ever wanted in my whole life. This is everything I worked so hard for to get better…This is like the happiest I’ve ever been in my life. I feel great about my body and I love my family. (Michelle, adulthood)

Lastly, a couple of the women interviewed spoke about how sharing similar body struggles with significant others have helped them to reject preoccupation with adherence to body norms and ideals that dominant their peer environments. For instance, meeting her female partner who has also struggled with body issues, was particularly influential for Jen in recognizing Alternative Body Norms that allow her to live more comfortably in her body and resist pressures to adhere to ideals of thinness.
I used to look at magazines and think that’s how you’re supposed to, and while I still look at them I don’t have those thoughts in my head that I should be like that anymore because I feel really secure. I know that I have flaws but I’m secure with myself and my body. And where has that security in yourself come from? It comes from other peoples’ struggles, especially living with my partner day-to-day who has her own insecurities. Seeing that has humbled me a bit to realize what’s going on in my head, and how I sometimes think I’m being presented to the world isn’t actually how it is. I’m making it worse in my head, and I know I should calm down, which I have over the last few years with her. I think that’s a big thing for me. (Jen, adulthood)

Summary of Alternative Body Norms

Promoting Alternative Body Norms within peer and friendships groups emerged as the first category in relation to Peer Processes that Challenge the Ideal Body Appearance. Specifically, the three themes under the category of Promoting Alternative Body Norms included: i) immersion in peer groups with inherent Diversity in Appearances; ii) relationships with friends who exude Expressions of Body Comfort; and iii) Shaping Life Experiences that have placed preoccupation with body weight and shape less central. These processes supported women in the study in developing Alternative Body Norms, helping them to live more comfortably in their body while resisting preoccupation with adhering to dominant norms and ideals for appearance.

Beginning with the first theme of Diversity in Appearances, for several women interviewed beginning towards the end of early to middle childhood (5-7 years), and continuing throughout adolescence and into adulthood, being a part of peer environments with considerable ethnocultural diversity contributed to a sense of comfort in their body and appearances as they were exposed to Alternative Body Norms. This was seen as particularly important for Canadian
women who were not of Caucasian, and/or European backgrounds and who were immersed in highly diverse elementary and middle schools. Further, peer diversity in other important peer appearance domains, such as ways of dressing in middle to late adolescence (14-19 years), and body size and shape in young adulthood and beyond (20+ years), was similarly demonstrated to contribute to Alternative Body Norms that allowed for greater comfort in their body and resistance to preoccupation with dominant appearance norms and ideals.

Regarding the second theme of Alternative Body Norms, relationships with friends and peers who Expressed Comfort in their body, while also resisting conformity to appearance ideals, helped to challenge the pressures associated with attaining the ideal body appearance, predominantly among participants in adulthood. Particularly for those who have struggled with their body in the past, new relationships in adulthood, with friends and peer groups who exude comfort in their body, enhanced women’s own comfort and reduced preoccupation with adherence to the thin ideal.

Lastly, the third theme of women’s Shaping Life Experiences, which included recovery from mental health issues, the experience of pregnancy and motherhood, and shared body struggles with significant others, similarly contributed to participants’ increased comfort in their body, while supporting them in challenging the preoccupation with thinness in adulthood.

Messages that Challenge and Resist Preoccupation with the Ideal

Although less prevalent among the women interviewed, the second category that emerged in relation to Peer Processes Challenging the Ideal Body, was Messages that Challenge and Resist Preoccupation with the Ideal. Described by five of the women in the study, Messages that Challenge and Resist Preoccupation with the Ideal, in turn, included two themes: i) Receiving Supportive Messages from peers; and ii) women’s own Active Resistance to their Peers’ Appearance-focused Messages (see Figure 14).
Based on the women’s interviews, Receiving Supportive Messages and Active Resistance to Appearance-related Messages were demonstrated to support women in distancing themselves from pressures associated with conformity to the ideal. (see Figure 15).

Supportive Messages

Regarding the first theme, few women spoke about receiving Supportive Messages that challenged preoccupation with the ideal. Further, among those who described receiving these messages, all reported receiving them from male peers and/or partners at the time. Additionally, all but one participant reported receiving these messages in adulthood.

Leena was the only participant who disclosed receiving supportive messages from her male peers during middle adolescence (14-16 years). Though Leena continued to struggle with her body and self-image at the time, being surrounded by her male peers provided her with the
temporary relief from pressures associated with appearance conformity that dominated her female peer group at the time.

I had very good boyfriends which I think helped me a lot because we were not talking about things about all girls’ stuff, about the body and what to dress and the make-up. Because the girls were already thinking about putting make-up on but the boys were like, “you don’t need that!” They offered a more relaxed so their perspective so that was very healthy to me I think... I felt like they were not looking at me with respect to my appearance. When I was with the boys that were my friends, I felt very comfortable with my body and less pressure. (Leena, middle adolescence)

Further, in adulthood, a few women discussed receiving supportive messages about their bodies and appearances from their partner. Although these women still reported struggling with their body in adulthood, receiving supportive messages helped to distance them from the pressure to conform to strict norms and ideals for thinness in their peer environments.

After I met my husband I was very happy...He thought everything about me was perfect, even the parts that I didn’t like. He liked everything...Having a supportive partner has been huge in buffering the effect of this connection between my peers and my body. If it hadn’t been for my partner’s unconditional admiration, I think the punishing and pushing of my body would have been much worse by now. (Layla, adulthood)

[My husband] would always tell me that I am beautiful and that I’m okay. But he’s also very tough in telling me if I’m obsessing about it. He will always tell me when I am going off the track. He would tell me every time, “you’re concerning yourself too much with
this”…and at that time when we first met I didn’t have anybody else who told me that, so it was important to hear it from him. (Leena, adulthood)

Active Resistance to Negative Messages

Further, the second theme of Active Resistance to Messages was discussed by four of the women (Leena, Sarah, Hillary and Michelle), who disclosed that while communication about their body, appearances and dieting remains prominent in many of their peer groups today, their attempts to avoid, ignore and/or actively resist the messages they receive from peers, have helped in distancing themselves from ongoing pressures for thinness.

I realized in that sometimes when my friends and I did talk it would be always about food and weight… I just noticed that it was sort of influencing me and my relationship with my own body, so I started to ignore it…It allowed me to distance myself for my own mental health…Also, having more confidence in myself now and feeling good about myself inside, if people do say negative comments, it doesn’t impact me as much now. (Sarah, young adulthood)

There’s a couple of friends who like to talk about weight more than others. It’s not something that I like talking about anymore though. I don’t feel the necessity to do that. I don’t think its part of my overall existence on a day-to-day basis. (Hillary, adulthood)

People are always looking at your body and commenting on your body when you’re pregnant, like “oh you’re only pregnant in your tummy”, and “your butt isn’t big”, and “your butt’s going to get big”, and “your thighs are so big”, “your face isn’t getting fat”…I was surprised at how little I cared. It just didn’t matter anymore…Recently in my mom and baby group, one mom said to another mom, “Oh my God you look so skinny today.”
And then they went through this whole conversation about it. And I’m like really?! Its actually unbelievable. It was out of nowhere. We were talking about our babies. I don’t know why that person felt the need to say that. That’s not something I would ever say to someone…I’m much more confident and comfortable in my body now. (Michelle, adulthood)

Summary of Messages that Challenge and Resist Preoccupation with the Ideal

Although far less prevalent among the women interviewed, the category entitled Messages that Challenge and Resist Preoccupation with the Ideal included experiences that contributed to women’s ability to distance themselves from pressures of conformity related to dominant norms and ideals for appearance that have continued to infiltrate many of their peer environments in adulthood. In particular, the two themes of receiving Supportive Messages from male peers/partners and women’s own Active Resistance to Appearance-focused Messages contributed to participants’ challenging of the culturally sanctioned preoccupation with ideals for thinness.

Overall Summary of Peer Processes Related to Norms, Ideals and Expectations

Pertaining to the Female Body Appearance

Chapter three explored the first of two domains of the “Peer Processes Related to the Dominant and Alternative Norms, Ideals and Expectations” model. Specifically, this first domain described the shaping of peer processes among interviewed women by widely sanctioned idealized norms and expectations related to the Ideal Body Appearance.

Within this first domain of Peer Processes Related to the Ideal Body Appearance emerged two core categories: 1) Peer Processes Promoting the Ideal Body, which included the categories of Social Comparison, and Evaluative Messages and Appearance-based Conversations; and 2)
Peer Processes Challenging the Ideal Body, which included the categories of Alternative Body Norms, and Messages that Challenge and Resist Preoccupation with the Ideal.

Within the first core category of Peer Processes Promoting the Ideal Body, Social Comparison, and Evaluative Messages and Appearance-based Conversations, represented two important dimensions of interviewed women’s experiences with friends and peers that shaped their internalization of norms about the female body throughout development. In particular, Social Comparison was a prevalent category among all participants from the time of childhood through to adulthood, whereby women reported engaging in direct physical comparisons with their peers across the three themes of: i) Body Size and Shape; ii) Pubertal Changes; and iii) Ethnocultural Differences and Cultural Transitions. Firstly, in relation to Social Comparisons of Body Size and Shape, women’s own internalized body experiences were demonstrated to evolve from an external awareness of the body beginning towards the end of early to middle childhood, to a pronounced evaluative external gaze by late childhood, which remained throughout all of adolescence and into adulthood, contributing to body dissatisfaction and subsequent preoccupation with adherence to body norms and ideals. Secondly, Social Comparisons associated with Pubertal Changes contributed to participants’ own heightened body surveillance developing into body discomfort around the time of early to middle adolescence. Lastly, Social Comparisons that emerged in relation to Cultural Transitions and Ethnocultural Differences contributed to the internalization of inherent differences and cultural norms of attractiveness among peers in middle childhood and throughout adolescence and adulthood. Comparisons in relation to these domains subsequently resulted in heightened body surveillance and body consciousness for many participants.

Further, significantly reinforcing dominant norms for the ideal body appearance from late childhood through adulthood, Evaluative Messages and Appearance-based Conversations
emerged as the second category under Peer Processes Promoting the Ideal Body. Specifically, Evaluative Messages and Appearance-based Conversations was expressed according to the two themes of: i) Messages that Socially Rewarded conforming to the ideal; and ii) Disapproving and/or Critical Messages as a result of deviating from the ideal. Across each of these two themes, the transmission of evaluative messages and conversations about appearance within the peer environment resulted in the internalization of an evaluative external gaze of the body beginning in late childhood/early adolescence. As these messages and conversations strengthened around middle to late adolescence, interviewed women expressed body esteem in instances where they were socially rewarded for conforming to the ideal, or body consciousness in instances where they were criticized for deviating from the ideal. In each of these instances, these women developed a preoccupation with adherence to body norms and ideals, most often in relation to sustaining or attaining thinness.

Conversely, within the core category of Peer Processes that Challenged the Ideal Body were the two categories of Alternative Body Norms, and Messages that Challenge and Resist Preoccupation with the Ideal. Although less prevalent than peer processes that promoted the ideal body, these two categories which challenged dominant norms pertaining to the ideal body appearance arose most frequently among participants in young adulthood and beyond. In particular, the first category of Alternative Body Norms emerged in relation to the themes of: i) Diversity in Appearances; ii) Expressions of Body Comfort; and iii) Shaping Life Experiences, which each contributed to participants’ own comfort in their body, and their resistance to preoccupation with the ideal. In addition, the second category of Messages that Challenge and Resist Preoccupation with the Ideal emerged in relation to the themes of: i) Receiving Supportive Messages from male peers/partners; and ii) Active Resistance to Appearance-focused Messages, which further helped support several women in distancing themselves from pressures of
conformity to norms and ideals for the body which continue to infiltrate many of their peer environments today.

Thus, despite the a number of peer processes that helped challenge adherence to widely sanctioned idealized norms and expectations for the female body, peer processes that promoted these norms and expectations across development contributed to a relentless preoccupation with the ideal body, making it particularly challenging at times for participants to live in their body in a connected way as girls and young women.
CHAPTER FOUR

PEER PROCESSES RELATED TO IDEALIZED WAYS OF INHABITING
THE BODY AS A GIRL AND WOMAN

Chapter four explores the second domain of model one, *Idealized Ways of Inhabiting the body as a Girl and Woman*. Highly connected to the *Ideal Body Appearance*, the second domain addresses the influence of peer processes on the way interviewed women described inhabiting their bodies according to three core categories: Food and Eating; Sexuality; and Activities, Interests and Educational Pursuits (see Figure 16).

Figure 16. Core Categories Pertaining to Idealized Ways of Inhabiting the Body as a Girl and Woman

Across each of these three core categories, participants’ narratives were classified according to the categories of: 1) Peer Processes Promoting Adherence to Idealized Ways of Inhabiting the Body as a Girl and Woman; and 2) Peer Processes Challenging Adherence to Idealized Ways of Inhabiting the Body as Girl and Woman.

Food and Eating

Friends and peers across all developmental contexts influenced interviewed women’s attitudes and behaviours associated with Food and Eating. The present section begins with an exploration into the peer processes that served to promote adherence to social norms and ideals associated with girls’ and women’s eating, followed by those that served to challenge these norms and ideals.
Promoting Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Food and Eating

The majority of women interviewed described idealized eating attitudes and behaviours that were promoted within their peer environments. In particular, these idealized ways of eating surfaced across the two main themes of: i) The Pursuit of Thinness; and ii) Ideals of Health and Wellness (see Figure 17).

Figure 17. Peer Processes Themes Promoting Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Food and Eating

Analyses of participants’ interviews, suggested that the transmission and internalization of the Pursuit of Thinness, and Ideals for Health and Wellness, resulted in heightened body consciousness, internalized pressures to conform to these ideals, and ultimately girls’ and women’s negotiation of their own eating and appetites (see Figure 18).

Figure 18. Internalized Body Experiences Related to Ideals for Thinness, and Health and Wellness

The Pursuit of Thinness

As described in Chapter three, the internalization of the thin ideal occurred throughout most peer environments described by women in the present study, beginning predominantly in
late childhood and extending into adulthood. Specifically within the context of Food and Eating, all fourteen participants described the Pursuit of Thinness in relation to two particular sub-themes: Peer Dieting; and Pressures for Thinness. Further, these sub-themes were demonstrated to emerge in the beginning of early adolescence (11-13 years), heightening in middle to late adolescence (14-19 years), and continuing for several women in young adulthood and beyond (20+ years).

**Peer Dieting**

The majority of participants reported witnessing dieting in a variety of social contexts (e.g., within the home, at work and in their immediate peer groups). Given the focus of the present study, the peer context was given the most attention to women’s internalization of the thin body ideal, and consequently their negotiation of their appetite in an attempt to conform to this ideal. In particular, over half of the women interviewed described Peer Dieting as a normative part of their immediate peer culture beginning in early adolescence (11-13 years), and heightening in middle to late adolescence (14-19 years).

[My friend] talked about how much she weighed…I never weighed myself, but I discovered the scale then… I brought an entire thermos of Zoodles. I had chips and snacks and everything. And she would look at my lunch with such disgust and say, “how can you eat all of that!?,” She would throw out her lunch and be so proud of it and talk about it. And all these other girls would say, “oh my God I wish I could do that; I wish I could throw out my lunch; you’re so lucky, you’re so skinny!” That’s when I thought, ‘maybe I could do that.’ I started telling my mom, “don’t give me that in my lunch anymore.” I [became] too uncomfortable in my body. (Michelle, early adolescence).
With the exception of Ellie, who for the most part retained a connection to her appetite despite being surrounded by friends who dieted, all participants who witnessed their peers dieting in adolescence communicated its impact on their own heightened body consciousness, internalized pressures to conform, and ultimately, their negotiation of their appetites.

It was through my friend that I realized I could stop eating so much. Because it was not something my mom never said. She was always like, “finish your food!”...So at home I would have polished off [my food], but with my best friend at the time, she would be like, “oh man I’m feeling fat”, and then we’d have lunch and she would have only soup with vegetables in it, and so then I started doing that too because maybe this would do something for my fat arms…I had never thought about food in that way before. Suddenly realizing I should probably not eat so much…I remember thinking this is going to help me become thin. (Sandra, early-middle adolescence)

I became friends with a couple of girls and I remember they really wanted to lose weight. One of them had bulimia and she would tell me how she’d try not to eat very much…that’s when I first started buying Slim-Fast. (Sarah, middle adolescence)

Further, among most participants’ peer environments throughout adolescence, Peer Dieting was demonstrated to reinforce the social power of thinness, thereby encouraging the Pursuit of Thinness.

Anorexia was big in my high school. I would see five girls in the corner of the cafeteria sharing one donut cause I assume that they needed a sugar high to get them through the day, whereas I could polish off six of those donuts by myself. I heard people throwing up in the bathrooms…I felt the girls were absolutely ridiculous, but at the same time I wished
I was one of them because their lives looked so easy. Like the one thing they had to worry about was five of them sharing a donut. It just seemed very glamorous. (Hillary, middle adolescence)

Everybody was dieting…it was very common to discuss it and worry about the dieting…And the popular and beautiful people would also talk about how good it is to be skinny. (Leena, middle-late adolescence)

Additionally, though Peer Dieting reportedly continued into young adulthood (20-25 years), only Layla, Paige, Leena, Hillary and Jen acknowledged the explicit influence of Peer Dieting in their early twenties on their own negotiation of food and appetite. Specifically, these women all spoke of sustaining relationships with close female friends that encouraged dieting and reinforced their own preoccupation with adherence to the thin ideal.

My best friend was encouraging of me dieting, but it was funny because we were polar opposites in that she was really good in the eating department and could limit herself, but I was really good in the exercise department. Together we would have been like an ideal combination, so I tried to motivate exercising and she motivated me in the eating. (Hillary, young adulthood)

From my closest friend at the time I became aware of dieting as a very serious thing and not just cutting back on meals or eating less food. She had all kinds of diets, like a chemical diet, six days on min-meals…Through her I became introduced to a whole range of dieting that I had never known existed…It made me more careful with my own eating. (Layla, young adulthood)
Significantly, Layla was the only participant who acknowledged continuing to experience explicit pressures of dieting from close female friends at the time of the study, resulting in heightened body consciousness and negotiation of her food and appetite.

Further, three women (Hillary, Sandra and Jen) each spoke of their experiences watching their weight in relation to their partner’s dieting practices in adulthood.

My wife is similar to me, she has a tummy. She’s lost twenty pounds and [she’s] an emotional eater too. So we’ve really been supporting each other, like if we’re having a bad day; her thing is salt and my thing is sugar. So I won’t let her get chips and she won’t let me get ice cream. It’s a good match. (Jen, adulthood)

[My husband] was always very body conscious, and so its became a process of becoming more conscious about what we’re eating and what we’re putting into our bodies…He thought he was fat; he’s really not…but he cut out sugar altogether…We used to bake, but now we’ve started eating less of that stuff now. (Sandra, adulthood)

It is significant to note that with the exception of male partners who influenced dieting attitudes and behaviours, none of the participants spoke about dieting among male peers as influencing their own negotiation of food and appetite.

*Pressures for Thinness*

The second related sub-theme that promoted the Pursuit of Thinness and participants’ negotiation of their food and appetite, were Pressures for Thinness internalized within many of their immediate social environments. For the majority of women interviewed, Pressures for Thinness emerged around the time of early to middle adolescence (11-16 years), though unlike Peer Dieting, a few women (Mary, Hillary, Simone and Jen) also spoke about receiving overt
Pressures for Thinness as early as middle to late childhood (6-10 years). Significantly, of the women who reported Pressures for Thinness in childhood, these pressures were communicated exclusively within the home environment. In each of these instances, Pressures for Thinness within the home that were transmitted through modeling of disruptive eating practices and/or explicit pressure to lose weight, significantly contributed to disrupted experiences with food and eating in the context of friends and peers in adolescence. For instance, Mary and Hillary, who each struggled with food and eating in the context of friends and peers throughout adolescence, reflected on their mothers as chief influencing factors for their internalization of disrupted eating attitudes and behaviours. In Mary’s case, her mother modeled disruptive eating patterns from an early age.

When I was ten I remember hiding food in my closet and my parents were fighting and they sent me upstairs so they could fight. And I remember sitting in my closet eating Oreo cookies and just shoving them in my face…My mom was never happy with how she looked and she would always be calorie counting and not feeling great…she was always worried about how much she weighed so I think that’s where the preoccupation started.

(Mary, late childhood)

Conversely, Hillary’s mother explicitly pressured her daughter to diet.

We packed lunch to go to school, and I remember my mother packed me a cantaloupe and cottage cheese…And I opened my lunch and a teacher walked by and said, “that’s a really odd lunch. That’s what I eat when I’m on a diet.” This was in grade five and I just felt mortified…and everyone looked at me like, ‘yeah, well of course you’re on a diet cause you’re fat.’ (Hillary, late childhood)
For the majority of women interviewed, however, Pressures for Thinness were most frequently communicated within their peer environments, beginning in early adolescence and strengthening throughout middle to late adolescence. All women who reported Pressures for Thinness from friends and peers during this time described the impact of these pressures on heightened body consciousness and subsequent restriction of their food and appetite.

A lot of the peer influence on my body was that I had this odd belief that people expected me to look a certain way, and I didn’t want to disappoint them by being average. So a lot of my motivation for doing certain things, like restricting, for making sure my body was ‘good’, was because [my peers] expected it of me and I didn’t want to disappoint them. It was very stressful. (Michelle, early-middle adolescence)

Everybody was focused on being thin. Even my best friends who were not that skinny. They didn’t have issues, but they still watched what they ate all the time…I felt the pressure …everyone around was taking care or focusing on their bodies. (Leena, middle adolescence)

Further, most participants connected the Pressures for Thinness they experienced in adolescence, and the subsequent need to control their appetite and eating, with acceptance and rejection by friends and peers; a theme that will be highlighted further in chapter five in relation to the implications of social power and acceptance on peer conformity and compliance.

I felt like I had to [diet]…It seemed like she had the discipline to just eat soup and vegetables for lunch, so I thought I should have that discipline to. (Sandra, middle adolescence)
Feeling rejected was hard and [it] influenced how I felt about my body…It was easy to pin the negative feelings on my weight and eating…Whenever I was happy in my relationships, my weight seemed to be not much of an issue, even when I felt I needed to lose weight, it was not with so much self-negativity. (Layla, early-middle adolescence)

Thus, middle adolescence (14-16 years) represented a pivotal time for the majority of women who spoke about the strong messages they received regarding the importance of thinness within their immediate friendship groups. Particularly among women who experienced Pressures for Thinness within the home at the time, the peer environment greatly accentuated and reinforced these pressures, resulting in strict control over their appetites, as described by Jen and Hillary below. Both participants grew up with mothers who promoted dieting and openly criticized their weight, ultimately reinforcing the messages they received from peers at school regarding the importance of dieting for thinness.

My friends would talk about how they were fat and what they ate and that’s when it started. That’s when I started skipping meals…I would deny myself meals so that I wouldn’t gain any weight, or I would exercise excessively to stay at the weight that I was. I was like a size eight and that’s where I was for years up until I was about twenty-four and then I just started gaining weight cause I had learned those unhealthy practices to try and keep the weight off…I mean I never binged, I never threw up, but I did other excessive means to cut the calories. (Jen, middle adolescence)

There were a lot of anorexic girls at the time…And with my mom taking me to a nutritionist every week, weighing me, pushing me to lose weight…I just wanted to be like [one of those] girls. (Hillary, middle adolescence)
In contrast to adolescence, overt Pressures for Thinness from friends and peers resulting in the restriction of one’s eating and appetite, emerged as a less prominent theme among participants in adulthood.

There isn’t as much of that pressure from people now…[my friends] are more positive…And there’s a lot more openness and honesty. There’s not sort of a mask of perfection between friends anymore. (Mary, adulthood)

In the past maybe three, four years, things have changed…my friends are all shapes and sizes and they’re not as focused on their weight…they don’t influence [my eating] so much anymore. (Sandra, adulthood)

Only three of the interviewed women (Layla, Leena and Hillary) who reported restricting their appetite in relation to their friends and peers in adolescence, described continuing to control their appetites in response to ongoing social Pressures for Thinness from friends and peers in young adulthood or beyond.

I made a new best friend in my twenties…I was hoping it would keep my head off [my body] but it actually made it worse. In what ways? She was very skinny; she was kind of like me. She was skinny but feeling that she was not skinny enough so I think sometimes our ways would be kind of dangerous….It was the way she looked that made me feel pressured… She was very skinny and tall. It was like everything I wanted to be, so I wanted to look like her all the time…We’d encourage each other to lose weight. (Leena, young adulthood)
I go home to the Middle East every summer. And when I did this last time all my friends were amazed and thought I looked terrific because I’d lost a lot of weight, so I was very happy. But when I came back to Canada and I started going to school and not having as much time to plan out when I’m going to eat, I worry I’m putting on weight even though the scales don’t say that. I don’t like to put on weight. That’s really important to me. The system I have is I stop eating after a certain hour, and sometimes after a long day I get home and the smell of dinner is still in the air and I really want to eat. (Layla, adulthood)

Ideals of Health and Wellness

Ideals of Health and Wellness represented the second theme of peer processes that promoted adherence to norms and ideals for food and eating. Nine of the fourteen participants described the internalization of Ideals for Health and Wellness, which surfaced in relation to two particular sub-themes: the dichotomy of Healthy and Unhealthy Eating; and Upholding the Healthy Ideal. These two sub-themes occurred predominantly among interviewed women in young adulthood and beyond (20+ years). Similar to Ideals for Thinness, participants’ internalization of Ideals for Health and Wellness resulted in their heightened body-consciousness, pressures to subscribe to the ideals, and negotiation of their own eating and appetites.

Healthy vs. Unhealthy Eating

Approximately half of the participants spoke about the dichotomy of ‘healthy’ versus ‘unhealthy’ food and eating in relation to their friends and peers. With the exception of two participants who described the emergence of Healthy vs. Unhealthy Eating in either childhood or adolescence, the rest of the women reported these ideals emerging in their early twenties.

Specifically among the women who spoke about the dichotomy of Healthy vs. Unhealthy Eating in late childhood and early adolescence, Ideals of Health and Wellness were
communicated within the home environment, as described below by Hillary and Mary. It is important to note that both Hillary and Mary struggled with eating issues throughout adolescence and young adulthood, and attributed the initial development of eating disordered thoughts and behaviours with how their family perceived food and eating; a mentality that was ultimately reinforced within their peer environments in adolescence and young adulthood.

From a young age food in my house was put into categories. This is a ‘good’ food, this is a ‘bad’ food. If I wanted junk I had to go to my friend’s house to get it. We never had a balance. My friend who sat beside me at school had a good lunch; a turkey sandwich on a roll and a bag of chips and a fruit, and I had an egg salad sandwich on multigrain bread and sticks of celery and carrots and fruit, but no snack or nothing to make you feel like you had a lunch that was similar to someone else’s. I never had Oreos. I didn’t even know what an Oreo was until I went to a friend’s house. (Hillary, late childhood)

Both Hillary and Mary were very attune to the differences in their own food and eating in relation to their peers; particularly the emphasis their parents placed on Healthy vs. Unhealthy Eating. Meanwhile they recognized that their friends were largely unaware of this dichotomy at the time.

I always used to bring my lunch and it was always really healthy. My mom always made sure we had pretty decent meals. My group of my friends was not into that and would always buy their lunches. So I always felt peer pressure to buy French fries and hamburgers, which sounds ridiculous, but then again, just wanting to fit in and eat like they do, and not stick out like a sore thumb for eating apples. (Mary, early adolescence)
However, entrance into adulthood is when the dichotomy of Healthy vs. Unhealthy Eating emerged predominantly among participants, serving to accentuate the importance of controlling one’s appetite, and appearing to legitimize body weight and shape preoccupation.

Going to university made me much more aware of eating more healthy and things like that. Normally they say when most people start university they put on loads of weight because they’re eating take-out and junk food all the time but I actually lost a lot of weight when I went to university and I think it’s because I’d been eating you know junk food up until that point and I just became much more aware of healthy eating from my peers and friends around me. (Ellie, young adulthood)

There was more talk about nutrition and healthy eating then…I [witnessed] my friend go through struggles with weight and becoming more healthy…I got to hear a lot of what she did [to become healthy]…and it guided me in what I should do and where I should be with my health. (Jen, young adulthood)

In particular, participants expressed a societal shift in the normalcy of eating healthy among friends and peers in adulthood.

I think we’re in a period now where being healthy, being fit, eating well, it’s just lifestyle now. It’s become popular, and I don’t think it’s so much about being thin, but it’s about being healthy. I think that’s everyone’s goal and so I don’t feel different when I’m eating like a quinoa salad. Everyone’s eating quinoa now, like everyone’s trying to be healthy, everyone’s going to the gym. It seems to be the norm, so I think that I just blend…Everyone wants to be fit. I just think that’s normal. (Hillary, adulthood)
Tuesday mornings before the department seminar, we have coffee and someone brings in Tim bits, and most people don’t touch them…it’s just like “don’t eat that crap.”…There’s a solidarity of nobody touching the donuts cause they’re bad…And then there are days when you’re just feeling so bad that you have one, and you feel you need to explain to everyone why you’re having one. (Sandra, adulthood)

_Upholding the Healthy Ideal_

The second related sub-theme shown to promote Ideals of Health and Wellness within participants’ peer environments were pressures associated with Upholding the Healthy Ideal. Many of the women who discussed Healthy vs. Unhealthy Eating often referenced the pressure they experienced to live up to the healthy ideal by controlling and negotiating their eating and appetite within the context of their friends and peers. Significantly, this sub-theme emerged exclusively among interviewed women in young adulthood and beyond (20+ years). For these women, eating with different friends throughout their young adulthood, including at the time of the study, has significantly shaped their food choices, and their internalized pressure to Uphold the Healthy Ideal and control their appetites accordingly.

_Are there times when you feel better or worse eating when you’re with certain_ friends? I don’t know if there’s better or worse but just maybe my expectations of the situation are different. Like my friend at work, if we’re going down to the cafe together, I know she’s going to get something healthy. She probably thinks I’m going to as well, and we ask each other what we got. Whereas I have another friend at work who’s just whatever and has a very healthy body image. When I’m with her I know there’s just not going to be that underlying expectation… I think with the friend who’s also health conscious I feel
probably myself more body conscious, whereas with the other girlfriend at work who’s like very easy going, eats whatever, I feel more relaxed. (Paige, young adulthood)

I’m always the one ordering the salad and the grilled chicken or fish when they’re ordering pasta. I’m the one substituting or asking the waiter a million questions. *And do you feel with certain friends like you have to worry more or less about what you eat?*

Yeah, [less with] my friends back home. We have more history together. There’s no newness…When I was home recently, my friend and I went apple picking and we stuffed our face with apple donuts and we had poutine, and it doesn’t matter there. I would never do that with friends here. It wouldn’t feel the same, it wouldn’t feel as comfortable. (Hillary, adulthood)

Thus, for the majority of interviewed women, eating with friends in adulthood often fuelled pressures to Uphold the Healthy Ideal for fear of being judged. For these women, the fear translated into heightened body consciousness and negotiation of their eating and appetite within the context of friends and peers today.

I feel more awkward about eating something really unhealthy in front of my friends because I wonder what they’re thinking about me, especially if they’re not doing the same thing. Whereas if I was with a friend who maybe picked something really unhealthy, I would feel less awkward about doing the same thing. (Ellie, adulthood)

I don’t want to be a chubby nutritionist [Laugh], and I don’t want friends to see me or think of me that way …I want to have a positive relationship with food and my body and help others feel like that…To be honest it’s a balance, and I used to not want to have any ‘bad’ [food], but it’s learning to say that its okay if you have a piece of cake, the world
isn’t going to end and you don’t need to go to the gym the next day. I’m almost there…I’m just trying to find that balance of being healthy and feeling good about what I look like and who I am for other people. (Mary, adulthood)

Further, participants’ descriptions of food and eating in the context of friends and peers in adulthood often demonstrated an association between healthy standards of eating and ideals of thinness for women, which imply control of consumption or counting calories.

I find now more than ever before a common social thing to do with friends is to go out to dinner and as a result I think there is a lot more pressure now in terms of what you eat. If all of your friends are ordering a salad, you feel like ‘I can’t order a burger because what will they think of me.’ And at the same time they probably wouldn’t think anything of it but it would just make me feel uncomfortable eating something really unhealthy while all of my friends are eating healthy. (Ellie, adulthood)

Cause most of us women aren’t supposed to choose food over our looks. (Anna, adulthood)

Summary of Promoting Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Food and Eating

Under the first category of Promoting Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Food and Eating, two important themes emerged: i) The Pursuit of Thinness and ii) Ideals of Health and Wellness. Transmitted and internalized within participants’ peer environments during childhood, adolescence and adulthood, these two main themes were found to result in heightened body consciousness, internalized pressures to conform to these ideals, and ultimately girls’ and women’s negotiation of their own eating and appetites.
Beginning with the first theme of The Pursuit of Thinness, Peer Dieting and Pressures for Thinness emerged as two important sub-themes that shaped interviewed women’s negotiation of their eating and appetites in the context of their friends and peers throughout development. Specifically, almost all interviewed women described Peer Dieting as a normative part of their peer culture in early adolescence (11-13 years), heightening in middle to late-adolescence (14-19 years) and continuing for some women (e.g., five) into young adulthood and beyond (20+ years). Particularly among women who struggled with their eating and/or weight throughout childhood and adolescence, being immersed in peer environments where Peer Dieting was especially prevalent, reinforced norms for thinness and ultimately influenced their own food and appetite restriction. Further, relationships with close female friends who dieted was seen to have a strong influence on women’s continued preoccupation with their bodies and negotiation of their appetites into adulthood. Furthermore, similar to Peer Dieting, Pressures for Thinness typically emerged within women’s peer environments around early to middle adolescence (11-16 years). Several women, however, spoke about overt Pressures for Thinness occurring at an earlier age within the home environment. These internalized pressures within the home were demonstrated to contribute to greater disrupted experiences with food and eating in the context of friends and peers in adolescence. Middle adolescence (14-16 years) again represented a critical time for most women who spoke about the strong messages they received regarding the importance of thinness in their immediate female friendship groups. However, overt Pressures for Thinness from friends and peers, resulting in the restriction of one’s eating and appetite, emerged as a less prominent theme among participants in adulthood.

Within the second theme of Ideals of Health and Wellness, the dichotomy of Healthy and Unhealthy Eating and Upholding the Healthy Ideal emerged as two important sub-themes, which also contributed to participants’ heightened body consciousness and the subsequent negotiation of
their eating and appetite. Firstly, approximately half of the participants described the dichotomy of Healthy vs. Unhealthy Eating occurring within the context of their friends and peers. This sub-theme emerged predominantly among women in adulthood (20+ years), though two women reported the emergence of Healthy vs. Unhealthy Eating as influenced by their parents in late childhood. Among these women, the dichotomy of healthy and unhealthy foods and eating practices influenced disrupted experiences of eating with friends and peers in adolescence. Further, most other women described the normalcy of ‘healthy’ eating among friends and peers in adulthood, which reinforced the importance of vigilance and control over one’s appetite. In addition, exclusively among women over the age of twenty, Upholding the Healthy Ideal surfaced as an important sub-theme promoting women’s self-judgments related to food choices, which shaped their negotiation of eating within the context of their female friends and peers.

**Challenging Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Food and Eating**

The second category under the first core category of Food and Eating outlines two peer processes themes that were shown to challenge participants’ adherence to norms and ideals of food and eating described in the previous section: i) Modeling Comfort in Appetite; and ii) Enjoying and Appreciating Food (see Figure 19).  

Figure 19. Peer Processes Themes Challenging Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Food and Eating
Based on women’s interviews, each of these two peer processes themes were shown to contribute to participants’ own body comfort, and consequently, their ability to stay connected and respond to their appetite according to their desires and needs (see Figure 20).

Figure 20. Internalized Body Experiences Related to Modeling Comfort in Appetite, and Enjoying and Appreciating Food

Modeling Comfort in Appetite

Representing the first peer process theme that served to challenge participants’ adherence to norms and ideals associated with eating during childhood and adulthood, was Modeling Comfort in Appetite. Most participants described such experiences in early to late childhood (3-10 years) or in young adulthood and beyond (20+ years).

Particularly in early to late childhood, the majority of women interviewed communicated about the normalcy of their peers’ comfort with eating, together with their own comfort in their bodies and their subsequent ability to remain connected to their appetites.

Eating in childhood, I feel like it was something we were unconscious of. It was something that was part of life, like waking up in the morning and going to bed at night. As far as I remember it wasn’t a big deal then. (Sandra, early-middle childhood)

I never noticed anybody eating differently or not eating. It was very normal and comfortable to eat whatever…We weren’t aware of what was ‘bad’ food, or junk then. (Anna, middle-late childhood)
As highlighted in the previous section, throughout early to late adolescence (11-19 years), participants’ ability to remain connected to their appetites was severely challenged by Ideals for Thinness frequently transmitted and internalized within their peer environments. With the exception of few participants, such as Lisa and Zoe, the majority of participants struggled to remain comfortable in their bodies and respond to their appetite during this time.

*How did your friends influence your eating or food choices back then?* We just ate whatever. Everyone was sort of relatively a fair size, a good size, so I don’t think eating was every really a concern among any of us. (Lisa, early-middle adolescence)

I ate a lot of sugar and candy and junk food…But, in terms of how my friends ate and how that influenced how I ate, I think the group of friends I had then tended to eat the same way I did. We would tend to eat more kind of convenience style and fast foods…It wasn’t a big deal…My weight wasn’t an issue…I never worried about putting on weight and they didn’t seem to either. (Zoe, middle-late adolescence)

In contrast to adolescence, the theme of Modeling Comfort in Appetite emerged among several participants in adulthood. Specifically, six of the women interviewed spoke about female friends and peers who through modeling comfort in their appetites and challenging feminine ideals of eating, have contributed to their own comfort and ability to eat in accordance with their desire.

We were talking about celebrities and I was saying, “they age really badly and I’m sure it must be because of their diet, because they spend their youth binging and purging or existing on a diet of like drugs and cigarettes and coffee.” And my friend says, “yeah that’s crazy I would never do that. Just have a cheeseburger”, I was like, “yeah.” [Laugh].
It was a good experience. When I hear someone who’s also choosing food over the pressure [to be thin], it’s like finally someone feels the same way…When someone isn’t afraid to say that, it’s brave; it’s like, ‘yea, I’m with you!’ (Anna, adulthood)

I remember being out with this friend for dinner and she would actually put butter on her bread and I was aghast. And I remember saying, “oh, you put butter on your bread? It’s so fattening!” That never really occurred to me that she would do that. And nowadays, once in a while, when I have white bread I’ll put butter on it. (Simone, young adulthood)

Significantly, three women (Michelle, Paige and Leena) who reportedly struggled with their bodies and/or eating throughout adolescence shared the importance of later developing relationships with female friends in adulthood who, through modeling comfort with their own appetites and challenging feminine ideals of eating, provided them with greater freedom and flexibility to respond to their appetite.

In my early twenties everyone would go out after partying and have a piece of pizza, or sub…My friend would eat two large pizzas or McDonald’s hamburgers and a bag of fries, and drink beer…It made me aware of how I was eating differently…And I started to show people that I could eat normally. I even started to eat fries with my [meal]. (Michelle, young adulthood)

I didn’t have any close friends then who restricted or dieted…I’m lucky for all intents and purposes that they were normal, and modeled normal [eating] behaviours for me…I didn’t feel afraid to go out for ice cream or have French fries once in a while. (Paige, young adulthood)
Enjoying and Appreciating Food

Representing the second theme that served to challenge norms and ideals associated with eating, was Enjoying and Appreciating Food within a social context. Significantly, while all participants communicated this theme about their experiences in early to late childhood, it was relatively non-existent throughout adolescence and adulthood.

Up until the age of around eight, all participants described enjoying food and responding to their appetites freely in the context of their friends and peers.

I remember we would all just sit around, just eating candy. So I feel like we never were really self-conscious about our bodies because we just felt really loved and appreciated in our bodies, and I don’t know whether that’s just me with a sense of nostalgia, but I really can’t remember any negative incident…We loved eating. (Sarah, early-middle childhood)

I remember we’d always go find Freezies or whatever great snack we had at each of our own houses, like chips or pretzels, and go outside and eat together. It was just fun! We didn’t think about it then. (Paige, middle-late childhood)

[My friend] had the best junk cupboard and we would sit in bed and watch movies, eat tubs of ice cream and popcorn. (Hillary, middle-late childhood).

Throughout adolescence, however, the theme of Enjoying and Appreciating Food with friends was relatively obsolete, with the exception of one participant, Jen, who described sharing a love of food with her closest friends in late adolescence.

Among my closest friends, [we] wouldn’t talk about what not to eat, we would talk about the foods that made us happiest and sometimes we’d have a movie day and we’d go get
what our favourite food was and have it. And it was either junk food or just food that we liked. We would celebrate that together. (Jen, late adolescence)

Further, in adulthood, only three women reported connecting with friends and peers over a shared appreciation and enjoyment of food, and the sense of comfort this provided them in their bodies and the freedom to respond to their appetite. One of these participants, Lisa, described the passion she and her friends share in relation to food today.

My friends love to eat. We almost always overeat. They’re very passionate about food, and we’ve never had an issue with our bodies or eating as a result. I guess we’re just more appreciative of food. We don’t think in terms of weight and stuff. It’s not much of a concern to anyone and not an active interest in my group. (Lisa, adulthood)

Further, Leena and Paige, who each struggled with their bodies throughout much of adolescence, described how learning to enjoy and appreciate food in the context of friends in adulthood has helped them to feel comfortable in their bodies and re-connect with their appetite.

I had to learn how to like eating again...I started to realize you can actually enjoy it, and I started cooking. I never cooked before and that changed stuff...With my friends, I was cooking for everybody and bringing people home and we were eating and chatting, and so food started being social and it was not an issue anymore. It was not ‘bad’ anymore. It was something that made friends closer. And they were all eating normally so I was looking at them and thinking, ‘I can’t be picky here’, I started feeling better, and eating better. (Leena, adulthood)
I’m happy now to be sharing food and eating with my friends…I know in my mind that it’s been more of a challenge for me than for them. Even though I’m actively recovered, the act [of eating] is more difficult for me…but in my body, in general, I feel pretty comfortable around them…Its better, you know, sitting around, sharing a couple of drinks, having appetizers…I can enjoy that more now. (Paige, adulthood)

**Summary of Challenging Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Food and Eating**

Within the second category of Challenging Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Food and Eating, two dominant themes emerged: i) Modeling Comfort in Appetite and ii) Enjoying and Appreciating Food. Specifically, these two main themes contributed to participants’ own body comfort, and their subsequent ability to respond to their appetites accordingly.

The first theme of Modeling Comfort in Appetite appeared in the narratives of most women in reference to the normalcy of their peers’ comfort with food and eating throughout childhood (3-10 years). Further, with the exception of two participants, the majority of women did not report any instances of Modeling Comfort in Appetite among their friends and peers throughout early to late adolescence. Within adulthood, however, six participants spoke about the influence of their friends’ comfort with food, which challenged feminine ideals of eating and permitted them to respond to their own appetites.

The second theme of Enjoying and Appreciating Food surfaced predominantly in the narratives of women about their experiences in childhood, and was relatively obsolete throughout adolescence and adulthood. Significantly, throughout early to late childhood all participants described enjoying food and responding to their appetites freely in the context of their friends and peers. In late adolescence, only one participant discussed the enjoyment in eating among close
friends. Further, in adulthood only three women reported connecting with friends and peers over a shared appreciation and enjoyment of food.

Sexuality

Sexuality represented the second core category in the second domain of *Idealized Ways of Inhabiting the Body as a Girl and Woman*. Specifically, the following section explores the peer processes that served to promote and challenge participants’ adherence to norms and expectations associated with sexuality, particularly in relation to perceived ideals of female attractiveness.

*Promoting Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Sexuality*

All participants described the promotion of norms and ideals of female sexuality within their peer environments, which served to shape the way in which many women inhabited their bodies from a place of discomfort and disconnection. In particular, peer processes themes demonstrated to promote participants’ adherence to ideals associated with sexuality included: i) the Male Evaluative Gaze; and ii) Sexual Harassment (see Figure 21).

![Sexuality Diagram](image)

**Figure 21. Peer Processes Themes Promoting Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Sexuality**

Based on the interviews, women’s internalization of the Male Evaluative Gaze and experiences of Sexual Harassment beginning predominantly in early adolescence was demonstrated to result in feelings of body shame and/or discomfort. For the majority of interviewed women, these feelings fuelled their preoccupation with adherence to ideals associated
with sexual attractiveness, and in some instances, disconnection from sexual desire in middle adolescence to young adulthood (see Figure 22).

Figure 22. Internalized Body Experiences Related to the Male Evaluative Gaze and Sexual Objectification

Male Evaluative Gaze

Participants’ narratives suggested that male peers played a critical role in promoting their tendency to view their bodies from an external perspective, subsequently fuelling their feelings of discomfort and/or shame in relation to widely sanctioned norms and ideals associated with perceived sexual attractiveness. Beginning as early as the age of ten, two of the participants described their internalization of the Male Evaluative Gaze in relation to male peers who conveyed ideals of female sexual attractiveness. Sandra, who earlier in chapter three described her shock after hearing one of the boys in her grade five class comment on the body of another girl, communicated this instance as the “turning point” where she first internalized the Male Evaluative Gaze, and began to question her desirability in terms of the ideals promoted by her male peers.

**What about a time when you felt uncomfortable about yourself when you were with your friends or peers?** Probably at that moment that I told you about where the guy was talking, about the waist size thing. That was, you know, probably one of the turning points for me, like I’m not as desirable… I can’t fit my hands around my waist…That was probably the strongest instance. (Sandra, late childhood)
Michelle, also at the age of ten, recalled becoming abruptly aware of perceived norms of female sexual attractiveness when a male peer commented on her lack of breasts.

[That] was the first time I ever had any awareness of my body…I didn’t know I was supposed to have breasts…I felt very uncomfortable and exposed. (Michelle, late childhood)

With the exception of Sandra and Michelle, who began to internalize the Male Evaluative Gaze in late childhood, most other participants communicated the onset of their internalization of the Male Evaluative Gaze in early adolescence (11-13 years) in response to pubertal changes and questions surrounding desirability. Specifically, the Male Evaluative Gaze introduced for participants a critical awareness regarding perceived norms of attractiveness and judgments that boys held of girls’ bodies. Consequently, participants described their evaluation of their bodies in relation to the norms and standards held by their male peers, causing them to feel uncomfortable in their bodies at the time.

It was kind of shocking at the beginning [seeing] that boys were already into girls and chasing after girls…I felt very scared, but about my body, I noticed that boys tended to like me so I said, ‘okay, we’re safe.’ I started to cover up and I was not that carefree anymore. I never felt observed [before] but now I felt like everybody was looking at me…I felt very embarrassed, so I was covering myself and feeling that I had to be careful.

(Leena, early adolescence)

I was very curious about [boys] but they didn’t like me. They liked the other girls, and that had a big impact on me. ‘What is it about these other girls that the guys like, that I don’t
have?’…That really upset me…It made me feel uncomfortable in my body. (Michelle, early adolescence)

As participants transitioned into middle adolescence (14-16 years), the internalization of the Male Evaluative Gaze appeared to heighten in focus and intensity within most peer environments, particularly as participants described their desire to attract male peers. Further, as the Male Evaluative Gaze became more pronounced during this time, it was shown to accentuate participants’ preoccupation with conforming to perceived norms of attractiveness. For instance, Sandra and Leena each described their internalized pressure to attend more carefully to their appearances in order to attract male peers at the time.

You’d spend more time in front of the mirror in the morning before going to school because you knew there were going to be boys there…and you’d want to look good. (Sandra, middle adolescence)

My first boyfriend was very into skinny girls so I tried to please him. I felt I should be even skinnier. So I started dieting and that’s when I became, ‘oh food, food, food!’ Food could be another way to get skinny! (Leena, middle adolescence)

Additionally, in middle adolescence, most participants also described a greater tendency to evaluate their bodies and appearances in reference to other female peers who were already dating and/or who had attracted male peers, contributing to feelings of discomfort and/or shame in their bodies.
They all either had boyfriends, or were meeting them at the time, and I was the odd one out…The one guy that I had a crush on didn’t like me back, so I didn’t feel as good [about] myself then. (Jen, middle adolescence)

There was a change in the way girls started acting then as they started dating boys…[they] would start dressing a certain way. Do you remember how you felt in your body then? I remember, sort of, a tad of jealousy there, like I want to be like that. (Lisa, middle adolescence)

Further, as highlighted in chapter three, in relation to the impact of ethnocultural differences on heightened self-surveillance, participants who appeared physically different than their female peers on the basis of their ethnicity in middle adolescence, endorsed feelings of discomfort and/or shame in their bodies as they described evaluating their sexual attractiveness and desirability in relation to the (lack of) attention they received from male peers at the time. For instance, Paige, who is of mixed East Asian and European background and attended a predominantly Caucasian high school, described harsh self-judgments in relation to her female peers at who began dating.

I realized during that time that all of my friends had boyfriends and I didn’t…And I remember thinking that I’m so different looking from these other girls. I’m not pretty.

(Paige, middle adolescence)

Sandra, who is of Southeast Asian background and who grew up in a predominantly Caucasian peer environment, similarly reflected on self-judgments in relation to the ‘White Ideal.’
Just feeling not as attractive the girls with the blue eyes and blonde hair… Especially as they started dating, it became more apparent. (Sandra, middle adolescence)

Moreover, two participants described how shame and discomfort in their bodies in relation to the Male Evaluative Gaze during middle to late adolescence, resulted in a significant disruption in their sexual desire at the time. For Michelle, her intense preoccupation with thinness during adolescence significantly impacted how she felt being intimate with others.

I got my first boyfriend in grade nine and I felt very uncomfortable in my body. I knew what I was supposed to do [sexually], but I just didn’t want to be touched. I didn’t want anyone to hug me. It was very confusing…I started wearing very baggy clothes because I felt fat…I knew what was supposed to happen, but I struggled with just not wanting to be touched. (Michelle, middle adolescence)

For Zoe, who presently identifies as bisexual, disconnection from desire originated from the conflict she faced at the time in understanding her sexual orientation and perceived norms of female sexual attractiveness.

After [being intimate] I would feel weird and bad, and be like, no this isn’t what I want. We can’t do this….It really bothered me, that I often got intense stomach aches and felt sad and anxious after being intimate…So we’d break up every week or two or three and then we’d get back together. I was a mess and we told everyone we weren’t dating, we were just friends and it was one of those really mixed up, non-defined messy teenage situations…I felt a lot of conflict and confusion over my sexual orientation…I wasn’t very feminine but he was unequivocally adoring towards me…and it was all just very confusing (Zoe, middle-late adolescence)
As participants described entering adulthood, internalized pressures associated with the Male Evaluative Gaze continued to dominate their social environments and promote their external evaluation of their bodies. Similar to adolescence, most participants in young adulthood and beyond expressed the importance of their male peers’ opinions of their bodies on their overall self-worth in relation to the attention, or lack thereof, they received from men at the time. For instance, for some participants, like Michelle and Mary, positive attention they received from male peers at the time significantly enhanced their feelings of self-worth.

Everyone wanted to date me or fool around with me or sleep with me and I loved that. I felt really special…All my friends were guys…I needed someone to focus on my body and the girls weren’t going to do that in the same way I needed it from the guys at that time. Whatever void I needed filled, the guys were able to do that for me and focus on my body in a way that the girls wouldn’t. I loved when [they] grabbed me. I loved when they touched me…I wanted them to focus on my body…that’s how I was defining myself at that time. (Michelle, young adulthood)

I always wanted to be thin because I knew that would get me more attention, more liked to the guys…My whole life I never really thought that boys were interested in me so when I did eventually have a boyfriend I guess made it me feel better…He was probably the biggest influence in how I saw myself at the time. (Mary, adulthood)

Whereas for other participants, like Hillary, Layla and Zoe, the lack of attention they received from men contributed to feelings of discomfort and/or shame in their bodies, often reinforcing their preoccupation with adherence to norms and ideals for thinness.
My guy friend would make some pretty critical remarks about me and my appearance. I remember once him commenting on women he found sexually attractive and who he wanted to sleep with, and then said "But don't worry Zoe, I'll never ever want to sleep with you, you won't have to worry about that," and roared with laughter. That affected me and how I felt about my body. It really hurt. (Zoe, adulthood)

I tried to not believe what my parents said about not being able to have a boyfriend if you’re overweight, but the problem was is that it was true. I did go out on dates, a lot of first dates, but no second dates and so when my husband says to me now, “your parents are wrong, don’t listen to them.” Yeah, you don’t want to believe them but they were right. (Hillary, young adulthood)

When I went to university I noticed that all the girls who had the really handsome boyfriends were the girls with the perfect bodies, and so I started to wish I was even thinner. So I started going to the gym a lot to lose weight. (Layla, young adulthood)

Further, for the majority of women interviewed, conforming to ideals for thinness in adulthood, served to perpetuate a negative cycle, whereby the attention they received from male peers served to reinforce the importance of sustaining thinness and adhering to ideals of female attractiveness.

I felt that if this person thinks I look good enough to be with him it means I must look good. So I took my queues about my body from other people. And all these guys wanted me. I was very skinny and I had this new confidence in my body that I’d never had before…I remember thinking I feel skinnier now than I did thirty pounds lighter…I had
this new found confidence that I was hot shit because all these guys wanted me. (Michelle, young adulthood)

I had guy friends who hit on me and who would ask me out and that made me feel better about myself…it made feel more attractive. It made me feel that my weight loss was helping in this. (Sandra, young adulthood)

Additionally, two participants revealed how the Male Evaluative Gaze promoted disconnect from their desire in relation to the norms and ideals of sexuality and female sexual attractiveness promoted within their peer environments. For both participants, the intense preoccupation with adhering to standards of female attractiveness fueled confusion with regards to their perceived sexual desirability in relation to how they dressed or behaved in social contexts. For instance, Layla, who is of Middle Eastern background, described the need to “prove” to her North American peers that she subscribed to similar norms of female sexual attractiveness by wearing clothing that resulted in her feeling uncomfortable in her body.

I felt like I wanted to wear more revealing things to prove [to them] that I wasn’t a prude. I wore things that I wouldn’t normally have worn with friends. It was quite revealing for me…I was so uncomfortable in my body and unsure of what I wanted to do. (Layla, young adulthood)

For Michelle, the need for attention from her male peers fuelled her engagement in sexual activities, which resulted in her feeling ashamed, “dirty,” and “exposed” in her body.

I started being very promiscuous and wanting people to constantly be looking at my body. I would leave those situations after I had slept with someone and I would go home and cry
and feel dirty and feel ‘this is my body, I only have one body, why am I doing this to myself?’ ... It made me feel so bad about myself, so bad about my body, and so exposed, but I craved it at the same time. (Michelle, young adulthood)

Lastly, four of the participants in adulthood (Lisa, Zoe, Sandra and Paige) each revealed how ethnocultural differences and cultural transitions accentuated the power of the Male Evaluative Gaze and feelings of shame and/or discomfort in their bodies, particularly in relation to internalized norms of female attractiveness. For instance, Lisa, who is of East Asian background, and Zoe, who is of European background, each commented on the impact of internalized pressures of female attractiveness while recently travelling in Asia.

The boy that I’m dating now is Asian. When I first dated him I felt insecure. In Asia, for some reason, I feel below average in appearance. I think because there are so many Asians and there’s a greater emphasis on beauty among women over there than here. I told him, “I don’t feel that pretty with you,” and of course he reassured me, but I mean it does cross my mind that I need to match [that standard]. (Lisa, adulthood)

When I worked in Asia my [male friends] really found my lack of femininity off-putting, and things like hairy legs. I would definitely wear long pants. I wouldn’t feel comfortable otherwise because it would be seen as so ‘out there.’ I like the way I look. I feel comfortable, but in Asia I felt like there were parts of me that weren’t understood and weren’t seen as attractive in relation to the women there. (Zoe, adulthood)

On the other hand, Sandra and Paige, who are both of East Asian background, described receiving explicit message from male peers regarding cultural stereotypes of sexual desirability, which resulted in feelings of discomfort in their bodies within the context of their friends and peers.
Some guys are actually kind of obsessed with girls who are mixed or full Asian. [My guy friends] would say, “oh she’s hot because she’s exotic,” and I really felt like I had to live up to that a little bit. (Paige, young adulthood)

I wonder if I was objectified as the ‘Asian female exotic,’ being different, or more desirable for whatever reasons [by men]...It came up when I was hanging out with a group of friends recently, all of whom were White. They were mostly [my husband’s] friends at that point, and someone said about my husband that he loves Asian porn. And suddenly there was a silence at the table, and as a group of friends, we are pretty open with each other, but at that moment, there was a sudden consciousness that, ‘whoops, there’s an Asian woman at this table.’ And I had been unconscious of that...but there was some kind of objectification there, and it was really uncomfortable. (Sandra, adulthood)

Sexual Harassment

Representing the second theme demonstrated to promote norms and ideals of sexuality were instances of Sexual Harassment described by three participants about their peer environment. Though reported by participants to a far lesser degree than the Male Evaluative Gaze, the narratives suggested that Sexual Harassment had a similar adverse impact on participants’ internalized discomfort and/or shame in their bodies, and their subsequent preoccupation with adherence to norms and ideals associated with sexuality.

Apart from Layla, who recalled episodes of Sexual Harassment as early as middle childhood, whereby boys frequently lifted girls’ skirts to expose their underwear, no other participants communicated instances of Sexual Harassment until the cusp of early adolescence.
For instance, two participants (Anna and Michelle) described episodes of Sexual Harassment, in which male peers either physically or verbally harassed girls’ bodies.

I was in grade seven when the boys would start snapping the popular girls’ bra straps. I just remember that being so wrong, and feeling glad at that time that I was not one of them. It made me feel quite uncomfortable. (Anna, early adolescence)

He showed me a porn magazine and told me that that’s what I’m going to look like one day and I got really mad…that really had an impact on me; I’d never seen anything like that before…It just sort of felt like everything was changing really fast and it [felt] bad…I felt objectified in a way. (Michelle, early adolescence)

In the context of the present study Sexual Harassment was not discussed by any of the participants throughout middle to late adolescence, with the exception of Michelle, who described being labeled by her female peers at the time. Significantly, Michelle was the only participant to acknowledge Sexual Harassment instigated by female peers.

Girls called me a slut, and probably deservedly. Obviously it’s a disgusting thing to call people and you should never use it, but I slept with peoples’ boyfriends. [It made me] feel terrible, disgusting, dirty, ashamed of my body. It was always a lot of conflict back and forth in my head, feeling great about my body and really confident that everyone wanted me, and at the same time that was the reason I felt so dirty and disgusting. (Michelle, late adolescence)
As highlighted earlier, as a result of the shame and discomfort Michelle felt in her body at the time, she continued to struggle with a preoccupation to remain thin, as well as feeling disconnected from her sexual desire.

Further, none of the participants reported instances of Sexual Harassment instigated by peers in adulthood.

Summary of Promoting Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Sexuality

Under the first category of Promoting Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Sexuality, two themes emerged: i) the Male Evaluative Gaze, and ii) Sexual Harassment. These two main themes were demonstrated to result in feelings of shame and discomfort in participants’ bodies, beginning for most interviewed women in early adolescence, which subsequently influenced their preoccupation with adherence to norms and ideals associated with female physical attractiveness, and for a few women, disconnection from their desire.

Beginning with the first of these themes, participants’ narratives suggested that male peers played a significant role in promoting participants’ tendency to view their bodies from an external perspective, ultimately fuelling feelings of discomfort and shame in relation to norms and ideals associated with female attractiveness. With the exception of two participants, the Male Evaluative Gaze theme emerged predominantly in early adolescence (11-13 years) around the onset of puberty; at that time participants developed a critical awareness of the perceived norms and ideals for female attractiveness. Strengthening considerably throughout middle to late adolescence (14-19 years), references to the Male Evaluative Gaze were associated with body shame and discomfort and an intense preoccupation with conforming to perceived norms of attractiveness. For two participants, this preoccupation also coincided with their disconnection from desire. Further, in adulthood, internalized pressures associated with the Male Evaluative Gaze continued to dominate the majority of participants’ peer environments, reinforcing the importance of
attaining and sustaining thinness, as well as disrupting a few participants’ connection with their desire. Further, participants referred to ethnocultural differences and cultural stereotypes as important factors that shaped their perceptions of their bodies in relation to perceived standards of attractiveness held by men.

Representing the second theme demonstrated to promote participants’ norms and ideals of female sexuality, experiences of Sexual Harassment within the peer domain were discussed by a significantly smaller number of the interviewed women. In particular, one participant recalled an episode of Sexual Harassment in middle childhood, while two participants reported described episodes of Sexual Harassment, taking the form of physical or verbal harassment by peers in early to middle adolescence.

**Challenging Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Sexuality**

The second category under the core category of Sexuality outlines the peer processes demonstrated to challenge participants’ adherence to norms and ideals associated with sexuality; it includes the theme of Freedom from the Male Gaze and Pressures Associated with Sexuality. Specifically, this theme emerged in relation to the two sub-themes of: i) the Absence of the Male Evaluative Gaze; and ii) Relationships that Challenge Pressures Associated with Sexuality (see Figure 23).

Figure 23. Peer Process Theme and Sub-themes Pertaining to Challenging Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Sexuality
Freedom from the Male Gaze and Pressures Associated with Sexuality

Based on the interviews, each of these two sub-themes were demonstrated to contribute to participants’ comfort in their bodies, particularly in childhood in relation to the Absence of the Male Evaluative Gaze. Further, into young adulthood and beyond, the comfort some participants acquired in their bodies and appearances through Relationships that Challenged Pressures Associated with Sexuality, was shown to support women’s connection with their desire (see Figure 24).

Figure 24. Internalized Body Experiences Related to Freedom from Male Gaze and Pressures of Sexuality

Absence of the Male Evaluative Gaze

Representing the first sub-theme related to the Freedom from the Male Gaze and Pressures of Sexuality was the general Absence of the Male Evaluative Gaze which occurred exclusively in early to late childhood (3-10 years). Significantly, with the exception of two participants, Michelle and Sandra, who earlier described receiving comments from male peers about perceived norms of female attractiveness in late childhood, none of the women interviewed reported the presence of the Male Evaluative Gaze prior to early adolescence. Further, several participants communicated the inherent freedom and comfort to dress and behave according to their desire as a result of the Absence of the Male Evaluative Gaze at the time.

We weren’t at the stage yet where girls talked about clothes and what they ate and all that; that came later. It was pretty accepting in childhood. I think there was this idea that you’re still a child and you’re still kind of covered up, like you don’t wear anything that is too
low cut in your chest and you can have the shorter shorts and no guy is looking at your legs as a sexual object. I never felt like a sexual object in childhood. I mean that came later. And that was really free. (Jen, early-late childhood)

It was very comfortable and carefree, even with the boys...I didn’t feel judged by them...I was feeling very comfortable [with my body]...I could run and play however I felt. (Leena, early-middle childhood)

*Relationships that Challenge Pressures Associated with Sexuality*

Only in adulthood did four of the women speak about relationships with peers and/or partners who challenged the pervasive male evaluative gaze and pressures associated with sexuality, ultimately promoting greater comfort in their bodies. In particular, three participants (Jen, Michelle and Lisa) cited relationships with gay male friends who supported their freedom from pressures associated with sexuality and norms for sexual attractiveness. Specifically, Jen who presently identifies as gay, described her introduction to the gay social scene, in which she felt significantly more comfortable around men who were not objectifying her body in the way she had grown accustomed to in adolescence.

A lot of my friends are gay guys, so they’re not looking at me in a sexual manner. There’s freedom from that sexual pressure. Cause you can hug them and it’s not a big deal. And they just understand that nothing’s going to happen, but you can have fun and flirt and feel good about yourself. I think that was one of the nicest things when I became introduced to the gay scene...There’s a whole other dynamic...they’re not judging you, they don’t want in your pants...They make me feel fantastic. And I can go through a period where if I’m not the weight that I want to be, and that’s okay. (Jen, adulthood)
Similarly, Michelle and Lisa, who identify as heterosexual, each reported inherent comfort in their bodies in the context of close friendships with gay men. For each of these participants, including Jen, friendships with gay men, provided temporary relief from the male gaze and pressures associated with sexuality. Specifically, for Michelle, it contributed to feeling less objectified in her body.

I just felt comfortable with him. My focus wasn’t even on my body, and with him I was able to open up… didn’t feel like I needed to impress him and try and get him to sleep with me. I didn’t know he was gay at the time. There was just something about him, and we were just best friends. We were siblings almost and there was no pressure there. I never felt like he was looking at me. (Michelle, young adulthood)

For Lisa, it contributed to feeling more comfortable expressing her feelings and desires.

I guess I can be the most open with him and tell him anything about everything. Do you feel you can be more open with him than your girlfriends? Yeah, there’s less judgment. When I tell him stuff I’m not really worried about him saying anything. And how does that make you feel in your body when you’re with him versus when you’re with some of your other girlfriends? Oh definitely more free. I can just say anything that comes to my mind, whereas with [my girlfriends] I have be careful because they don’t open up as much to me, so I don’t know what my limitations are. I have to watch what I say and be more cautious. With him I can just be very loud and open. With them I need to be a bit more reserved if I talk about something sexual. With a gay best friend anything kind of goes. (Lisa, young adulthood)
Further, two participants highlighted relationships with partners in adulthood that have challenged pressures associated with sexuality and female desirability, providing them with greater comfort in their bodies, and freedom to connect with their desire. For Zoe, who identifies as bisexual, being in an intimate relationship with a woman challenged many feminine norms for appearance and perceived sexual attractiveness she previously held, allowing her greater comfort to express her desire.

I highly recommend same sex relationships because you really understand then what the opposite sex is dealing with as well. In terms of being with someone physically, women aren’t hung up on things that guys are hung up on, like certain areas being clean shaven or certain smells or certain things about a female body; they’re not going to repulse a woman, like menstruation, the way they might a man, because you’re a woman too. So in that sense it felt even more comfortable to be with a woman. (Zoe, adulthood)

Whereas for Michelle, starting a relationship with her husband, challenged many of her preconceived notions of female sexual desirability, fostering a new comfort and respect in her body, and connection with her sexual desire.

When I met my husband, after our third date I tried to advance things sexually and he had no interest. Normally I would have taken that as like, ‘oh my God what have I done wrong? What’s wrong with me? I’m ugly. My body’s wrong.’ But I was able to tell myself that this is a normal relationship perhaps. He doesn’t want to just be with [me] for [my] body, so this was a totally new experience for me. I had to think of something else to do [Laugh] because someone wanted to be with me for something other than that. So I had to be more than just my body at that point. I had used my body as my identity for so many
years, so my husband, really, without knowing it, helped me figure out who I was without being my body, and identifying myself that way. That was very significant. (Michelle, adulthood)

Summary of Challenging Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Sexuality

Under the second category of Challenging Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Sexuality, Freedom from the Male Gaze and Pressures Associated with Sexuality emerged as the main theme, under which the two sub-themes of Absence of the Male Evaluative Gaze, and Relationships that Challenge Pressures Associated with Sexuality, were derived. These two sub-themes were associated with feelings of comfort in participants’ bodies, and for some, connection with their desire.

Beginning with the first of these sub-themes, the Absence of the Male Evaluative Gaze occurred exclusively in childhood (3-9 years). With the exception of two participants, none of the women interviewed conveyed the presence of the Male Evaluative Gaze prior to early adolescence. Further, several participants communicated the freedom to live and move in their bodies prior to the age of 10 in absence of the male gaze.

In contrast to the Absence of the Male Evaluative Gaze, the second sub-theme of Relationships that Challenge Pressures Associated with Sexuality was communicated exclusively by four of the participants in adulthood. In particular, three participants cited relationships with gay male friends who contributed to a sense of temporary freedom from pressures associated with sexuality and the male gaze. Further, two participants highlighted intimate relationships with partners who challenged norms for female sexual desirability, and contributed to their comfort in their bodies and ability to connect with their sexual desire.

Activities, Interests, and/or Educational Pursuits
The following section explores the third core category under the domain of *Idealized Ways of Inhabiting the Body as a Girl and Woman*. Specifically, this section uncovers several peer processes that served to promote and challenge some of the dominant norms, ideals and expectations pertaining to participants’ engagement in Activities, Interests, and/or Educational Pursuits.

*Promoting Norms and Ideals Associated with Engagement in Activities, Interests and/or Educational Pursuits*

All participants described peer processes that served to promote some of the dominant norms, ideals and expectations associated with girls’ and women’s involvement in activities, interests and/or educational pursuits. In particular, these norms and ideals surfaced predominantly in relation to the themes of: i) Gender Segregation; ii) Passivity; and iii) Activity for Weight Control (see Figure 25).

Figure 25. Peer Processes Themes Promoting Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Girls’ and Women’s Engagement in Activities, Interests and/or Educational Pursuits

Based on the interviews, gendered norms regarding the composition of peer groups and the types of activities girls and boys are expected to engage in, appeared to segregate most participants around the time of late childhood and throughout adolescence. Together with this segregation emerged a heightened focus on appearances within many of the activities and pastimes participants reported engaging in with their friends throughout early to late adolescence.
Accompanying physical changes associated with puberty, this heightened focus on appearances, and often times, objectification of the body during participation in activities, promoted participants’ discomfort and self-consciousness in their bodies, ultimately causing many to refrain from participating in activities previously enjoyed with their friends. Further, as participation in these activities was demonstrated to decrease, participation in activities for the purposes of weight control/loss, was demonstrated to increase (see Figure 26).

Figure 26. Internalized Body Experiences Related to Norms and Ideals Associated with Girls’ and Women’s Engagement in Activities, Interests and Educational Pursuits

Gender Segregation

With respect to the nature and composition of peer groups and activities, Gender Segregation was a theme referenced by almost all participants, beginning in middle to late childhood (6-10 years), and intensifying in early adolescence (11-13 years). Prior to this time, most interviewed women discussed the mixed composition of their peer groups.

Everybody always mixed together…boys, girls…it was very relaxed back then. (Sarah, early childhood)

At that young age my [peer group] was mixed, and the schoolyard was mixed…playing with both boys and girls. (Lisa, early childhood)
However, beginning in middle to late childhood, twelve of the fourteen participants described the norm of gender-divided activities with their peers, as highlighted by Zoe and Jen.

There were no little boys in my world then…it was all little girls. I’d never thought about it. It wasn’t that there were boys that I chose not to play with. It was just the girls played with the girls, so that’s what I did. (Zoe, middle-late childhood)

All the girls would sit on one side of the playground or stand and just talk. I was like, ‘why aren’t you running around and playing? This is our free time where we don’t have to sit at our desks!’ (Jen, middle-late childhood)

Accompanying this Gender Segregation, most participants communicated inherent differences in the nature of activities and pastimes girls and boys engaged in throughout middle to late childhood. Frequently noted were participants’ desire to engage in the same activities boys participated in, but refraining to do so because it challenged gendered norms and expectations for play.

The boys definitely got dirty more often. They didn’t mind just laying around in mud or whatever. The girls would play like hopscotch or skip rope…Back then boys stayed with boys and girls stayed with girls. There wasn’t really much inter-mixing. Did you ever want to play with the boys? Ya, though I clearly liked my hopscotch and I was a definite girly-girl, but the one time I did play with a boy it felt weird. It was fun, but at the same time I thought girls aren’t supposed to play with boys. I did once but then I decided this can’t be a long-term thing cause it’s just weird. (Anna, middle childhood)
In the schoolyard girls played hopscotch or four squares…the boys would play soccer-baseball; that was huge at the time. I loved soccer-baseball, but not a lot of girls wanted to play…And the problem was that everyone always thought when you hung out with a boy its cause you liked them and that wasn’t the case. I was always athletic, I liked sports. But I got taunted for that. (Hillary, late childhood)

The transition into early adolescence (11-13 years) for most interviewed women intensified the Gender Segregation of many peer groups.

Around what I consider my cusp of puberty period to be, that’s when I started hanging out with girls exclusively…that’s just the way it was. (Sandra, early adolescence)

Pretty much from then on [my friends] were pretty much all girls I would say….It was just the way it happened I guess. (Simone, early adolescence)

With the exception of two participants (Lisa and Ellie), throughout middle to late adolescence (14-19 years) peer groups continued to remain segregated by gender.

My closest friends then, they were predominantly female. (Mary, middle-late adolescence)

Significantly, five of the interviewed women (Jen, Sandra, Sarah, Leena, and Layla) reported attending all-girls’ schools throughout the time, which limited their contact with male peers.

We’d mostly hang out with the girls. I mean I did talk to guys. I didn’t have a problem talking to [them], but we’d mostly hang out with the girls…Being at an all-girls school it was segregated like that. (Sarah, middle adolescence)
Going to an all-girls school, I mean I could still be friends with boys, but I would hang out mostly with the girls…I guess it changed then. It kind of felt like it’s supposed to be on TV, where you have your little clique of girls (Jen, middle-late adolescence).

However, while the majority of interviewed women retained close female friendships throughout adulthood, the strict gendered composition of many participants’ peer groupings appeared to lessen in adulthood as more women described spending time within mixed gendered groups and activities.

I still hung out with mostly the girls although I started having a couple of guy friends beginning in university, and now, I mean, its very diverse…my main group are the people I play sports with, my co-ed rec softball team…they’re just really fun to hang out with. (Sandra, adulthood)

I started becoming friends with more guys…and they’re really fun to be around! We go to the club and dance all together. Its great. (Jen, adulthood)

Passivity

Accompanying the frequent Gender Segregation of peer groupings throughout adolescence, participants described heightened Passivity in relation to decreasing, or not engaging altogether, in physical activity; which, for the majority of participants represented a significant shift from childhood to adolescence. As will be explored in the following section in relation to peer processes that challenged norms and ideals associated with participants’ engagement and pursuit of activities and interests, most participants recalled highly active childhoods, involving considerable freedom in their bodies.
Ball games, skipping around…riding our bikes, being outside…I felt great. (Zoe, middle childhood)

I was very athletic…we were always outside skating, doing whatever activities were appropriate for the season. (Hillary, middle-late childhood)

However, as exclusively female friendship groups intensified in early adolescence, many participants described their engagement in more passive and traditionally female-oriented activities, such as playing indoors with dolls, or experimenting with make-up and clothing, as highlighted by Sandra, Sarah and Ellie.

We did a lot of just going over to friends’ houses and playing with Barbie dolls. I see it now. [Laugh] You know, moving from sticks and leaves to playing with Barbie dolls, it’s a pretty big difference. And then again you’re looking at Barbie dolls and you’re thinking, how nice it would be to have a body like that. (Sandra, early adolescence)

Me and my friends we’d always be swapping clothing. We liked to always keep it fresh and keep it new and keep it interesting so we’d give each other makeovers or swap clothes…We all wanted to look good at the time, and there was that emphasis on clothing and appearance. (Sarah, early adolescence)

At that age a lot of the activities that we’d do together as girlfriends would be going shopping every Saturday. We would get the bus into the next town and go around the shopping mall and that was a regular thing that we did. Really what else did we do?! I guess it was just things like shopping and make-up and clothes and going and trying on
clothes in different places. We were more interested in that kind of thing as opposed to sports at that point. (Ellie, early-middle adolescence)

As highlighted across all three examples above, the more passive activities which participants described engaging in during early to middle adolescence also coincided with a greater focus on their physical appearances.

Further, accompanying the heightened emphasis on physical appearances and the onset of physical changes associated with puberty during early to middle adolescence, many participants also described the objectification of their bodies during various activities, ultimately fuelling their desire to reduce or end their engagement in physical activities previously enjoyed with peers. Specifically, nine of the fourteen women interviewed described the objectification of their bodies during martial arts, dance, swimming and/or gym class, contributing to discomfort and self-consciousness in their bodies throughout adolescence.

In Tai Kwon Do we had to weigh-in…As a girl at that age it doesn’t really feel great. And when we were training, we’d wear long sleeves under our uniforms so we’d sweat more and lose more weight. I remember kind of thinking, whoa, I was having fun with this but it’s becoming a bit too intense. It made me more aware of the importance of being slim in that context, and maybe that’s when I first became aware of the importance of slimness in general. (Paige, early adolescence)

I started to feel self-conscious in activities where your weight comes into play. I was really self-conscious around my peers in swim class then, especially given that everybody changed in front of everyone else…I would go into the washroom and change. I felt
evaluated…Everyone is checking everybody out, you know, picking me apart. I felt judged. (Layla, early-middle adolescence)

Definitely with swimming, because I was the heaviest girl in the class and I started to notice it cause we all had to be in swimsuits and I was really, really self-conscious…I just felt real uncomfortable…The swimming definitely had an effect on me…In that class we were allowed to wear a t-shirt on top of the bathing suit. I remember that I was only like one of two or three who wore the t-shirt, but I always wore the t-shirt even though it made swimming really difficult. Whenever I’d go in the water my t-shirt would float up and I was constantly battling this, it was like having to battle a balloon to try and swim but I didn’t care. (Anna, early-middle adolescence)

The desire to retain comfort in one’s body by choosing to wear clothing that concealed the body from objectification, as described by Anna previously, was a theme that emerged in five of the fourteen women’s interviews. Being prohibited to wear alternative clothing ultimately resulted in all five of these women stopping their participation in activities they previously enjoyed with their peers in early to middle adolescence, as explained by Ellie and Michelle.

I noticed it most in ballet class because you’re wearing your tights and leotard, and you begin to feel very self-conscious in front of other people… We were all more aware of our bodies then, and we felt uncomfortable and self-conscious in what we were wearing and wanted to try and cover up…We no longer wanted to wear our proper ballet outfit; we would wear like long baggy t-shirts. And our ballet teacher would get so annoyed with us and tell us that we had to dress properly for class…Many of us stopped not long after that. (Ellie, early adolescence)
I stopped dancing. I was too uncomfortable. I said it was because the class was too hard but I stopped dancing because they wanted me to take off my shirt and I wouldn’t. I wasn’t allowed to wear a t-shirt over my uniform, and so that became an issue with dance. I’d been dancing since I was three, so that was huge. I was too uncomfortable to dance anymore... I couldn’t take it. I think I convinced myself that I didn’t want to do it anymore. I sort of rationalized it that way with myself, that I wasn’t interested anymore anyway…But it was sad. I still miss dancing. I used to do it because it was fun and the fun was gone. (Michelle, middle adolescence)

Other contributors to participants’ reduced engagement in physical activity during adolescence included their geographical location and/or lack of finances. In particular, four participants (Ellie, Simone, Sandra, Jen) described their reduced ability to participate in organized sports or other physical activities with friends because of the lack of resources available to them at the time.

Living in a small town we were kind of limited in what activities we could do…there wasn’t much around us. (Ellie, middle adolescence)

Things like organized school sports were probably more in the realm of the wealthier schools. (Simone, early adolescence)

In addition to physical passivity, three participants (Lisa, Ellie, Mary) in adolescence also acknowledged Passivity in relation to their reduced participation in academic classes. Similar to the physical passivity noted throughout adolescence, these participants described restricting their
participation in class as a result of heightened self-consciousness, discomfort and fear of judgment from the peers, as articulated by Lisa and Ellie.

I was afraid to participate in those classes where the other people who were really smart were in. I just tried to stay quiet, which is, you know, not how you should be at all. (Lisa, early adolescence)

Having to give presentations in front of the class, things like that made me quite uncomfortable. It felt like everybody was staring at me, and I didn’t like to be the center of attention, so I guess I was the kind of person who would not be very loud in class or not put their hand up. I would do my work, but I would keep to myself. I felt uncomfortable around everyone who I felt was staring. (Ellie, middle-late adolescence)

Although participants did not explicitly communicate the theme of Passivity in young adulthood or beyond, it is significant to note that of all the participants who decreased or ended their involvement in various physical activities and team sports throughout adolescence, only two at the time of the interview (Sandra and Hillary) reported continuing their participation in recreational team sports in adulthood.

Activity for Weight Control

Contrary to the two previous themes, the last theme of Activity for Weight Control emerged predominantly in young adulthood and beyond. Specifically, while absent throughout childhood, as participants described becoming increasingly uncomfortable in their bodies throughout early to middle adolescence, and subsequently restricting their participation in recreational activities previously enjoyed with friends and peers, activities for the purposes of weight control began to emerge as a new area of interest within some female friendship groups.
We would have this annual trip to a swimming pool at a country club. I knew I would be wearing a bathing suit so I started exercising to lose weight. It was something that all us girls started to do at the time. (Leena, early-middle adolescence)

My girlfriends and I, we wanted to get ‘healthy,’ so we joined a gym together. We would do step class or cardio together…That was the first time I remember working out. (Paige, middle adolescence)

As discussed earlier in the chapter, attempts to become healthy often disguised participants’ desire to control their body in and attempt to attain or sustain thinness. While communicated by a few participants in middle to late adolescence, exercising for weight control evolved into an increasingly popular activity and area of interest among female friends in young adulthood and beyond. Specifically, over half of the women interviewed reported regularly attending fitness facilities and “working out” with friends for the purposes of attaining or sustaining weight loss in adulthood, as described by Ellie, Sandra and Mary.

I joined a gym during my first year at university and I would go there with my girlfriends and work out and I think that was the first time I’d ever joined a gym. (Ellie, young adulthood)

We joined a gym together and we were working out three, four times a week, and it made me feel good about myself. I felt really fit. I was still conscious of my body, like you know, fat rolls in my belly…but it felt good, and was something that we’d just do together. (Sandra, young adulthood)
I went to the gym but it was more because I thought that I had to as opposed to having an actual interest in it. I wanted to be more fit…That was actually a really big deal for me because I’d never been sporty. I had two really good friends at my office who were really sporty and so I came into work one day and said, “I think we should maybe think about running a half-marathon”, and we did. We spent a lot of our time training. (Mary, adulthood)

Further, for many of these women, working out at fitness facilities further served to heighten processes of social comparison, thereby perpetuating discomfort and self-consciousness in their bodies at the time, as highlighted by Paige and Sandra.

When I was in [graduate school], the closest gym was a women’s-only. Worst gym I’ve ever been to…I never really felt comfortable because I go to the gym in track pants, no make-up, hair thrown back. I’m just there to do my thing, whereas I found that a lot of the girls were very done up, they’re working out but kind of looking, they’re kind of checking out who else is there. I hated it. (Paige, adulthood)

I would go to this exercise class at the gym with [her] and, at that point, she’d go to class in just a sports bra and pants, and I just thought she has such a nice belly, like no belly fat or whatever. I could not do that. I always had to wear my workout shirt, covering my belly. (Sandra, young adulthood)

Summary of Promoting Norms and Ideals Associated with Engagement in Activities, Interests and/or Educational Pursuits
Under the first category of Promoting Norms and Ideals Associated with Engagement in Activities, Interests and/or Educational Pursuits, three main themes emerged: i) Gender Segregation; ii) Passivity; and iii) Activity for Weight Control.

Beginning with the first theme of Gender Segregation, gendered norms regarding the composition of peer groups and activities seemed to first segregate some participants around the time of middle to late childhood (6-10 years), intensify in early adolescence (11-13 years), and continue throughout adolescence for most of the women interviewed. In adulthood, however, participants described greater mixed gendered peer groups and activities.

Accompanying the gendered composition of peer groups throughout adolescence was the theme of Passivity, which addressed the decreased engagement in, previously enjoyed, physical activities with friends and peers. Beginning in early adolescence, participants described engaging in more passive types of play that encouraged preoccupation with their physical appearances. In conjunction with the physical changes accompanying puberty, and the objectification of girls’ bodies in recreational activities and sport throughout adolescence, many participants described intense discomfort and self-consciousness in their bodies, fuelling their desire to reduce or terminate their engagement in activities previously enjoyed with their friends and peers. Other contributors to participants’ reduced involvement in physical activity at the time included their geographical location and/or lack of finances preventing them from access to various sports or activities. Significantly, only two participants acknowledged their continued participation in recreational team sports in adulthood. Lastly, in addition to physical passivity, three participants described restricting their participation in academic classes as a result of heightened self-consciousness and discomfort during adolescence.

In contrast to the two previous themes, the last theme of Activity for Weight Control emerged predominantly in young adulthood and beyond (20+ years). As participants described
becoming increasingly uncomfortable in their bodies throughout adolescence, and restricting their participation in recreational activities with friends and peers, activities for the purposes of weight control began to emerge within some female friendship groups. Throughout adulthood, however, over half of the women interviewed reported “working out” at fitness facilities with female friends for the purposes of sustaining or attaining weight loss. Most notably, women described how “working out” served to heighten processes of social comparison, and perpetuate discomfort and self-consciousness in their bodies.

*Challenging Norms and Ideals Associated with Engagement in Activities, Interests and/or Educational Pursuits*

The second category under the final core category of Activities, Interests and/or Educational Pursuits, outlines three main themes that served to challenge dominant norms and ideals associated with participants’ engagement in activities, interests and/or educational pursuits: i) Physical Immersion; ii) Passion; and iii) Ambition (see Figure 27).

![Figure 27](image)

Figure 27. Peer Processes Themes Challenging Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Girls’ and Women’s Engagement in Activities, Interests and Educational Pursuits

As highlighted in chapter three, the absence of an evaluative external gaze within participants’ peer environments in early to middle childhood allowed for considerable freedom in participants’ bodies at the time. Related to their involvement in Activities, Interests and/or Educational Pursuits, the absence of the evaluative external gaze thus afforded many participants in childhood the freedom to play and immerse themselves in physical activities, with no external
consciousness of their appearances. Further, while adolescence represented a time when many participants’ immersion in physical activities was stifled, expressions of passion and ambition were shown to support participants’ immersion in various activities and pursuits, contributing to joy, comfort and/or competence in their bodies (see Figure 28).

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 28.** Internalized Body Experiences Related to Challenging Norms and Ideals Associated with Girls’ and Women’s Engagement in Activities, Interests and Educational Pursuits

**Physical Immersion**

One of the most striking differences noted between childhood and adolescence/adulthood, were participants’ descriptions of Physical Immersion in activities prior to the age of ten. In the absence of the evaluative external gaze throughout this time, all participants described a sense of freedom running around, playing outside and immersing themselves in their physical environment, with little external consciousness of their appearances to interfere with their enjoyment in play with friends and peers.

I remember we’d just run around the neighbourhood and play in the dirt….I was quite unconscious of my body. It was more about having fun, going to ride bikes, looking for insects, that sort of thing…That was before I became conscious that there were looks to be aspired to. (Sandra, early-middle childhood)
In the summer we’d ride bikes, skip, build tents, just a lot of outside. Summer vacations felt like they lasted forever, just being outside in someone’s backyard, laying on the grass and looking at the sky, building a tent and just hanging out in it; just everything felt very easy…I don’t even remember feeling aware of my body. (Paige, early-middle childhood)

I don’t even remember ever thinking about [my body] then. It was just me and my friends. We would bike, run, go swimming. My body was never an issue. (Jen, early-middle childhood)

Reflecting on their Physical Immersion in activities with friends and peers at the time, participants expressed joy, comfort and competence in their bodies.

I would go over to my friends’ houses or we’d be playing in the park. We were never the videogame-type people, like the way it is now….[we were] very active and outdoorsy…I think I felt most comfortable then because we were very active, whether it was running up and down the park trying to chase grasshoppers. And I think that really helped me to have a very positive body image then. (Sarah, early-late childhood)

I remember I felt very athletic at that time. I could run and jump like the boys…my body would go with me wherever I wanted it to; it would be there. So I felt good and comfortable in my body at that time. (Leena, middle-late childhood)

I just loved dancing. It was something I felt really good at. I was able to do the splits in a way that other people couldn’t…I never did dance competitively, it was always recreational, but I felt that other girls looked up to me….I didn’t feel pressure then. I just
really enjoyed it. I really loved dance because of dancing…it was when I felt the best in my body around friends. (Michelle, middle childhood)

As highlighted earlier, entrance into early adolescence significantly stifled participants’ Physical Immersion in activities as a result of objectification, discomfort and self-consciousness of their bodies. Among the few participants who continued to engage in certain physical activities during adolescence, their external consciousness of their bodies distracted from the pure sense of joy and freedom they referenced during their participation in activities throughout childhood.

I’ve always liked sports, but I got to a chance to be a part of the varsity [rugby] team in junior college…I was training and had lost weight, and I recognized through it all, you know, this is good for my body, it makes my body look good, so I kept it up. (Sandra, late adolescence)

I trained twenty hours a week doing karate, so my body was, well, I felt had the best body in my high school because I was just constantly working out…I looked really good. I had muscle and I was thin and, you know, could fit into a pair of jeans and that made me feel better. (Mary, middle adolescence)

I got into Tai Kwon Do, and it wasn’t to lose weight, that wasn’t the sort of purpose, but through it I did lose a lot of weight…so if you look at my grade seven and my grade eight picture, it’s totally different…I definitely remember having to buy new clothes and I got less attention from my peers…I wasn’t targeted like I was when I was heavier. (Paige, early-middle adolescence)
Similarly in adulthood, with the exception of one participant (Zoe), all interviewed women who described their participation in activities with peers, acknowledged the presence of an external consciousness of their body, and the importance of their body physicality to their sense of enjoyment, comfort and/or competence during various activities.

We have these dance parties for women only, about once a year. And when I go to those parties I admit, I feel great in my body…It’s just really nice to dance and to feel like I have a body that helps me do that, that helps me look good. (Layla, adulthood)

I love exercise and working out, but as a part-time trainer there’s always pressure on myself to look a certain way. I’m never going to be a size two, but I can’t, you know, let myself slip cause I still have an image to uphold. (Hillary, adulthood)

Zoe was the only participant, who in adulthood, articulated a similar Physical Immersion referenced by participants in childhood. Significantly, being with friends who modeled their own freedom and comfort in their bodies has supported Zoe in re-connecting to her physical environment and her body, with less external consciousness as she did in childhood.

I’m so happy walking naked along a nude beach now. I mean really, when you can literally and metaphorically shed all your stuff and just walk around, and there are other people on the beach and you just don’t care? That’s very freeing. It’s like homosapiens walking on the planet. When I’m with these friends of mine, in nature, I just feel like one creature among others, which is the way I’d like to feel all the time. I mean if I look in the mirror and I like how I look, that’s a good feeling, but I almost prefer the feeling of just not caring, just being one more creature on the planet. Squirrels don’t care how they look. I want to be like that ideally. (Zoe, adulthood)
Passion

Passion represented a smaller, but nonetheless important theme in the current study. As highlighted previously, while most participants conveyed joy and Passion in the context of their Physical Immersion in activities throughout childhood, adolescence represented a time when Passion was relatively absent from the interviewed women’s narratives. However, in the face of pronounced body consciousness, discomfort, and stifled Physical Immersion, participants’ connection to, and pursuit of their Passions in adolescence and adulthood, was shown to support their immersion in various activities and pursuits, and foster a sense of joy, comfort and competence in their bodies.

Specifically two women in adolescence (Lisa and Leena) communicated their Passion for different activities. Lisa, who was relatively quiet and feared speaking out in the context of her peers, described her Passion for Dragon Boat racing, which allowed her to develop her voice and feel more comfortable and confident in the context of her peers.

I really loved Dragon Boat racing, and I think that also changed me because it’s a very loud sport, requiring a lot of shouting, whereas I was more quiet before. It definitely helped build up my confidence around others…to speak up more and not be so afraid…it was one of the best parts of high school participating in that. (Lisa, middle-late adolescence)

Further, Leena’s Passion for singing, provided her with temporary relief from the pervasive appearance-related pressures that dominated her peer environment in early to late adolescence, and made it difficult for her live comfortably in her body. Significantly, choir practice was the
only peer domain in which Leena was able to feel comfortable in her body throughout adolescence.

The only place I didn’t worry about my body was when I was singing in the choir with my friends. It was weird, I guess I didn’t even think about that. I was always comfortable in those instances. I absolutely loved singing; I still do…It took me away from all of that other stuff. (Leena, middle-late adolescence).

In adulthood, three women (Sandra, Sarah, Jen) described re-connecting or discovering Passions with new friends or peer groups. Pursuing their Passion supported these women in developing joy, comfort and competence in their bodies, with less external consciousness of their appearances. For instance, Sandra described her involvement in a new adult recreational sports team.

When I’m out with my sports team I feel comfortable [in my] body. Just like, I’m here, I’m happy. It helps give me peace with my body right now…I like the way playing sports every week has made my body feel…I feel really good that I’ve been out using my body. It’s something that I just absolutely love. (Sandra, adulthood)

Sarah and Jen, who were each too uncomfortable in their bodies to participate in sports and other physical activities in the context of their peers during adolescence, described discovering their Passion for dance in adulthood. For both women, dancing has considerably strengthened their sense of freedom, joy and overall comfort in their bodies.

I feel great in [my body] when I’m out dancing with my friends. I’m usually the last one to get off the dance floor now. I just love dancing! Honestly, I don’t even feel self-
conscious of my body when I’m dancing now. When it’s something you love to do, it feels good. I’m just enjoying the music, it’s a good feeling. (Sarah, adulthood)

I discovered burlesque with a new group of women and that really made me love my body…I absolutely love [dancing] now! And it’s been really instrumental in me just loving myself…It showed me to embrace my body. I can feel comfortable dancing with these other women, and it’s just a really fun, freeing time. (Jen, adulthood)

**Ambition**

Particularly in relation to pursuing educational and/or career-related goals, Ambition was an important theme discussed by over half of the women interviewed, and one that was highly connected to the influence of friends and peers. Specifically, shared expressions of Ambitions were demonstrated to help women distance from appearance-related pressures in their peer environment, and support greater comfort and competence in their bodies. Of the fourteen participants interviewed, Lisa was the only woman who described Ambition in the context of her friends and peers throughout the period of childhood.

I see now that my friends who accomplished things as adults are the ones that I was friends with growing up…So at a young age I recognized these are the people who are similar-minded, you know, achievers and things like that….Like my best friend as a child was also really smart and a bit of a keener too, and that sort of pushed me …I [felt] most comfortable around my peers when I was doing something I excelled at; I would feel totally confident in those instances. (Lisa, middle childhood-late childhood)

Throughout adolescence, five participants (Simone, Hillary, Jen, Sarah and Lisa) communicated the importance of shared educational Ambitions among their close friends.
My friends all had similar ideas to mine, like all wanting to go to university, having similar motivations and such. (Simone, middle-late adolescence).

I guess [my group of friends] were considered ‘the smarties’, and that felt good to be around other people who were similarly motivated to do well in school, go to college, get a good job. (Jen, middle-late adolescence)

Among these participants, shared educational Ambitions among friends were demonstrated to support women in distancing from some of the dominant appearance-related pressures they faced in the context of their larger peer environments; a theme that will be further explored in chapter five in relation to the impact of alternative group norms. For instance, Simone and Sarah each articulated how being surrounded by ambitious female peers, who shared in their desire to pursue post-secondary education, helped to lessen their focus on appearances throughout high school.

We were the group who’d have to keep their grades up, have to do all these extracurricular club activities, so it will look good on our university applications and so on…We were not the people dressed in any distinct fashion. And we were probably the people who were studying over lunch or debating some issues from our social studies class, or volunteering at the yearbook, or tutoring, or something like that. (Simone, middle-late adolescence)

I wasn’t as concerned about my appearance with [my friends]…But I’ve always been grounded and independent and [had] other priorities. Like I always knew that I wanted to go to university, and maybe do a Masters and whatnot, so I was always pretty focused on that…My group of friends, we were all a bit nerdy and so it was more about substance. They weren’t really concerned with their appearances, they were mostly concerned with
getting good marks, being a good student, honour roll. I felt comfortable around them. 

(Sarah, middle-late adolescence)

Conversely, in the absence of female peers who shared in her educational pursuits, Lisa surrounded herself predominantly by male peers at the time.

I was more concerned with being an achiever; and it was mostly the boys who’d be in the math club and stuff like that, so I was more friends with boys throughout high school. That kind of played a role in that I didn’t care so much about the make-up and the name brands and stuff, cause I hung out with the boys…they just focus less on that stuff. (Lisa, middle-late adolescence)

With respect to adulthood, significantly all fourteen interviewed women reported currently pursuing or having completed, post-secondary education. Of these women, Zoe, Simone, Sandra, Hillary, Leena, Michelle and Lisa all expressed how Ambitions associated with their educational and career-related goals fostered a sense of competence and comfort in their bodies that helped to simultaneously lessen their preoccupation with appearance standards, as described by Sandra and Michelle.

*Where does your satisfaction come from now?* Now it’s all about when am I going to finish this PhD for crying out loud?! [Laugh] I’m pretty close to the end, so my sense of satisfaction now has nothing to do with my looks anymore…I’m happy and I think that’s really important. It’s hard to describe, but I could be in a bad mood or I could feel bloat-y, and the most important thing is I’m really pleased with where I am right now in my career. I think that helps a lot with my confidence…We’re all in grad school and all my peers are grad school people, they’re people of all shapes and sizes, and it doesn’t matter
because we’re all here for one reason, just to get out alive with our PhD right [Laugh]. (Sandra, adulthood)

As I started focusing more on my career and degree [controlling my body] just sort became less important to me. I started to have a realization that what I was doing [to my body] was bad and I shouldn’t be doing this and there’s more to me than my body. Like I knew I was this smart person…My work started to become more important and more meaningful and I could see that I was capable of so much more and what I wanted to achieve…I realized I just needed to focus on myself and I hadn’t done that since probably before I was ten. So I’d made the decision after graduating from university that I would treat my body differently, and really focus on becoming the person who I wanted to be…and it was nice to be surrounded by people who felt the same way and wanted the same things. (Michelle, adulthood)

Thus, just as in adolescence, surrounding oneself with peers who expressed similar career and educational-related Ambitions was demonstrated to strengthen interviewed women’s desire, confidence and competence to pursue their goals.

Definitely my friends started influencing me a lot in my twenties because you start really goal setting your life. And I saw how they’re doing and what they’re doing and it really pushed me even more to want to get a great job and so forth. I think they influenced me the most at that point…I started valuing friendships more and asking myself how certain friendships motivate or push me [to succeed]. (Lisa, adulthood)

Summary of Challenging Norms and Ideals Associated with Engagement in Activities, Interests and/or Educational Pursuits
Within the second of category of Challenging Norms and Ideals Associated with Engagement in Activities, Interests and/or Educational Pursuits three main themes emerged: i) Physical Immersion; ii) Passion; and iii) Ambition.

With respect to the first theme of Physical Immersion, in the relative absence of an evaluative external gaze of their bodies in early to middle childhood (3-7 years), participants described as sense of freedom to run around, play outside and immerse themselves in their physical environment with no external consciousness of their appearances. Further, participants expressed considerable joy, comfort and competence in their bodies at the time. However, entrance into early adolescence (11-13 years) considerably limited participants’ Physical Immersion in activities as a result of the discomfort and self-consciousness they felt in their bodies at the time. Among the few participants who continued their engagement in sports throughout adolescence (11-19 years) their external consciousness of their bodies was shown to distract from the joy and freedom they experienced during participation in activities throughout childhood. Further, in adulthood (20+ years) all but one interviewed woman, who referenced their participation in physical activities with peers, described the importance of their body physicality to their sense of enjoyment and comfort participating in activities with their peers.

The second theme of Passion was frequently conveyed through participants’ descriptions of their engagement in physical activity with peers throughout childhood. In adolescence and adulthood, however, the theme of Passion was relatively absent from their narratives. Significantly, even within the context of pronounced external body consciousness throughout adolescence and adulthood, participants’ connection with certain Passions supported their continued engagement in various activities, and the associated sense of joy, comfort and competence in their bodies. Additionally, immersion in their Passions was shown to temporarily lessen participants’ preoccupation with their appearances.
The final theme of Ambition emerged predominantly in adolescence and adulthood in reference to participants’ pursuit of educational and career-related goals. Specifically, only one participant (Lisa) described educational Ambitions prior to the age of eleven. Throughout adolescence however, five participants communicated the importance of shared educational Ambitions among their close friends, which was shown to support them in distancing from some of the dominant appearance-related pressures they faced in their larger peer context. Further, in adulthood, half of the interviewed women described how their Ambition related to educational and career-related goals contributed to a sense of competence and comfort in their bodies, which also served to once again lessen their preoccupation with adhering to certain appearance standards. Surrounding themselves with peers who expressed similar Ambitions in adulthood was shown to strengthen participants’ desire, confidence and competence in pursuit of their goals.

Overall Summary of Peer Processes Related to
Idealized Ways of Inhabiting the Body as Girl and Woman

Chapter four explored the second domain of the “Peer Processes Related to Dominant and Alternative Norms, Ideals and Expectations” model. Specifically, this second domain described the influence of peer processes according to Idealized Ways of Inhabiting the Body as a Girl and Woman. Within this second domain emerged three core categories: 1) Food and Eating; 2) Sexuality; and 3) Activities, Interests and Educational Pursuits. Each core category was further divided according to the categories of Peer Processes Promoting Adherence to Idealized Ways of Inhabiting the Body as a Girl and Woman, and Peer Processes Challenging Adherence to Idealized Ways of Inhabiting the Body as Girl and Woman.

Food and Eating

Within the first category of Peer Processes Promoting Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Food and Eating, two themes emerged: i) The Pursuit Thinness; and ii) Ideals of
Health and Wellness. Specifically, these two themes were seen to promote participants’ heightened body consciousness, internalized pressures to conform to these ideals, and ultimately their negotiation of their own eating and appetite throughout development.

In relation to the first theme of The Pursuit of Thinness, Peer Dieting and Pressures for Thinness emerged as two sub-themes that shaped interviewed women’s negotiation of their eating and appetite in the context of their friends and peers. Specifically, almost all interviewed women described Peer Dieting as a normative part of their peer culture in early adolescence (11-13 years), heightening in middle to late-adolescence (14-19 years) and continuing for some women (e.g., five) into young adulthood and beyond (20+ years), which influenced their own preoccupation with their bodies, and negotiation of their appetites. Pressures for Thinness typically emerged within participants’ peer environments around early to middle adolescence (11-16 years), though some women described overt Pressures for Thinness occurring in childhood within their home environment. In middle adolescence (14-16 years) most interviewed women spoke about the strong messages they received regarding the importance of thinness in their immediate female friendship groups. However, overt Pressures for Thinness from friends and peers emerged as a less prominent theme among the interviewed women in adulthood.

Within the second theme of Ideals of Health and Wellness, the dichotomy of Healthy and Unhealthy Eating and Upholding the Healthy Ideal emerged as two sub-themes, which similarly contributed to participants’ heightened body consciousness and subsequent negotiation of their eating and appetite. Approximately half the participants described the dichotomy of Healthy vs. Unhealthy Eating that emerged in friendship groups predominantly in adulthood (20+ years), and that reinforced the importance of vigilance and control over one’s appetite. Further, exclusively among women over the age of twenty, Upholding the Healthy Ideal surfaced as an important sub-
theme promoting women’s self-judgments related to food choices, which shaped their negotiation of food and eating within the context of their female friends and peers.

Within the second category of Peer Processes *Challenging Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Food and Eating*, two themes emerged: i) *Modeling Comfort in Appetite*; and ii) *Enjoying and Appreciating Food*; which each contributed to participants’ own body comfort, and their subsequent ability to respond to their appetites accordingly.

The first theme of *Modeling Comfort in Appetite* emerged in the narratives of most interviewed women in reference to the normalcy of their peers’ comfort with food and eating throughout childhood (3-10 years). However, this theme largely disappeared among women’s narratives throughout early to late adolescence (11-19 years). Within adulthood, approximately half of the participants spoke about the influence of their friends’ comfort with food, which challenged feminine ideals of eating and permitted them to respond to their own appetites.

The second theme of *Enjoying and Appreciating Food* surfaced predominantly in the context of participants’ experiences with peers in childhood, and was relatively absent throughout adolescence and adulthood. In particular, all fourteen participants described enjoying food and responding to their appetite freely in the context of their friends and peers in childhood, while only one participant in adolescence and three in adulthood discussed the shared enjoyment of eating among close friends.

*Sexuality*

Within the first category of *Promoting Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Sexuality*, two themes emerged: i) *the Male Evaluative Gaze*, and ii) *Sexual Harassment*. Each of these themes contributed to participants’ feelings of shame and discomfort in their bodies, their subsequent preoccupation with adherence to norms and ideals associated with female physical attractiveness, and for some women, a disconnection from their desire.
The Male Evaluative Gaze theme emerged in early adolescence (11-13 years) around the onset of puberty, when participants developed a critical awareness of the perceived norms and ideals for female attractiveness. Throughout middle to late adolescence (14-19 years), the Male Evaluative Gaze strengthened considerably for all participants, and continued within the majority of participants’ peer environments in adulthood (20+ years). Of particular significance were references by male peers related to ethnocultural stereotypes, which shaped some women’s perceptions of their bodies in relation to perceived standards of attractiveness held by men.

The second theme of Sexual Harassment was discussed by a significantly smaller number of the interviewed women. One participant recalled an episode of Sexual Harassment in middle childhood (5-7 years), while two participants reported episodes of Sexual Harassment, taking the form of physical or verbal harassment by peers in early to middle adolescence (11-16 years).

The second category of Challenging Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Sexuality, included the main theme of Freedom from the Male Gaze and Pressures Associated with Sexuality, under which two sub-themes emerged: Absence of the Male Evaluative Gaze; and Relationships that Challenge Pressures Associated with Sexuality. Each of these sub-themes were associated with participants’ comfort in their bodies, and for some, a connection with their desire.

The first sub-theme of the Absence of the Male Evaluative Gaze occurred exclusively in childhood (3-10 years), contributing to participants’ ability to live and move freely in their bodies at the time. The second sub-theme of Relationships that Challenge Pressures Associated with Sexuality emerged exclusively among several of the interviewed women in adulthood. Most often, women described relationships with gay male friends who contributed to a sense of temporary freedom from pressures associated with sexuality and the male gaze. Additionally, a couple of participants referenced intimate relationships with partners who challenged norms for
female sexual desirability, contributing to enhanced comfort in their bodies and a connection with their sexual desire.

Activities, Interests and/or Educational Pursuits

Within the first category of Promoting Norms and Ideals Associated with Engagement in Activities, Interests and/or Educational Pursuits, three main themes emerged: i) Gender Segregation; ii) Passivity; and iii) Activity for Weight Control.

Beginning with the first theme of Gender Segregation, gendered norms regarding the composition of peer groups and activities seemed to first segregate some participants around the time of middle to late childhood (6-10 years), intensify in early adolescence (11-13 years), and continue throughout adolescence for the majority of interviewed women. In adulthood, however, participants described greater mixed gendered peer groups and activities.

Accompanying the gendered composition of peer groups in adolescence was the second theme of Passivity, referring to participants’ decreased engagement in physical activities with friends and peers. Firstly, in early adolescence (11-13 years) participants described engaging in more passive types of play that encouraged preoccupation with their physical appearances. Additionally, the objectification of girls’ bodies in recreational activities and sport throughout adolescence caused many participants to experience discomfort and self-consciousness in their bodies, reinforcing their desire to reduce or terminate their engagement in activities previously enjoyed with friends. Lack of finances and geographical locations, which prevented some participants from accessing various sports/activities also contributed to the reduced involvement in physical activity during adolescence. Further, accompanying physical Passivity, three participants in adolescence referenced their reduced participation in academic classes as a result of heightened self-consciousness and discomfort.
The last theme of Activity for Weight Control emerged predominantly in young adulthood and beyond (20+ years), when over half of the women interviewed reported “working out” at fitness facilities with female friends for the purposes of weight loss/control, fuelling processes of social comparison and reinforcing discomfort and self-consciousness in their bodies.

Within the second category of Challenging Norms and Ideals Associated with Engagement in Activities, Interests and/or Educational Pursuits three main themes emerged: i) Physical Immersion; ii) Passion; and iii) Ambition.

In the absence of the evaluative external gaze in early to middle childhood (3-7 years), participants referenced the first theme of Physical Immersion as they described their sense of freedom to play and immerse themselves in their physical environment with no external consciousness of their appearances. Entrance into early adolescence (11-13 years), however, significantly limited participants’ Physical Immersion in activities as a result of the discomfort and self-consciousness many felt in their bodies at the time. Among women who continued to participate in sports throughout adolescence, their external consciousness distracted from the joy and freedom they experienced during activities in childhood. In adulthood (20+ years), women described the importance of their body physicality in their ability to enjoy and feel comfortable participating in activities.

The second theme of Passion was present throughout many participants’ descriptions of their engagement in physical activity with peers in childhood. However, in adolescence and adulthood, this theme was relatively non-existent. Notably, within the context of pronounced external body consciousness throughout adolescence and adulthood, participants’ connection with Passions supported their continued engagement in various activities, and contributed to their joy, comfort and competence in their bodies.
The last theme of Ambition emerged predominantly in adolescence and adulthood in reference to shared educational or career-related Ambitions among close friends, which supported participants in distancing from some of the dominant appearance-related pressures within their larger peer context. Surrounding themselves with peers who expressed similar Ambitions was seen to strengthen participants’ desire, confidence and competence to pursue their goals.
CHAPTER FIVE
THE IMPLICATIONS OF PEER PROCESSES ON SOCIAL POWER AND ACCEPTANCE

The final results chapter presents the second model, entitled “The Implications of Peer Processes on Social Power and Acceptance,” comprised of two core categories: 1) Promoting Pressures of Peer Conformity and Compliance; and 2) Resisting Pressures of Peer Conformity and Compliance (see Figure 29).

![Diagram of Implications of Peer Processes on Social Power and Acceptance]

Figure 29. Core Categories of Model Two, Implications of Peer Processes on Social Power and Acceptance

Specifically, this model illustrates how widely sanctioned norms, ideals and expectations pertaining to participants’ bodies and appearances, as described in chapters three and four, are expressed and internalized through concerns for status, power, belonging and acceptance. In an effort to sustain or attain social power and acceptance within their social environments, participants were frequently faced with pressures to conform or comply with these norms, ideals and expectations. Alternatively, the model also explores peer group protective factors that provide alternative norms for social power and acceptance, irrespective of many of these dominant appearance-related norms, ideals and expectations, as well as individual protective factors that demonstrate expressions of resistance to typical peer group conformity.

Promoting Pressures of Peer Conformity and Compliance
The first core category of the “Implications of Peer Processes on Social Power and Acceptance” model explores the impact of internalized social inequity within the peer environment on participants’ conformity and compliance to dominant norms, ideals and expectations. This first core category is thus comprised of two categories: 1) The Internalization of Social Inequity and/or Privilege; and 2) Consequences of Social Disempowerment and Peer Rejection (see Figure 30).

Figure 30. Categories Pertaining to Promoting Pressures of Peer Conformity and Compliance

*Internalization of Social Inequity and/or Privilege*

This first category, the Internalization of Social Inequity and/or Privilege, explores participants’ internalization of their social power and acceptance within their peer environments in relation to widely sanctioned norms, ideals and expectations. Specifically, this category includes the five themes of: i) Body Size and Shape; ii) Sexuality and Desirability; iii) Clothing; iv) Ethnocultural Differences and Cultural Transitions; and v) Relational Connections (see Figure 31).
Figure 31. Themes Pertaining to the Internalization of Social Inequity and/or Privilege

Body Size and Shape

Emphasized throughout chapters three and four, peer processes such as social comparison, evaluative messages, teasing/harassment and peer dieting, strongly influenced the transmission of widely sanctioned norms and ideals pertaining to the importance of thinness. Intensifying predominantly towards the end of late childhood, social comparisons with peers and body-based teasing were demonstrated to significantly shape participants’ internalization of their social inequity or privilege pertaining to differences in Body Size and Shape.

The bigger kids always became the focus of bullying more often than others...You feel lucky you’re not as big as they are even though I always knew I was a little bigger, but it’s like, thank goodness I’m not as big as that person. They’re always what you can measure yourself by. (Anna, late childhood)

Reinforcing the importance of Body Size and Shape within the peer environment in late childhood was the emergence of popularity norms emphasizing the social privilege that thinness afforded girls at the time.

She was considered one of the more ‘popular’ girls in school...She was tall and skinny...And after that boy made that remark about his hands being able to fit around her waist, I felt pretty bad about myself that I wasn’t skinny like that. (Sandra late, childhood)

I was never the popular kid by any means... not being able to belt my tunic was the time I started to feel very different [than my peers]...I grew up with the belief that appearance was really important. My parents put so much importance on appearances. They were
preparing me for the world. [They’d] say, “You want to be like everyone else? You need to lose weight. You want to have friends? You need to lose weight. You want to have a boyfriend? You need to lose weight.” They’d stress the importance of losing weight, especially before high school, because then I wouldn’t have the uniform to hide behind…there were more kids to contend with, and more insults. (Hillary, late childhood-middle adolescence)

The internalization of one’s social inequity and/or privilege related to Body Size and Shape heightened considerably in early to late adolescence (11-19 years) as concerns for popularity and the formation of peer groupings and cliques intensified, and as the prevalence of peer dieting, appearance talk, weight-based teasing and explicit pressures for thinness among female peers increased. Participants like Leena and Mary, who adhered to the thin ideal in early adolescence, described the safety and status that thinness afforded them at the time.

Groups began to be very clique-y at school. There was the ‘beauty pageant group,’ they were the girls that were very successful and thin, all of them had long hair and were all dressing the same. Those were the ones who were dieting…most of the [eating] disorders were in the ‘beauty group.’ They were the most popular…It was quite weird because I was a nerd, but at the same time kind of popular because I was skinny. I felt like because I was skinny I was lucky and I fit in. (Leena, early adolescence)

Watching my friends [who were overweight] get teased, that was hard…It made me thankful that I wasn’t overweight. And it made me aware of what gets attention and what doesn’t…Because I was fit I was sort of left alone. (Mary, early adolescence)
Whereas participants who did not adhere to the thin ideal at the time, such as Layla, Sandra, and Hillary, described feeling disempowered in their peer environments as they internalized norms for popularity which dictated the importance of thinness.

I wasn’t as cool anymore. At that time I started to get a little bit pudgy. And the other girls were much thinner and cooler. It upset me a lot…Watching the cool group and how thin they were…I felt like if my body looked the same way [as them] it would solve my problems. (Layla, early adolescence)

The [popular girls] were considered the ‘good looking people’, ‘the pretty people’…You’d sit around and think, this girl has such nice skinny arms… Even if my [family] loved me, I was still fat, and of course they loved me, they were my family, but what about everybody else right? That was always with me. …I mean you always think about the pretty girls and you think they have nothing to worry about; they’re so slim, they’re so pretty. They don’t waste so much time worrying about what the rest of us do. (Sandra, middle adolescence)

At my new school, ‘thin was in.’ That’s just the way it was. You had to be thin. That was the unspoken law. The message was very clear, that you had to be thin to be accepted…if you’re not thin, you’re not good. That’s just the way things were, and I accepted it. (Hillary, middle-late adolescence)

Further, throughout middle and late adolescence (14-19 years), half of the participants described the significance that losing weight and moving closer to the thin ideal had on their sense of social power, belonging and acceptance within their peer environments at the time.
I remember in the latter part of high school there being big concerns over waist size. The school uniform skirts were separated into small-mediiums, then mediums and then large. And I had to get my skirt from the small-medium area that year, and I thought, ‘oh I’m small, that’s good!’ I remember that quite clearly actually…I felt comfortable; I was part of that ‘smaller group.’ (Sandra, middle adolescence)

I think when I lost weight was probably one of the times I felt most comfortable in my body around my peers. I felt better about myself. And I guess knowing that nobody else was sort of looking at me and thinking, ‘she should lose some weight,’ or ‘she’s too fat,’ it made me feel more secure. I didn’t stand out. (Ellie, late adolescence)

Within adulthood, while strict popularity standards were relatively obsolete and the importance of Body Size and Shape as a primary determinant for peer acceptance and belonging was significantly less pronounced, the continuation of social comparisons, appearance-based conversations, as well as the emerging preoccupation with ‘healthy’ eating, reinforced the prevalent discourse of body dissatisfaction among female friends, and participants’ subsequent internalization of the social privilege afforded by thinness.

I felt a lot of body surveillance among my peers in university…there was also more of an open dialogue of body dissatisfaction among women. It definitely stressed the value of being thin. (Sarah, young adulthood)

Lots of talk among friends, like I’m having a fat day”; “I wish I could wear those jeans that you can wear”…I think for me it almost made it more competitive, like all these girls are aware of the significance of [being thin], so I needed to do something to make sure that I’m like that too…And it continues today. (Paige, young adulthood-adulthood)
Additionally, compared to adolescence when thinness afforded interviewed women a sense of belonging and acceptance among their peers, in adulthood, two participants described how moving closer to the ideal stimulated tension within female friendships. Michelle and Hillary, for instance, both described how moving closer to the ideal, contributed to jealousy among their female peers.

In university people were jealous of my body. I worked out really hard...Everyone wanted to look like me. Girls would come up to me and tell me that I could have every guy I ever wanted. Everyone thought I had an incredible body and I put the focus on my body. I ended up not being able to be friends with girls then because of the jealousy. (Michelle, young adulthood)

My best friend and I we were always both a bit shorter and plumper. We were best friends because we liked to eat together. We were friends from early childhood until the age of about twenty-three. But we had a falling out on a trip that we went on together. I had started losing some weight; she had not. I became a lot more active, physically, but socially too…and our whole lifestyles changed. A lot of people said she felt jealous of me, like I was like leaving her behind. (Hillary, adulthood)

Further, among participants who were socially disempowered in their peer environments and struggled immensely in their bodies throughout adolescence, their strong internalization of the social value of thinness at the time, was demonstrated to continue to influence the importance they placed on Body Size and Shape within their relationships with female friends in adulthood. Michelle and Paige, for instance, acknowledged greater comfort and confidence in their bodies in adulthood when surrounded by female peers who are physically larger than them.
She has a very different body type from me. We’re very physically different. She’s more overweight, and I ask myself sometimes if the reason I feel so comfortable and confident around her is because I know that physically I look better than her. (Michelle, adulthood)

Growing up she was the type of kid who was stick skinny. So when she was rail thin, I was kind of portly and a bit chubby and overweight. And that’s really switched around now. Like I’m at an average weight and she’s, I love her to death, but she’s just heavier now. She’s heavier than me. How do you feel in your body when you’re with her? To be honest and this sounds terrible, but like I actually feel good, because I know she’s not someone that I have to compete with in any way. I feel comfortable. (Paige, adulthood)

Sexuality and Desirability

Representing the second theme pertaining to participants’ internalization of social inequity and/or privilege within their peer environments was Sexuality and Desirability, encompassing girls’ physical maturation into women, and perceptions of sexual desirability throughout development.

Specifically, differences in the timing of physical changes accompanying puberty had a profound impact on participants’ internalized social power and sense of belonging within their peer environments in early adolescence.

The other girls had an awareness of their bodies that I didn’t have…There was something different about me…It’s like they were a million years older than me and I was this little girl. There was sort of a sexuality there that I had never experienced…. [I felt] like I’d better catch up quick. (Michelle, early adolescence)
My friends all started getting their periods, and I was the youngest person in the class and couldn’t wait to get my period so I could be like everyone else…I thought I would never get it. And I felt that when it came [that] a lot of things would change for me and I would be a lot more satisfied with my body, but that wasn’t the case. (Layla, early adolescence)

Adding to participants’ feelings of social disempowerment and confusion at the time was the challenge for some interviewed women to communicate the changes they were experiencing with significant adults in their life, such as their mothers. Anna and Paige, for instance, who are both of East Asian background, discussed their challenges in seeking support and guidance from their mothers who were not open and/or knowledgeable about the changes accompanying puberty.

I got my period at eleven, and I just remember feeling weird cause it was physically uncomfortable, like [my] chest developing…I remember telling my mom, but because where she came from you don’t talk about any of this at all, so she just took me to the doctor and he explained it…But I don’t remember talking to any girls about it. I started to feel like I was on the outside of everyone around that time. (Anna, early adolescence)

I remember in grade seven when girls were starting to wear training bras. My mom and I didn’t have this very open mother-daughter dialogue and I was too embarrassed to say, ‘mom I think I need to go do this and you need to take me.’ She was just very matter-of-fact one day, and it was very mechanical, and I remember thinking, I don’t think other girls had this experience with their mom, it may have been something more and fun and special…It was my dad who actually had to explain everything to me [when I got my period] and get me what I needed…I think for my mom it was related to her [Asian]
culture, even though my grandparents were born here, you’re just not as open and a lot of things are kept inside. (Paige, early adolescence)

In addition to physical changes associated with puberty, many participants described the emergence of the male evaluative gaze as early as ten years of age, which established dominant norms/ideals for female physical and sexual attractiveness throughout adolescence, and which greatly impacted participants’ internalization of their social inequity and/or privilege in relation to perceptions of desirability.

You start to think of yourself in terms of desirability, and then you realize you’re not in comparison to everyone else. (Sandra, late childhood)

My male attention was very negative…It made me feel ashamed. (Hillary, early adolescence)

I felt that I was always going to be the single friend because I didn’t get the attention from the guys that they all got. (Paige, early-middle adolescence)

All my friends then all either had boyfriends. I was the odd one out. And the one guy that I had a crush on didn’t like me back. I felt like an outsider. (Jen, middle adolescence)

Further, into young adulthood, several participants continued to internalize their social inequity and privilege in relation to their adherence to dominant norms of sexual attractiveness and desirability.
I was interested in dating guys then but guys weren’t interested in me. They were more interested in the feminine women. They really found I think my lack of femininity off putting. (Zoe, young adulthood)

School reinforced what they said about being thin, society reinforced what they said about being thin. I didn’t have a boyfriend…and I truly believed it had a lot to do with my appearance. (Hillary, young adulthood)

All the girls who had the really handsome boyfriends were the girls with the perfect bodies. (Layla, young adulthood)

In addition to the transmission of dominant norms related to female sexuality and desirability throughout adolescence and young adulthood, one participant who presently identifies as bisexual, described her internalization of social inequity related to her sexual orientation, after coming out to her peers towards the end of high school.

People just seemed not to be looking at me as directly anymore. I felt so anxious…I felt like everybody peeled away from me again. (Zoe, late adolescence)

Clothing

All participants referenced the third theme of Clothing in relation to their internalization of social inequity and/or privilege within their peer environments. In contrast to the two previous themes, however, the theme of Clothing emerged earlier in development (e.g., middle-late childhood), but similarly intensified in early to late adolescence, accompanying concerns for popularity and heightened self-surveillance in reference to appearance norms and ideals.
In middle to late childhood (6-10 years) a few participants acknowledged the emergence of brand names showcasing differences in social status among their peers. While in middle childhood these differences did not yet give rise to teasing or bullying, as described by Zoe, by late childhood, participants like Lisa acknowledged being explicitly targeted by their peers for not adhering to dominant clothing norms.

My closest friend was on welfare. Her mom was a single mom, and we’d notice that she didn’t have the same clothes as the [rest of us]. Later on she was bullied for that, but as younger kids we just noticed the difference in her clothes. (Zoe, middle childhood)

My mom bought me a pair of shoes and it wasn’t a name brand, but it looked like a name brand, and I was teased about that by my peers. But I didn’t know any better at the time, and my mom just wanted to get me a new pair of shoes. So already then brand names were starting to play a role. (Lisa, late childhood)

For the majority of participants, as concerns for popularity heightened in early adolescence, the emphasis on clothing trends, and conforming to these trends, emerged as an important indicator of one’s status within the peer social hierarchy. Most interviewed women described this period as a time when they began to strongly internalize their sense of power, status and belonging within their social environments through comparisons of their clothing.

That’s when I really noticed there was kind of this division of the ‘cool’ kids emerging, about really having to prove who you are, really having to find your status in your grade. Being way more fashion conscious; following the trends. That really stands out…I found myself kind of hanging out with like the next level of peers who I felt were a little bit
more down to earth; there was less sense of competition, of having to be cool all the time. (Paige, early adolescence)

One group of peers I was a part of were, I guess, more popular. They always had the nicest clothes…and I felt kind of like the odd man out when I was in that circle of friends. (Mary, early adolescence)

I never felt cool enough. Maybe because I didn’t have the right clothes. Other girls had cool clothes. I didn’t have a lot of control over what I wore because, for one, I had no idea what people wore, so I just never felt the same as my peers then. (Sandra, early adolescence)

Further, among most of the interviewed women, Clothing greatly accentuated differences in social class among their peers throughout adolescence. Moreover, several of the women described their parents, particularly mothers, as chief influencing factors for what they were able to wear at the time.

It wasn’t until I was thirteen when I realized the whole fitting in, like you can be teased if you are seen holding a shopping bag from a discount store. My parents have always been very frugal, and we lived in a developing country...I think part of me, intellectually, just thought this is stupid; who cares if you wear two dollar shoes or if you wear your Nikes? I still feel sorry for the people that bought into the whole materialism. But those people could also make your life miserable. It was actually when I was teased for the first time in my life by my peers. (Simone, early adolescence)
My mom wasn’t concerned with going to the [brand named] stores, like Le Chateau or Suzy Sheir. She’d want to take me to Sears, and I’m like, yeah Sears is so fashionable right [laugh]…Back then I never had any fashionable clothes….I nicknamed my mom ‘the economist’. She was conscious of her money. I remember feeling quite un-cool wearing these clothes. I didn’t have the funds to be keeping up with the latest styles. I didn’t share in that fashion. (Sarah, middle adolescence)

We were wearing uniform up until grade seven. But after, you had the ability now to show what you had. It was a sign of wealth. A lot of the girls’ parents did a lot travelling overseas and brought back tons of clothes…I was invited to a Sweet Sixteen and I had to get a dress at Addition Elle, and I showed up in this dress feeling so different than everybody else… In my mind everyone else looked so glamorous. I felt shameful. I spent my own money on this dress, and my best friend, her parents spent six hundred dollars getting a dress made to measure in this beautiful material…I was the only one that had to pay for it all by myself. (Hillary, middle adolescence)

I didn’t get a big allowance so my mom just made a lot of decisions unconsciously for me…moms never buy what’s cool. I was much happier hanging out after school in my school uniform than going out on weekends without my school uniform because I just didn’t think my clothes were cool. (Sandra, early adolescence)

Like Hillary and Sandra, several participants acknowledged the protection that school uniforms provided them from peer judgment and ridicule throughout adolescence.

_Did the popular girls dress differently than the girls who were not popular?_ It’s very hard to say because we wore school uniforms so I think the uniforms eliminated that problem.
It’s a big problem when kids are allowed to wear whatever they want to school. There’s the kind of thing, like, ‘oh God she’s wearing that? What is she thinking?!’ Or, ‘this person obviously has money because they’re wearing all the designer labels or whatever.’ (Ellie, middle adolescence)

There was no uniform in my new school so all of a sudden I had to find something different to wear every day, and there were very specific rules of what to wear and what not to wear in high school; not to wear the same thing twice in a week. This whole thing I just had no idea about, and I learned about it very brutally with kids who talked behind my back. (Layla, middle adolescence)

Additionally, beginning in early adolescence, and continuing into adulthood, a few of the participants described their internalization of social inequity related to gendered norms for dressing that promoted the objectification of women’s bodies in tighter, more revealing clothing.

The other girls had nicer jeans or jeans that fit them better, that made them look more womanly, more grownup, tighter t-shirts. I was still at a stage where I was wearing baggy t-shirts all of the time…I felt really different from them. (Sandra, early adolescence)

I definitely wanted my jeans to be much tighter-my v-necks to be much deeper…It upset me, and I started to become dissatisfied with my body because I wasn’t looking like the rest of them. (Layla, middle adolescence)

People would say I dressed like a man, and yeah, I do, but it doesn’t feel good to hear that. I don’t want to put a dress on to prove that I’m not…Its just not comfortable. (Anna, adulthood)
While the influence of Clothing norms and ideals on peer social power and acceptance emerged predominantly in early to late adolescence, four participants referenced this theme in adulthood. Two of these participants, Michelle and Layla, who both attended prestigious universities, highlighted the significance of Clothing as a representation of social class among their peers in young adulthood. Michelle, who comes from a high socioeconomic bracket, explained how her ability to adhere to the clothing trends impacted her relationship with other friends, and her sense of status, belonging and acceptance within her dominant peer group.

I felt very confident then, I felt great. I felt like I looked great, but my best friend was sort of slowing me down. She didn’t fit in as well. These weren’t her kind of people. I don’t think she had the desire I did to fit in with these people. She didn’t have the money. It sounds terrible to say, but the money to have the clothes that you needed to fit in, and I did. (Michelle, young adulthood)

Layla, on the other hand, whose parents had recently experienced a significant financial loss at the time, described how the inability to keep up with the clothing trends of her peers highlighted importance differences in social class, and contributed to feelings of disempowerment and lack of acceptance and belonging among her peers at university.

My father left his job and started his own practice near where I went to university. So when I finally had the freedom to do most of my own shopping, the budget suddenly shrank a lot and it didn’t let up for a while…And this class of people at the university they loved brands. I did not dress in brands. I didn’t have the money nor access to go to the kinds of places that they went to. (Layla young adulthood)
Further, one participant referenced the importance of thinness in affording women more freedom and flexibility to adhere to clothing trends. Anna, who earlier described her distaste for shopping trips with friends in high school, explained how she continues to feel left behind when shopping with her thinner girlfriends today who possess greater freedom and choice with respect to their clothing.

Any time there’s shopping trips now I feel like an outsider again. Especially looking for clothes, like I’ll always just be following [my friends], just tagging along, most of the time, cause of course they can walk by any store and have ten things that might be good on them, but for me, its not much choice. Even when I find something and try it on, it just doesn’t look good. Even though I have money as well, it’s like you go to the mall and you know you’re just going to be really tailing them. It’s not going to be as enjoyable for me…It makes me feel self conscious, and like if I was skinny like them I could also have my choice of whatever. (Anna, adulthood)

Lastly, Zoe, who in adulthood has surrounded herself with a more diverse and accepting group of friends, similarly acknowledged Clothing as an important determinant of group belonging. Zoe explained how she occasionally feels “out of place” within her group of friends because she does not subscribe to their same clothing trends.

The happy hippies I hang out with do care about their appearances, notably being funky and colourful and not looking like Gap ads, but like happy hippies. They don’t care about being “cool” or “trendy,” and are more accepting of diversity. But, I would get flak form them for wearing clothes with big name brands, or looking preppy. I often feel too conventional for them cause a lot of my wardrobe looks like its right from the Gap…I just
want to be neutral, but they’re much more flamboyant, and I feel out of place sometimes when I’m with them. (Zoe, adulthood)

Ethnocultural Differences and Cultural Transitions

Many of the women interviewed also articulated the importance of Ethnocultural Differences and Cultural Transitions on their internalized social inequity within their peer environments. Referenced earlier in chapter three, several participants in middle to late childhood described the significance of their emerging understanding of ethnocultural differences among their peers. Specifically, Sandra, Lisa, Paige, and Simone, who are all of East-Asian background, and Layla, of Middle Eastern background, described the allure of the ‘White Ideal’, signifying status, belonging and acceptance within their peer environments.

Where we lived in England everybody was White, so me not being White stood out, even though when I look at the pictures it looks like I was similar, I was somehow known as being different. There were some people who wouldn’t talk to me because my parents were from the Middle East…there were a lot of questions about identity and how I fit in and why I was seen as different. (Layla, middle childhood)

The popular girls were always the White girls for whatever reason. In that environment, not only were the popular girls White, but the Barbie dolls that we had were all White. Nobody bought the brown Barbie dolls…I always think about that time as when I started to realize my identity, and [that] I’m different than my peers…[and] that White people are sort of to be aspired to. (Sandra, late childhood)

Further, adolescence signified a time when the internalization of White privilege intensified for several of the interviewed women, particularly among those who relocated from
their country or city of origin at the time. Referenced earlier in relation to social comparisons based on ethnocultural differences, Paige, Anna, Lisa, Layla, Simone and Sarah each described feelings of disempowerment and lacking a sense of belonging in relation to their Caucasian peers. For instance, Simone, who is of East Asian background, described her transition in early adolescence from a culturally diverse community in the Caribbean to a predominantly Anglo-European school in Canada.

That’s when I started to realize we’re supposed to look this way [white, thin, blond hair, blue eyes], we’re supposed to have these brands, and so forth, to be considered cool, popular, to fit in really…I was amazed how much more emphasis my peers placed on these things…I had no clue about it before. (Simone, early adolescence)

Paige and Lisa who at certain periods throughout adolescence were some of the only non-Caucasian students at their school, articulated feelings of disempowerment, self-consciousness and a general lack of belonging among their peers as a result of differences in their ethnocultural background.

I remember thinking I’m so different looking from these other girls...because I was mixed [race], and there wasn’t a lot of that [at my school]…I started feeling self-conscious. (Paige, early-middle adolescence)

I kind of wonder now, you know, why are all my friends Asian, even though I grew up in Canada. I guess its sort of a comfort thing that happened when I transitioned over to the gifted program because the peers that sort of excluded me were Caucasian, and maybe that had some influence on me later, that I feel like I just don’t belong. (Lisa, early-late adolescence).
Transitioning into adulthood, Anna, Sandra, Lisa and Paige, who are all of East Asian background, and Layla, of Middle Eastern background, each conveyed their continued internalization of social inequity pertaining to the ‘White Ideal.’

What’s considered beautiful is the total opposite of me…It’s got to be a White woman, she’s got to be thin, have blonde hair, blue eyes, perfect features…So I still have that image [that] I’m on the outside of what is beautiful. (Anna, early adolescence-adulthood)

Layla was the only participant who described the impact of witnessing discrimination of a close friend on her own internalization of social inequity pertaining to her religious and cultural background. Layla explained how she became very attune to the discrimination her Muslim friend incurred in North America as a result of wearing the hijab, which Layla had never worn before.

I could see that people were being mean to her because she wore the head scarf…they really got her down with the way they treated her every day… I felt guilty because if I had the head scarf on at that time, maybe I would have been more of a support for her then. (Layla, adulthood)

Significantly, after 9/11, Layla’s friend decided to no longer wear the hijab as a result of ongoing discrimination. Layla further described her decision to begin wearing the hijab five years ago, and experiencing, first-hand, strong sentiments of inequity and disempowerment.

Even though it was several years later, what made me wear it really, and this sounds really weird, but it was very rebellious. Like I’m going to put it on and show everybody…and present that I’m not weak and I’m not a pushover and I have it on…But obviously now it’s the first thing people see about me. Before it was easier to be friendly with people and
easier to get a friendly response from them. But it’s how people respond to me now that’s made it very hard. (Layla, adulthood)

In addition to the internalization of White privilege, cultural transitions also significantly influenced participants’ internalization of their social inequity related to ethnocultural differences among their peers. For instance, participants who, in adolescence, transitioned from culturally diverse schools to more homogenous schools, similarly articulated feelings of disempowerment and a general lack of belonging among their peers. Michelle, for example, who identifies as Jewish, communicated her struggle to identify with her peers after transitioning from a multicultural elementary school to a predominantly Jewish high school.

Most of the kids [in my new school] were Jewish…they all seemed to sort of have more in common with each other and I had come from such a different background it felt. They all went to Jewish schools and camps and they all seemed to know each other and have things in common and I just couldn’t be a part of that. I felt like I came from another planet. There was something about them that I just couldn’t seem to be or do, and I tried, I tried til it almost killed me. (Michelle, middle-late adolescence)

Additionally, moving back to her native city after spending several years within a culturally diverse school in East Asia, Sandra expressed similar sentiments as Michelle, with respect to the challenge identifying with her peers, and feeling accepted within her new environment.

I moved back to Southeast Asia to start my third year in a four-year [high school] program. Everybody already had friends. It was an all girls’ school. It was super clique-y and I was petrified. It was so different. You’re unconscious about all these things as a kid, but then when you come back five, six years later it’s like a new world…and it was hard. I
went back to a public school. It was pretty homogeneous…and I had all these ideas on the plane that I’m going back to a place where people are like me, but then I didn’t realize that I’m not like them, because most of the people there had spent their entire lives in that city. I just didn’t make the connection until I got there, and it was hard to make friends. (Sandra, middle-late adolescence)

Similarly in adulthood, six women (Anna, Layla, Sandra, Lisa, Paige and Zoe) described the continuation of their internalization of social inequity based on ethnocultural differences among their peers. Specifically, participants who transitioned to homogenous peer environments in adulthood described how these cultural transitions often accentuated significant differences in appearance and social class, which served to reinforce feelings of disempowerment and a lack of belonging, as highlighted by Layla, of Middle Eastern background, and Zoe, of Euro-Canadian background.

University was incredibly homogeneous. There were other nationalities but they were a minority. But this was the first time I had with such a homogeneous group of people. It was an American university and a private university. It was very expensive, and everyone was from the upper class. There wasn’t a single person on campus who was disabled. It was really hard. A lot of these people had lived their whole lives in this city, and of course their parents had adapted to the lifestyle there. [Mine] had not. They had a lot more freedom than I did…they had the clothes, the money and the ability to go out with their friends…I felt very alone. I didn’t belong. (Layla, young adulthood)
[In Asia] I felt like I was another gender. Like if this was female, what was I?...I lived in a smaller town and people look at you like, ‘wow what’s that?’ It made me feel like I didn’t fit in…it felt lonely and painful. (Zoe, young adulthood)

Relational Connections

The final theme pertains to participants’ internalization of social inequity in their peer environments as a result of challenges and/or disruptions in their Relational Connections with peers. While this theme is closely related to each of the four previous themes, in that disempowerment across each of these domains contributed to disrupted relationships with peers, this theme specifically illustrates feelings of social inequity related to a general lack of connection and belonging among peers.

Beginning in early adolescence, as peer groupings, cliques and popularity norms prevailed within all interviewed women’s peer environments, many participants first described their feelings of social disempowerment related to a lack of connection, belonging and acceptance among their peers.

I felt very alone because most of the students, or my peers, had already established [their] peer groups…so I remember feeling like a floater…I was the straggler. (Sarah, early adolescence)

Grades three and four were fine. They were happy years. Grade six I was in a split class and we always had to work in pairs, but no one ever wanted to work with me, so that was really hard. That was the time too when I felt I became really ugly and awkward. That was the year everything changed. (Zoe, early adolescence)
Throughout middle to late adolescence, approximately half of the interviewed women described feelings of social disempowerment related to their lack of Relational Connections. Particularly upon entrance into high school, participants described the difficulty “navigating” their social environment and making friends.

I just didn’t want to be seen alone. It was the mark of shame…I realized that spending the whole recess reading a book and eating my lunch alone was not the thing to do, but at that point it became a way to escape, because I really didn’t know how to navigate the other options. (Layla, middle adolescence)

The first year of high school was really difficult. It was a whole new world to navigate. It was much bigger and just a sea of uniforms and so you kind of kept your head down until you figured things out. I felt pretty lonely until I finally started to make some friends. (Jen, middle adolescence)

It was a big high school, and I very quickly felt lost. I had no friends. I didn’t know how to make friends. I’d always been with the same kids, so whether they liked me or hated me, we all knew each other, so the experience of trying to get to know another kid, I had no idea how to do that. And so I very quickly found myself really alone…I felt ugly, I felt awkward, I felt out of place….It was a horrible feeling. (Zoe, middle adolescence)

There’s cliques right, and if you don’t fit into a certain clique, you’re never going to fit in, and they’re never going to accept you, so sometimes the choice is made for you in a way…Though I could still make that one or two friends it was never as good as being popular…I was an outsider. What did that feel like in your body? Just sadness and
uncomfortable, like is there something wrong with me that I’m on the outside, you know? (Anna, middle adolescence)

Other participants communicated distinct friendships that fell apart in high school as their former friends moved on to ‘cooler’, more popular groups, and participants were left behind.

She wouldn’t talk to me anymore. She had no interest in being friends with me, but I tried hard to be her friend. I would still sit with her and her friends and be ignored. (Michelle, middle adolescence)

She was cool and popular, unlike me, and in high school she wanted to hang out with cool popular kids, who like her, were into sports, student council, going to dances. I felt she’d rejected me for a new, better crowd. (Zoe, middle adolescence)

In young adulthood, four participants alluded to their challenge connecting with peers, and feeling a sense of acceptance and/or belonging among them. Significantly all four of these participants were socially disempowered in their peer environments throughout adolescence as a result of peer rejection and/or not conforming to dominant peer norms and ideals. Anna, Layla and Zoe, for instance, described feeling different from their peers in young adulthood, making it challenging to establish Relational Connections.

Friendships became a lot harder after high school, because [in university] the classes are so huge and there are always different people. It was a lot harder to make friends…I still sometimes had that outsider feeling. (Anna, young adulthood)
In university I had to make my friends with people I saw, at most, three times a week. That was very hard, and I ended up spending a lot of time in the library as a result…It was difficult to find friends because I wasn’t like most people. (Layla, young adulthood)

I felt like most situations or grouping where people kind of fit into the [popular] mould, like they look nice and have nice clothes and do certain things to their body that I didn’t know how to do or wasn’t interest in doing, they would see I was different and respond to me differently. I felt like I didn’t belong with them. (Zoe, young adulthood)

Whereas Michelle felt especially distrustful and fearful of establishing relationships with girls after being rejected by many of her female friends throughout high school.

I was friendly with girls but I didn’t trust them. I found it very stressful. It was just something missing. I just could not seem to be friends with girls properly…I’m at a loss still, I don’t know what the issue was. (Michelle, young adulthood)

Summary of the Internalization of Social Inequity and/or Privilege

The first category, the Internalization of Social Inequity and/or Privilege, illustrated participants’ internalization of their social power in the peer environment related to widely sanctioned norms, ideals and expectations. In particular, this category centered around the five main themes of: i) Body Size and Shape; ii) Sexuality and Desirability; iii) Clothing; iv) Ethnocultural Differences and Cultural Transitions; and v) Relational Connections.

Beginning with the first theme of Body Size and Shape, predominantly in late childhood, social comparisons and appearance-based teasing among peers promoted participants’ internalization of their social inequity and/or privilege related to social norms for thinness. Accompanying the formation of peer groupings and cliques, the internalization of social inequity
pertaining to Body Size and Shape strengthened considerably throughout early to late adolescence (11-19 years). Further, in adulthood (20+ years), the continuation of peer processes promoting the thin ideal, continued to reinforce participants’ internalization of the social privilege afforded by thinness. Particularly among interviewed women who struggled in their bodies throughout adolescence, their internalization of the value of thinness continued to inform their sense of social power and status in relationships with female friends in adulthood.

In relation to the second theme of Sexuality and Desirability, differences in the timing of physical changes accompanying puberty strongly impacted participants’ sense of social power and belonging within their peer environment. Additionally, the emergence of the male evaluative gaze in late childhood greatly influenced participant’s internalized social inequity related to perceptions of desirability, which continued throughout adolescence and into young adulthood. Further, one participant reflected on her internalization of inequity among her peers related to her sexual orientation.

With respect to the third theme of Clothing, in middle to late childhood (6-10 years) a few participants acknowledged the emergence of brand names that promoted differences in social status among their peers. By late childhood, participants described being explicitly targeted by their peers as a result of not adhering to dominant clothing trends. As concerns for popularity heightened in early adolescence (11-13 years), the emphasis on Clothing as an important indicator of one’s status within the peer social hierarchy increased substantially, and continued throughout adolescence; resulting in participants’ internalization of distinctions in social class among peers. Consequently, school uniforms were discussed by several of the interviewed women as offering protection from peer judgment and ridicule at the time. Significantly fewer women referenced their internalization of social inequity and/or privilege in relation to Clothing norms among peers.
in adulthood, however, among a few participants, Clothing continued to represent an important determinant of peer belonging and acceptance.

The fourth theme illustrated participants’ internalized social inequity related Ethnocultural Differences and Cultural Transitions within their peer environments. Beginning in middle to late childhood (6-10 years), a few participants described their internalization of the ‘White Ideal’, representing status, belonging and acceptance in their peer environments. Participants’ internalization of White privilege intensified considerably throughout adolescence and continued into adulthood, giving rise to feelings of disempowerment, self-consciousness and a lack of belonging within the peer environment. Additionally, cultural transitions throughout adolescence and adulthood reinforced participants’ internalization of social inequity pertaining to ethnocultural differences among their peers.

The last theme of Relational Connections illustrated participants’ internalization of social disempowerment related to their lack of connection, belonging and acceptance among their peers. Beginning in early adolescence, with the emergence of peer groups, cliques and popularity norms, many participants first described feeling socially disempowered as a result of limited Relational Connections and a lack of belonging within their peer environments. Entrance into high school significantly heightened the challenges many participants’ faced in establishing a sense of belonging and connection among their peers. Continuing into young adulthood, four participants who struggled to maintain Relational Connections with peers throughout adolescence disclosed ongoing challenges in establishing friendships.

**Consequences of Social Disempowerment and Peer Rejection**

The second category under the core category of Promoting Pressures of Conformity and Compliance, illustrates the Consequences of Social Disempowerment and Peer Rejection, most typically resulting in pressures to conform or comply with widely sanctioned norms, ideals and
expectations within the peer environment. Specifically, this category includes the three themes of: i) Controlling the Body; ii) Dressing to ‘Fit In’; and iii) Pressures of Cultural Assimilation (see Figure 32).

Figure 32. Themes Pertaining to Consequences of Social Disempowerment and/or Peer Rejection

As participants’ internalized their social inequity within their peer environments, those who were disempowered and/or rejected by their peers conveyed discomfort and self-consciousness in their bodies, fuelling pressures to conform or comply with dominant norms and ideals by altering their bodies to attain or sustain social privilege. Consequently, individuals who did not conform or comply with dominant norms and ideals often endorsed sentiments of social isolation or withdrawal in their peer environments (See Figure 33).

Figure 33. Internalized Body Experiences Related to Social Disempowerment and/or Peer Rejection

Controlling the Body
Controlling the Body was a prominent theme among the majority of interviewed women who acknowledged the importance of thinness in relation to social power and acceptance within their peer environments. Emerging first in early adolescence (11-13 years), most participants described a sense of disempowerment and intense discomfort they felt in their bodies as result of not adhering to norms, ideals and expectations for thinness, prevalent in their peer environments.

I wished I had an eating issue like those thin, popular girls. I mean, I had tried going to the bathroom and sticking my finger down my throat. I could never make myself throw up. It bothered me. I couldn’t believe that there were people who did that. But I also wished I could be one of them, which is sad. (Hillary, early adolescence)

Attempts to Control the Body to attain social power and gain acceptance from friends and peers, significantly disrupted many participants’ connection with their body throughout the period of adolescence. Their internalization of pervasive norms and ideals for thinness, combined with heightened concerns for peer popularity and group acceptance, particularly in early to middle adolescence (11-16 years), contributed to intense discomfort and self-consciousness in participants’ bodies, resulting in many women’s internalized pressures to conform to these unrealistic body standards.

I felt like I had to [diet] to sort of fit in, to be a part of [name of a girl’s] clique. Probably not that she would have cared, but I wanted to be like her. (Sandra, middle adolescence)

I started feeling really low. I didn’t like to try on any clothes cause I would be afraid that people would make fun of me [because of] my weight. For most girls going to the shopping mall is such a great experience…I just felt very self-conscious about whether
certain things made me look bigger…I bought Slim-Fast. But my mom eventually found it and she was really pissed off with me. (Sarah, middle adolescence)

At the most severe end of the spectrum, five of the interviewed women (Leena, Layla, Michelle, Paige, and Mary) developed clinical eating disorders as a result of the pressures they internalized within their peer environments at the time.

During high school the opinion my peers had about my body was important to me. I started to notice that being skinny was good, it made you popular, and then I started liking being skinny and I started to try for the first time deliberately, to keep myself skinny. So I started exercising more…My mom was super concerned, but I felt that I couldn’t make her understand how important it was to keep myself skinny, that I couldn’t be fat. (Leena, middle adolescence)

I spent a while from grade six all the way to grade ten asking my parents if I could go and have liposuction on my thighs…I felt like if I were as thin as [my peers] or dressed as cool as them that would solve everything…The more comfortable and accepted I was by my peers, the less angry I was at my body and vice versa. I think it’s easy to take things out on my body. When things were very messy for me I felt like if my body would behave and get thin, everything would be solved. (Layla, middle adolescence)

I tried to conform so that she would include me… I was just so lost in my body. I was so stripped, empty and confused. I didn’t know who I was anymore cause I had spent so many years trying to be like [her]. I lost everything about myself…She stopped being my friend because I wasn’t cool enough…When I saw what a reaction she got from the others from losing weight, I started losing weight…I felt accomplished when I lost the bit of
weight and they noticed. I liked when people noticed, and it was something that I became
good at. Again, I saw how much the other girls liked it when she couldn’t eat, when she
was able to throw away her food and not eat, and how great people thought that was.
(Michelle, early-middle adolescence)

Several other participants articulated how feelings of discomfort and self-consciousness in
their bodies, arising from the inability to conform or comply with their peers’ standards for
thinness, fuelled their subsequent withdrawal and isolation from others during adolescence.

Looking back now I know that I was a very angry adolescent; angry with the way I
looked, angry with the way I felt. I thought that people were malicious and their intents
weren’t genuine and I didn’t trust anybody, so you didn’t really want to sit next to me at
lunch because if you liked me, [I thought] you wanted something from me. You wanted
my notes from math class; you wanted me for something because I didn’t think that I
could have friends if I was fat. (Hillary, early-middle adolescence).

I was never able to be popular cause I wasn’t thin like the rest of them, so there was a lot
more dissatisfaction with the state of high school friendships…That’s definitely when I
started to feel like an outsider, not one of ‘the chosen ones’. (Anna, early-middle
adolescence)

Fewer participants spoke about explicit pressures of conforming to strict body norms as a
direct result of social disempowerment and/or peer rejection in adulthood. Significantly, three
women who had developed eating disorders in adolescence, after internalizing strong norms of
thinness within their peer environments, referenced ongoing pressures for thinness and associated
feelings of social disempowerment and/or rejection on the basis of peer non-conformity to body
norms. Layla, who felt largely disempowered, and often times rejected by her peers throughout adolescence, acknowledged the association between her perceived acceptance and belonging (or lack thereof) within peer relationships in adulthood, and her need to control her body in an attempt to maintain or sustain friendships.

When I’m not happy in my friendships I try and fix my body so that my relationships will be good again. So in university [my body] was something that I could control, whereas all the other things in my life, I couldn’t really control…I wasn’t cool or popular, and didn’t fit in, and that really caused me a lot of unnecessary pain. I got into the habit of blaming my body when things in my life weren’t going right, when my relationships with my peers weren’t going right, and that continued. (Layla, adulthood)

Further, Mary and Michelle each described the tensions and isolation they have felt in adulthood when surrounded by peers who continue to reinforce unrealistic body norms and practices. In Mary’s case, pressures to “fit in” with her former peer group ultimately resulted in her beginning to binge eat again.

In my mid-twenties I was living with a roommate who was one of the popular girls in high school. Being around her and that group of friends that she had, it was like being back there in high school all over again, but this time I was very different, and I really struggled between wanting to fit in with them and I guess having this new appreciation for my life. So how did you negotiate that? It was really hard. Binge eating. On the surface, like to them, I was normal and, I guess, I tried to fit in or I did fit in. But when I was by myself I would binge eat…Our friendship felt very superficial and I just didn’t have anything in
common with them anymore…I broke off a lot of my friendships at the time, and just kept to myself. (Mary, young adulthood)

For Michelle, who recovered from anorexia as a young adult, yet remains immersed in a peer group today that promotes strict norms for thinness, feelings of disempowerment and social isolation as a result of choosing not to comply to dangerous body norms, presents an ongoing challenge in her ability to sustain relationships with other women.

I’m finding it very difficult [in my new mother’s group] because all these women talk about is how much they weigh, how much they have left to lose, how ugly they look, and how fat they are, and its really difficult…I think I’ve isolated myself because I [challenged] one of them by saying “nobody will notice that about your body,” and they were all like, “sorry miss eating disorder therapist.” I was just trying to be helpful. I’m just trying to say something nice and I think that I ostracized me there because I won’t complain about my body. I almost don’t fit in as a result. So I’m finding myself sort of alone. (Michelle, adulthood)

Consequently, Michelle has found herself detached from most women in her social circle because she chooses not to subscribe to the same norms, ideals and expectations they endorse.

I’m just a little sad for myself in terms of peer relationships. I think over the years because of all the problems I had, I just found it less stressful and easier to just be by myself and not be around anyone cause then I had no one to compare myself to and no one to make me feel bad, so I spend a lot of time by myself. I find myself happiest when I’m mostly on my own, like I don’t have these huge groups of friends that all these girls have. I have a
few friends here and there who I talk to and see, but I don’t have a huge active social life anymore. (Michelle, adulthood)

Dressing to ‘Fit In’

The second theme related to pressures of conformity and compliance within the peer environment was that of Dressing to ‘Fit In,’ occurring predominantly in early to middle adolescence (11-16 years). However, a couple participants referenced pressures to conform to peer clothing norms in late childhood in order to fit in.

Clothing choices, what shoes you have, what backpack, whatever, everyone was always very current and I guess I started wanting to care around grade four…It was a backpack, which is so silly, but it was the backpack that my friends had and I thought, well I want to fit in. I begged my parents and they got it for me. I guess that was the first time I recognized the idea of wanting to fit in. (Mary, late childhood)

Similar to the theme of Controlling the Body, as concerns for popularity and social hierarchies emerged in early adolescence, the desperation to fit in by conforming to clothing norms and ideals intensified for most participants.

In high school I became desperate to fit in, so my friends and peers did influence me a lot. Like I definitely dressed differently. I used to not really care and then I started caring a lot and wanting to be better dressed and have nice hair and make-up and all of that…I was awkward in myself and not really knowing who I was or what I wanted out of life, but I knew I wanted to, or needed to be popular, otherwise high school could be a brutal experience. (Mary, early-middle adolescence)
I just remember I didn’t even own my first pair of jeans until I was twelve, because the school was having a Spirit Day, and I was thinking, oh no, I need to get some jeans! And that’s how I got my first ever pair of jeans. (Simone, early adolescence)

Further, several participants articulated how pressures of conformity and compliance arose from being teased, bullied, ostracized and/or rejected by their peers on the basis of their clothing. While these pressures promoted some participants’ desperation to conform to certain trends, such as Michelle and Layla, for those who were unable to conform or comply for financial or other reasons, such as Zoe and Hillary, there was a tendency to withdraw and isolate within their peer environments.

She would say something mean that she knew would hurt me but in a very passive-aggressive sort of way, like my clothes weren’t good enough. I had to wear different clothes to be like the rest of them. But then if I bought the same clothes as her and that wasn’t good either. So every day it was me trying to figure out how I can be okay for this girl. How can I be good enough. (Michelle, early-middle adolescence)

I learned about the social rules for dressing at school when after the first week my friend called me up and said, “you know people were talking about you in computer class the other day and they were saying this and this and this about you and you really should think of changing the way you dress because this looks really weird.” That experience that shook me to the core very, very deeply and I spent a lot of time recovering from that. And did you change what you wore after that time? I did but it took a while because I couldn’t just take off and go to the mall…It wasn’t until a year later when [my family] went to the
US that there was a much more cool selection of things to buy and it was easier then to negotiate what I wanted to wear. (Layla, middle adolescence)

Zoe, who was also teased on the basis of her clothing during adolescence, articulated how her failure to conform and comply to her peers’ norms and ideals, despite her desire to do so in order to fit in, resulted in withdrawal, isolation and feelings of disempowerment and “detachment” from her body at the time.

I really wanted to look like the popular kids, and dress like them, but I could never pull it off. I tried. But I started being picked on for what I was wearing cause all of a sudden it became hugely important; like these things seem to really matter to people who I want to like me. I guess that’s when I wanted so badly to look like them…They teased me and I just withdrew. There was no real safe place. I just kind of kept to myself…I very quickly felt lost. I felt like I wasn’t liked and I wasn’t seen as attractive and it was horrible. I didn’t feel comfortable in my body. I wasn’t happy about my appearance…In general, I was kind of detached from my body. (Zoe, early to middle adolescence)

Hillary spoke about financial limitations to her ability to conform to her peers’ clothing trends, fuelling feelings of inadequacy, discomfort and self-consciousness in her body, as well as resentment towards school and her peers.

It was like a fashion show honestly. My parents didn’t spend the money on clothes that they thought were going to go out of style like in a month…I tried to pick out clothes the night before because I knew that the next morning if I didn’t know what I was going to wear my room would be upside down. That’s what it was pretty much every day. Oh it was horrible. I was planning my outfit for the first day of grade seven throughout the
whole summer…I hated going to school, and my negative attitude towards people came through. (Hillary, middle adolescence)

In adulthood, the theme of Dressing to ‘Fit In’ was far less pronounced as clothing norms and ideals no longer appeared to strictly dictate power and acceptance within participants’ peer environments. However, Michelle, who earlier described her lack of belonging and feelings of disempowerment within her peer environment in adulthood, articulated the importance of adhering to her peers’ clothing norms, to avoid being ostracized or rejected.

When I go to these playgroups or these music groups with the other moms now, I’m very careful about what I wear because I’m still influenced to some extent. I don’t want people talking about me so I’m very careful about what I wear so that I fit in enough that they’ll leave me alone and not talk about me. (Michelle, adulthood)

Pressures of Cultural Assimilation

Pressures of Cultural Assimilation in response to social disempowerment and/or peer rejection on the basis of Ethnocultural Differences and Cultural Transitions, was less common in comparison to the themes of Controlling the Body and Dressing to Fit In, although nonetheless a particularly significant theme among several of the participants. Although several women earlier in the chapter described feelings of discomfort and self-consciousness in response to their ethnocultural differences as children, only Layla, who is of Middle Eastern background and attended a predominantly Anglo-Saxon primary school in England, described her efforts to assimilate with her Anglo-European peers in order to feel accepted in middle childhood. Significantly, across all fourteen participants, Layla also described the earliest internalization of an evaluative external gaze of her body in relation to her “fat thighs” around this same time.
I definitely played my [cultural background] down as much as I could… I mean I have an English name, but I also tried to do everything by the book [to resemble] my peers, and I was upset when my parents didn’t… I wanted to have a Christmas tree and Christmas presents. When my mom gave me a party at school everyone sent a certain repertoire of things for the children to share, and my mom sent a different repertoire. I wasn’t happy with that…it really reinforced the feeling that I was different than everyone else. (Layla, middle childhood)

Given that adolescence represented a time when the perceived status and power of the ‘White Ideal’ intensified for several of the interviewed women, causing them to feel uncomfortable, self-conscious, disempowered and even rejected by their peers on the basis of ethnocultural differences, a few of the participants communicated their desire to assimilate with their Caucasian peers during this time. For instance, previously discussed in chapter three was Sarah’s intense desire to grow out her hair like her North American peers when she returned to Canada from her family’s native country of Africa. Also, Paige expressed desire in childhood to “breed out” her Asian heritage after being teased for the colour of her skin by her peers. Additionally, Sandra expressed the desire to conform to Western cultural norms and ideals, in order to be accepted within her peer group. Internalizing pronounced differences from her Caucasian peers at the international school she attended in East Asia fuelled Sandra’s desire to assimilate and simply “mix in [with] the masses.”

I think all these transitions and changes I was beginning to go through sort of made me a more flexible person. Flexible is not the word I’m looking for, but adaptable I think. To try and fit in, just to try to be like one of them, like I’ve never tried to stand out and be a
leader, I just wanted to be somebody mixed in the masses and not standing out for any particular reason because I was different, or I had a weird accent or I looked different, but I just wanted to be somebody in the group and just not be noticed at the time. (Sandra, early-middle adolescence)

Highlighted earlier in the chapter, pronounced feelings of disempowerment and peer rejection on the basis of ethnocultural differences throughout adolescence significantly shaped how some women continued to feel in their bodies in the context of friends and peers in adulthood. Paige, for instance, described being targeted throughout adolescence because of her mixed Asian and Caucasian heritage, which promoted her intense desire to “breed out” her heritage by dating only Caucasian peers. Later in university, ongoing discrimination based on her ethnocultural heritage intensified these earlier frustrations and reinforced feelings of disempowerment. Although Paige did not articulate her earlier sentiments of “breed[ing] out” her heritage in young adulthood, she acknowledged the pronounced impact these experiences had on the way she inhabited her body and distanced from her peers.

The first couple years of university there was this Chinese food restaurant in the mall and my friends would call me [by] the name of the restaurant….I think in their mind they thought it was funny and that I’m going to laugh with it, but it was just not funny to me cause I grew up being made fun of for that. How did that make in you feel in your body when they would say that to you? I felt like I wanted to shrink up into my body and disappear. I was so over feeling the need to defend my background. I was frustrated with not being able to feel proud of who I was. I was disappointed and annoyed that I was still fielding these sorts of ‘jokes’ with people who I considered to be adults and friends. I feel
like I always have to be on guard for comments about my background…It’s a terrible feeling and made me not want to be around certain people. (Paige, young adulthood)

Additionally, Layla, who felt largely disempowered and rejected throughout most of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, and who subsequently expressed desire to assimilate with Western culture after moving as an adult from the Middle East to North America, articulated the ‘weight’ of her cultural identity in the context of her North American peers. In the following excerpt, Layla articulated how wearing the hijab has had a pronounced impact on how she lives in her body, her perceived power and acceptance among her peers, and her internalized pressures to conform to the dominant culture.

I’ve internalized all of that and I just want to get rid of it sometimes because it’s very heavy and it’s not something that I signed up for…As a result of this heaviness I’ve internalized, I feel like I’ve tried to lose weight a lot more. (Layla, adulthood)

Significantly, Layla reflected on cultural differences between the United States and Canada, on her internalization of social inequity and subsequent feelings towards her body.

In the US felt like I had to be perfect because I had to be a good example. That sounds really pathetic, but when I moved to Canada, in some ways I felt like I could breathe again. The atmosphere in Canada was, and is, much less hostile and Islamophobic. Although there is some ignorance and bigotry, my experience in Canada has been that people are much more polite, respectful and knowledgeable about other cultures. And how did that translate to how you felt in your body? I felt more relaxed in my body. I didn’t have to prove as much to my peers in Canada as I did in the US. (Layla, adulthood)
Layla’s desire to control her body and assimilate to North American norms and ideals as a result of her internalized social inequity echo the experiences of a few of the women interviewed (e.g., Paige, Sarah and Sandra), who, in addition to feeling disempowered and/or rejected in their peer environments because of their culture or ethnicity, also reported struggling to control their bodies to attain social privilege, acceptance and/or belonging among their peers.

Summary of Consequences of Social Disempowerment and Peer Rejection

The second category of Consequences of Social Disempowerment and Peer Rejection illustrated internalized pressures to conform or comply with widely sanctioned norms, ideals and expectations within the peer environment. This category included the three themes of: i) Controlling the Body; ii) Dressing to ‘Fit In’; and iii) Pressures of Cultural Assimilation. Disempowerment and rejection on the basis of non-adherence to norms and ideals was shown to result in participants’ discomfort in their bodies, fuelling internalized pressures to conform and comply to attain power and acceptance among their peers. Consequently, participants who did not conform or comply often endorsed feelings of social isolation or withdrawal from their peer environments.

Beginning with the first theme of Controlling the Body, the internalization of pervasive norms and ideals for thinness, combined with heightened concerns for peer popularity and group acceptance, particularly in early to middle adolescence (11-16 years), contributed to participants’ discomfort and self-consciousness in their bodies, resulting in attempts to conform or comply with unrealistic body standards at the time. Further, attempts to Control the Body in an effort to attain social power and gain acceptance from peers significantly disrupted many participants’ connection with their body throughout early to late adolescence (11-19 years), with five participants describing the development of a clinical eating disorder related to internalized peer
norms of thinness at the time. Further, several participants who were unable to conform or comply with their peers’ standards for thinness during adolescence described their isolation and withdrawal from peers. Although fewer interviewed women communicated feelings of disempowerment and rejection related to their adherence (or lack thereof) to standards of thinness in adulthood, three participants communicated ongoing internalized norms for thinness transmitted through their peer groups, that fuelled disrupted experiences with their body and/or tensions in their relationships with others.

The second theme related to Consequences of Social Disempowerment and Peer Rejection was Dressing to ‘Fit In,’ occurring predominantly in early to middle adolescence (11-16 years). Similar to the first theme of Controlling the Body, as concerns for popularity and social hierarchies emerged in early adolescence, the desire to ‘fit in’ by conforming to clothing norms and ideals intensified for most interviewed women. While these pressures promoted the need to conform to certain clothing trends, those were unable to conform or comply often became isolated or withdrew from their dominant peer environment. Further, in adulthood, as clothing norms and ideals no longer strictly defined power and acceptance within the peer environment, the theme of Dressing to ‘Fit In,’ was far less prevalent.

The last theme of Pressures of Cultural Assimilation, while less common in comparison to the two earlier themes, was nonetheless a significant theme among several of the interviewed women who described feelings of discomfort and self-consciousness in response to ethnocultural differences throughout development. Occurring predominantly in adolescence, when the perceived status and power of the ‘White Ideal’ intensified for several participants, Pressures of Cultural Assimilation were triggered by feelings of disempowerment and rejection in the context of their peers. For several women, these feelings continued into adulthood through experiences of ongoing discrimination by their peers. Although participants spoke significantly less about
pressures to assimilate in adulthood, a couple of the women acknowledged the impact that disempowerment from ethnocultural discrimination had on their desire to assimilate and/or distance from their peers.

Resistance to Pressures of Peer Conformity and Compliance

The second core category of the “Implications of Peer Processes on Social Power and Acceptance” model explores participants’ resistance to pressures of peer conformity and compliance in relation to dominant norms, ideals and expectations. Specifically, it is comprised of two categories: 1) Group Protective Factors; and 2) Individual Protective Factors (see Figure 34).

![Figure 34. Categories Pertaining to Resistance of Pressures Related to Peer Conformity and Compliance](image)

**Group Protective Factors**

Encompassing the first category of Group Protective Factors related to resisting pressures of peer conformity and compliance are the two themes of: i) Accepting, Nonjudgmental Peer Groups; and ii) Alternative Group Norms (see Figure 35).

![Figure 35. Themes Pertaining to Group Protective Factors](image)
Accepting, Nonjudgmental Peer Groups

Connections with accepting, nonjudgmental friends and/or peer groups, throughout all stages of development, were demonstrated to support participants’ comfort in their bodies, and distance from pressures of conformity and compliance.

As highlighted earlier in chapter three, for most participants, early to middle childhood typically represented a time of unawareness of dominant appearance norms and ideals within peer groups. With the exception of Layla, who in middle childhood internalized ethnocultural differences among her Caucasian peers, participants reflected on this time as a period in which they felt the most acceptance and belonging among their peers, and also most comfortable in their bodies, as expressed by Sarah.

You know, back then, I just felt loved and I felt accepted by my friends. I never thought, ‘oh she put on weight’, or ‘oh she’s a bit chubby.’ It didn’t really matter then. We all seemed to accept each other and so I think that my friends had a very positive influence. I mean, when you think about it, its pretty incredible the fact that you can be with this group of people and you feel loved and you feel accepted and you don’t have to worry. I was really blessed to have the type of childhood that I had. (Sarah, early-late childhood)

However, for most participants, beginning around the age of ten and extending throughout adolescence, the importance of adhering to dominant appearance standards to achieve status, belonging and acceptance within their peer environments, intensified substantially. Nonetheless, a few participants described how supportive relational connections built on loyalty, acceptance and freedom from judgment contributed to positive feelings in their bodies, and assisted them in resisting dominant pressures of conformity at the time.
I felt most comfortable having a very good group of friends who were very loyal. They didn’t judge. They were fun to be around, easy to talk to if you ever were having problems. It was just a close-knit group of friends, and it really supported me in feeling comfortable in myself. (Ellie, middle adolescence)

Between sixteen and eighteen I had a really great group of friends and I just felt acceptance no matter what…Two of my best friends at the time, they were the ones that I was always with, and they loved me no matter what I looked like…We just always had fun no matter what we were doing and I always felt safe and accepted with them. (Mary, middle-late adolescence)

Throughout certain times in high school, and with certain groups friends, there was a lot of the kinds of messages that I think ‘Glee’ pushes a lot now, “be yourself”, and “everyone’s an individual” and “don’t be so judgmental”, and it made me feel, okay I’m different, but maybe my difference is a good thing…that felt great to be around, and less pressure to do things like diet. (Jen, late adolescence)

The prevalence of accepting, nonjudgmental friends and peer groups appeared to increase for many of the participants transitioning into adulthood. Connections with these peers supported greater comfort in their bodies at the time.

I think my friends have made me feel comfortable in my own body. I think I’m more confident about my body and my appearance than I was through adolescence and, you know, maybe even early adulthood…but I’ve got so much more confidence [now] that I don’t try as hard…I think it’s having a group of diverse, non-judgmental friends that have
sort of shaped that, because I don’t feel I need to try hard for them and I feel that they accept me for whatever really. (Ellie, adulthood)

Just realizing that there are people who just like me for me. I don’t have to be a certain way…I never noticed a difference in the way they treated me, regardless if I lost weight. It never mattered to them. (Simone, adulthood)

Further, among participants who struggled in their bodies throughout adolescence, establishing new relational connections with accepting and non-judgmental peers, helped to lessen their preoccupation with their bodies, as highlighted by Sandra and Michelle.

It was just a very large group of [people] who were just friendly, very accepting, just out for fun all the time. It felt really good to be like this. I felt almost like I had made it, like I’m part of this group…It felt like I was accepted and I had my group of friends. And how did that change how you felt in your body at the time? I still worried about it but didn’t have the kind of hang-ups, like the big arm hang-up. It lessened a lot at that point. (Sandra, young adulthood)

The people from my last residence, with all the gossip, who everyone knows everything about you and everything that’s ever happened to you; they weren’t there at this new college. It was a very different culture there, more accepting…We [all] just stuck together and were just very happy there together and it was sort of like a vacation…The other stuff just became less important then. (Michelle, young adulthood)

Alternative Group Norms
Establishing relational connections with peers who embodied alternative norms of appearance, dress and/or behaviour, was the second group protective factor that contributed to several of the participants’ ability to resist pressures of peer group conformity to dominant norms, ideals and expectations. Specifically, this theme emerged exclusively in adolescence and adulthood when participants were most often confronted with pressures of conformity in an effort to attain status and belonging within their peer environments.

Throughout adolescence when concerns for popularity, status, belonging and acceptance intensified for all of the interviewed women, several individuals reflected on the positive impact that fostering relationships with peers who rejected dominant norms for popularity and/or appearances had on their own comfort in their bodies, and their ability to resist frequent pressures for conformity and compliance.

I was able to feel okay, and not succumb to those pressures because my friends and I were okay with the fact that this is just who we are. That popular world is always going to be foreign to us…And in that group, no one was so consumed by their appearances. None of them were dieting or anything like that. (Anna, middle-late adolescence)

I would go and hang out at the alternative high school…and kids would be doing cartwheels and finger painting, and it was really this happy hippie atmosphere. It was great. Thank God…I felt more free to wear what I wanted to and I wore some really weird things. I’m sure I looked really weird but I was fine with that at this point because I was like okay, I’m weird, that’s who I am. Seeing people who didn’t fit this norm that I wanted to achieve but failed miserably at achieving, I felt more free to do what I wanted to do. (Zoe, middle-late adolescence)
Particularly among a few participants who struggled in their bodies throughout adolescence to attain social privilege, fostering relational connections with peers who embodied alternative norms for appearance, provided them with a safe space, and temporary relief from the pressures associated with peer conformity. For instance, Paige and Michelle, who were each recovering from clinical eating disorders at the time, described the significance of being a part of a group of peers who rejected dominant norms and ideals for girls’ appearances.

It was important to have a good set of friends who appreciated and respected each other. It [also] helped that they weren’t the type of girls that were dieting, they weren’t concerned with that as much. A lot of them played rep sports, and they seemed to just have very healthy attitudes. (Paige, late adolescence)

I was very involved in drama and those are different people altogether. I sort of felt like I could be who I wanted to be, who I really was. I could be outgoing. I didn’t have to worry about being embarrassed. I loved it. That’s where I felt most confident in my body, in drama class. I felt most at home in my body with my peers; I felt most accepted, and that’s still my happiest place. They’re weirdoes and I was the kind of person who typically dressed properly, but I was just comfortable with them. It was sort of like a family. (Michelle, late adolescence)

Further, several participants in middle to late adolescence communicated the importance of participating in alternative group norms, such as involvement in clubs, activities and educational pursuits (highlighted earlier in chapter four). Sustaining friendships with peers who were less focused on their appearances, and oriented towards other pursuits and interests,
supported women in feeling comfortable and less preoccupied by dominant pressures of peer conformity and compliance.

In grade nine the girls in my class started to not like me. So I just sort of embraced all these other activities. I guess the friendships in those clubs allowed me to do that…there was a sense of companionship…There wasn’t so much of who’s cool and who’s not. It was a much more comforting environment…I wasn’t wearing the best clothes then, but it didn’t seem to matter as much with those peers. (Lisa, middle-late adolescence)

I was definitely a busy social bee then. I mostly hung out with the ‘nerds’ …like we were part of the library club and I was an assistant librarian. I was also in the choir. And we were all in the social club. With the ‘nerdy’ friends, I had a more stable group than I did before. I felt comfortable and less pressure with them. (Sarah, late adolescence)

I found another clique and they were all scholastic, and I felt very comfortable in that group. Those were my girls. They were sort of my core group…We all kind of had strict parents that really pushed us, and that was our primary focus, so it was really comfortable to be around them. We weren’t as focused on our appearances. (Jen, late adolescence)

Additionally, in adulthood, three of the interviewed women spoke about relationships with friends who embody alternative norms that have supported greater comfort and freedom in their appearances and behaviours. For instance, Sandra, who felt largely confined by dominant social norms and ideals throughout adolescence described a refreshing new mentality among her diverse group of peers in university.
I think in university we were coming around to the idea where everybody’s unique and you don’t have to fit into some kind of mold anymore. There were still ideas of what was pretty and what was not but I think it was a point where we were trying to assert [our] individuality… In the grand scheme of things it was probably a positive change. I didn’t feel I had to look like everybody else but I could throw in a little bit of my individuality, or a bit of myself into what I wore. (Sandra, young adulthood)

Zoe similarly reflected on her dominant peer group in adulthood, which, like her ‘alternative’ group in high school, accept and embrace diversity in physical appearances, contributing to Zoe’s own comfort in her body.

They’re total happy hippies, so they’re not people who care overly about what they wear and how they look. For them, to put on make-up or to worry about body hair, in a sense, they would feel like it was a betrayal of their principles or something [Laugh], it’s almost like there’s a different standard with them…They care about being funky and colourful, but not about being ‘cool’ or ‘trendy’, and they are more accepting of diversity, and very accepting of each other, and they’ve been really good for me too in that sense… They tend to be people who are pretty body positive in that it’s more important to feel good in your body than to look any particular way. (Zoe, adulthood)

Additionally, for Jen, coming out as gay in her early twenties introduced a new, diverse and accepting peer group in the gay community, and one female friend in particular, who challenged dominant appearance norms, and assisted Jen in discovering, and feeling comfortable with her own identity.
I met this girl and we became really good friends. She was butch, but had really long hair, like almost down to our waist, and she said, “we’re the only two dykes with long hair, isn’t that cool? That’s how everybody will know us; the two girls with long hair!”, and I just thought that was the coolest. She kind of helped me with my identity…I realized I should just focus on being more like me as opposed to trying to be something that I’m not. (Jen, adulthood)

Summary of Group Protective Factors

The first category of Group Protective Factors included the two themes of: i) Accepting, Nonjudgmental Peer Groups; and ii) Alternative Group Norms.

Beginning with the first theme, relational connections with Accepting, Nonjudgmental peers were demonstrated to support participants’ enhanced comfort in their bodies and distancing from typical pressures of peer conformity and compliance to dominant appearance norms and ideals. Participants reflected on early to middle childhood (3-7 years) as a time when they felt most accepted by their peers in the absence of an awareness of dominant appearance norms and ideals. By the age of around ten, and extending throughout adolescence, the growing importance of status, belonging and acceptance within the peer environment intensified many participants’ internalized pressures to conform to dominant norms and ideals in an effort to attain or sustain social privilege. A few interviewed women in adolescence, however, described how supportive relational connections which fostered a sense of loyalty, acceptance, and freedom from judgment, contributed to positive experiences in their bodies and resistance to dominant peer appearance pressures. For several of the women, accepting and nonjudgmental friends and peer groups increased upon entrance into adulthood, and similarly enhanced comfort in their bodies within the context of their friends and peers.
The second theme of Alternative Group Norms emerged exclusively within the narratives of women in adolescence and adulthood, during times when most participants were faced with pressure of conformity to dominant norms and ideals to attain status and belonging within their peer environments. Particularly throughout adolescence, relationships with peers who rejected dominant norms for popularity and adopted alternative norms for appearance, supported participants in their ability to resist dominant pressures of conformity and compliance, and feel more comfortable in their bodies. Further, sharing in alternative group norms, such as involvement in clubs, activities and educational pursuits, helped support several participants throughout middle to late adolescence in focusing less on their body physicality, and experience less pressure to subscribe to dominant body norms and ideals. Within adulthood, three of the participants described relationship with friends who embodied alternative appearance norms, which have supported greater freedom and flexibility in the way they live in their bodies as adults.

**Individual Protective Factors**

Individual Protective Factors represents the second and final category related to resisting pressures of peer conformity and compliance. It includes the two themes of i) Agency; and ii) Clarity and Locating Oneself in Relation to the Peer Group (see Figure 36.)

![Figure 36. Themes Pertaining to Individual Protective Factors](Agency)
Just under half of the women interviewed described a sense of agency in relationships with peers, which assisted them in resisting pressures of conformity or compliance to dominant norms and ideals.

Expressions of agency were most commonly exhibited in early to middle/late childhood (3-9 years), when participants described considerable freedom to live in their bodies and connect with others according to their own wants, desires and needs.

I was very free spirited, and I would hang out with people who others might not have particularly liked…I always felt like I was a very feisty and independent person. I always would be the one to decide on whether I would have that particular friendship with a person, like I didn’t necessarily care what other people thought as long as things were good between us, and they didn’t do me any harm. I just didn’t necessarily care about external factors like that. (Sarah, early-late childhood)

As concerns for popularity, status, acceptance and belonging intensified upon entrance into early adolescence (11-13 years), most participants struggled with their ability to express individual agency within their friendships and resist the pressures to conform to dominant norms and ideals. However, a few of the women, including Jen, Ellie, Anna, Lisa, Paige and Sarah, reflected on their decision to distance from certain friends as a result of feelings of discomfort with the types of activities they were engaging in at the time (e.g., smoking, drinking, dieting, dating). For instance, in the following excerpts Ellie, Jen and Sarah each described their decisions to separate from friends who no longer adhered to their same goals and/or values.

Around thirteen, some of my friends certainly changed a lot. I had a few friends that sort of started dating boys at the time, and would smoke behind the bike sheds. I even had
some friends that were drinking at that point. And I never really got into that, nor felt comfortable with it, at that age, so I drifted apart from those friends. (Ellie, early adolescence)

*Was that a conscious decision to become friends with a different group at that point?* I think so. I didn’t feel comfortable. I didn’t feel like I wanted to be a part of that other group. I like to be around people who are, in a way, role models too, and people who you can go to especially for school, for homework, not other girls who just want to smoke and hang out. I mean it’s kind of fun but it wasn’t the type of person who I wanted to be, so I found other friends. (Jen, middle adolescence)

My best friend started to get into this phase of dressing a certain way and that’s all she was concerned about. She lost weight because she wanted to look good primarily to go to clubs, and to meet guys off the Internet. And back then I knew who I was and I knew that this is not the same person who I grew up with; because before she was all concerned about her marks and being on the honour roll and now she’s just concerned with meeting guys and the latest trends or whatever. So I decided to meet other friends. I was sort of in a way being true to myself. I always felt [that] I wanted to be about substance. I think it’s important to care about the way you look but it can’t supersede other concerns, especially academically. (Sarah, late adolescence)

Helping to support their agency to stand up to friends, and/or distance from various pressures, were other groups of friends that participants’ could rely on at the time, as well as the influence of their parents.
To be honest, I just thought what they were doing was stupid. I think also because I had other friends that didn’t do those kinds of thing, you know, not sort of getting in with the bad crowd, that I was able to make that decision [to separate from them] more easily. (Ellie, early adolescence)

What gave you the strength to stand up and say, I don’t want to hang out with these girls any more? Well, it was mostly because I had other friends to surround myself with at the time. (Jen, late adolescence).

I told myself it wasn’t the end of the world because I had other friends. I was very diversified. (Sarah, late adolescence)

Ellie, Sarah and Paige also reflected on the importance of their parents who helped to instill strong values in them, and express concern regarding certain friends who they perceived as potentially harmful.

I’ve always been very close to my mother, and with this group of friends, my mother really did not like [them]. She didn’t think that they were suitable friends for me. Well she thought they were trouble, so I guess because of that I didn’t hang out with them as much. (Ellie, early adolescence)

If I didn’t have the great relationship that I have with my mom then my friends who have probably influenced me much more negatively, like I may have gotten into more disordered eating or whatever…My mom’s always been like, ‘you don’t need to [follow your peers] in everything they do.’ (Sarah, early-late adolescence)
What gave you the strength to be able to say I don’t really feel comfortable doing this or going along with what my peers are doing? This may sound really cheesy, but I think my parents, my dad in particular, just really in his roundabout fatherly way just kind of told me that I’m old enough to make my own decisions, but I have to be aware that my decisions will have repercussions so I need to make the most positive decisions I can. So I think in my head, knowing that these kids were getting up to bad things [drinking, smoking], I knew it’s maybe not the best idea, and there are other people I can hang out with, who are a better influence. (Paige, early adolescence)

In adulthood, several of the participants’ expressions of agency developed after reflecting back upon their life experiences, and achieving clarity of their location in relation to their peer group; a theme that will be discussed further in the following section. However, participants who exhibited greater expressions of Agency throughout adolescence, were more likely to exhibit similar expression of Agency in relation to distancing from pressures of peer conformity in adulthood, as evident in Jen and Sarah’s narratives.

At the end of the day I make my own decision or my own opinion about myself. I have taken what most people have said into account and either discounted it or used their practices and tried them out to see if they were valid, if they would work for me, and if they didn’t I would just discard them after. So I say my friends have influenced me but where I’m still in charge. (Jen, adulthood)

I’ve always had a strong sense of who I was, and I feel like if I didn’t exert such a strong sense of who I was and if I didn’t have mostly the great relationships that I had, then my friends could have had a much more negative impact on me. (Sarah, adulthood)
Clarity and Locating Oneself in Relation to the Peer Group

The final theme, under the second category of Individual Protective Factors pertaining to resisting pressures of conformity, was that of Clarity and Locating Oneself in Relation to the Peer Group. Closely connected to the previous theme of individual Agency, this theme describes how, through self-reflection about their cumulative life experiences with peers, participants acquired an awareness which assisted them in choosing to resist dominant norms and position themselves differently in relation to their peer group today. Every one of the fourteen women interviewed described a sense of Clarity regarding the influence that their peers have had on their experiences in their bodies across their life, and/or their desire to resist pressure of conformity and compliance in adulthood.

Several of these participants, including Lisa and Hillary, reflected on their sense of Clarity arising from past experiences of rejection by peers during childhood and/or adolescence, which have contributed to expressions of agency, confidence and independence today.

My relationships with peers across my life have definitely made me a very strong, independent person. Taking the time to reflect back on my life and think about what has brought me to where I am today, and I guess talking about it now today, has highlighted the idea of the whole not fitting in initially, and that, sort of, made me find my own path. I’m fine if I’m by myself and I sort of embrace that. And its made me become stronger on my own and not so dependent on others. (Lisa, adulthood)

Looking at the people who I went to high school with I think that they were all so sheltered and ignorant and I wouldn’t want to be friends with those people anyway. When I see them now it’s that superficial chatter. I look at them and think none of them have changed. They’re still those mean girls. They still care about money, cars and the way
they look and that superficiality about them and they didn’t do anything with their lives. And I thank God I’m not friends with any of these people cause that’s not what I want my life to be. And when they ask me what I’m doing, and I’m able to say, “well I’m getting a PhD”, I feel that that’s so much more worthwhile. (Hillary, adulthood)

Other participants, like Michelle, Layla, Mary and Paige, who all formerly struggled with eating disorders, reflected on their susceptibility to pressures of peer conformity and compliance throughout adolescence, how their peers have shaped how they lived in their bodies, and how in their present life they attempt to distance from negative social influences today.

I’m aware of the influence [my peers] can have on me and I’m very careful to not allow it and to check myself if I feel myself being influenced, because I know how dangerous it can be. When I was younger I didn’t realize the influence that peers could have and how dangerous that can be; and I think you need to be a certain type of person to be susceptible to that influence because not everybody ends up like I was. But I’m more cautious and I’m aware of what kind of damage can be done. I could fit in if I wanted to with this group of women who are not the greatest influences today, but at this point, I’m choosing to be [on the outside]. (Michelle, adulthood)

I think I’m becoming more picky in the people I choose to be friends with… I have realized that I am hugely influenced by my friends, all of them, and we’re all mirroring things together all the time, and so when I become friends with somebody and you start mirroring things back together in a way that I don’t like, or that doesn’t fit with my self-concept then I have to assert myself more. I think I’m fine thank you very much, and I don’t need to change anything. (Layla, adulthood)
I think I have let people have far too much influence on me and I’ve let other peoples’ opinion rank over how I feel about myself. I mean I’m sure there’s always pressure but now I try not to let that have so much influence on me that I can get actually physically ill. And having an eating disorder is nobody’s fault, it’s not even about fault, but having a circle of friends back then that weren’t very positive, I never want to get to that point again. (Mary, adulthood)

Friends are going to be there no matter what. I think the strength of influence they have over you is contingent on your strength and how you’re feeling at the time. Like whether you’re going to be susceptible to their influence…I mean when I was jealous for a split second when my friend came back from her trip recently and lost a lot of weight, I kind of self-talked myself through it and recognized our friendship is separate from that. I’m not going to define our friendship based on [whether] she is thinner than me…There are more important things in my life going on now that I can’t give all that attention, that much weight, and that much pressure to that sort of thing anymore. (Paige, adulthood)

Further, in their careers in the mental health and education fields, respectively, Michelle and Leena, who struggled considerably in their bodies throughout high school, have applied their insight from former experiences with peers to help other young girls work through similar challenges.

Because I had those kind of negative experiences during high school I can now appreciate more positive things that maybe other people might just overlook and so I feel it has helped me… I can see other people going through the same thing, so I feel more empathic…I could identify girls going through the same thing and I could have a chat
with them and try to help them…Suddenly all [those] negative experiences became something very useful and positive in the end. (Leena, adulthood)

Notably, all participants expressed the desire to surround themselves with more positive social influences in adulthood that support them in living more comfortably in their bodies.

With some of my friends I have found great comfort, that you can go to them, and rely on them. But then there are the people you’ve met along the way that don’t share in that positive mentality, who maybe are struggling more. Then maybe its best to just step away from them because they’re not good for you…I’ve just decided that I don’t have time for nonsense and I want to be around people who are positive and who care about themselves and care about the world, and who have a purpose. (Jen, adulthood)

I think I’ve been able to recognize how much I have evolved and changed, but also realizing the attitudes I have had about eating and dieting and body image, and how I’ve slowly turned it around now. I’ve really recognized the positive changes that I’ve been trying to introduce, and recognizing that my friends are also changing. It’s nice to know that even though everyone’s different we have some common ground. We’ve evolved from girls to confident women with more positive body images. (Sarah, adulthood)

Lastly, all of the participants perceived the interview process itself as a positive and rewarding experience for them. And while a few of the women (e.g., Michelle and Hillary) had reflected upon the influence of their peers prior to the interview, the majority of women acknowledged how reflecting back upon their life during the interview provided them with a new and important awareness of the impact their friends and peers have had on their bodies over time,
and their desire to adopt a more critical stance of the social influences that impact how they live in their bodies as adult women.

It was pretty interesting, and I try not to be too reflective usually, but it's good once in a while. *Did anything surprise you that we talked about today, or perhaps make you think differently about something?* It made me realize that of all the influences on the way I feel about my body, my friends have probably been one of the more stabilizing…Since I’ve lost all that weight, I thought that they’d notice, but the thing is they won’t see it as any great triumph or whatever; it’s just not that important to them. It makes me think that maybe I shouldn’t hang up too much importance on how I look, and I’m glad that my friends don’t either. (Simone, adulthood)

What was it like for you to participate in this interview? Enlightening. I hadn’t really thought about middle school for years. As I was talking with you I really came to understand how strong of an influence my peers are, and that was something I kind of vaguely wondered about, but I’d never really thought about before. I’ve realized how I’ve gotten into this habit of blaming my body when my relationships are not going well. I wonder if I get into another situation or time in my life when my relationships aren’t going well if I’ll blame my body then? Could be that I have this awareness now that might help. I hope I don’t have to find that out. (Layla, adulthood)

I have gone through my life without ever thinking about, or reflecting on this. And so when I saw the ad, I felt it was very interesting that you’re actually doing this study because I always find information about girls that already have an eating disorder, and it feels like no one’s paying attention unless it’s serious or has a name or label. So I feel this
is so important because it’s an issue all girls have…Talking to you, I’ve realized that my friends’ opinions [of my body] are very important to me. (Leena, adulthood)

It was really interesting to look back and sort of piece everything together. And some things I never really thought about, that you know, are connected…Seeing the process of friendships. It’s strange to me to think that it took almost thirty years to get there, but it’s here now, and it’s a healing process. (Mary, adulthood)

I want to say it’s been empowering to be able to talk about it, and raise these [issues], because like I said earlier, we don’t talk about it, or I don’t really raise my own opinion about how I feel about my body anymore. So it’s kind of nice to be able to talk about my body. Now that I’m thirty-two years old I haven’t talked about it since I was eighteen… I realized that I want to try to be in a position where I make my friends feel better about their bodies whenever they gripe about it, rather than be the one saying I wish I had a smaller bum; I think following in the example of my friends who have, you know, inspired me to be happy about my body at whatever shape it’s in. (Sandra, adulthood)

Summary of Individual Protective Factors

The second and final category of resisting pressures of conformity and compliance was that of Individual Protective Factors, which included the two themes of: i) Agency; and ii) Clarity, and Locating Oneself in Relation to the Peer Group.

Beginning with the first theme, just under half of the participants described a sense of Agency in relationships with peers, which contributed to their ability to resist pressures of conformity or compliance to dominant norms and ideals. Most commonly exhibited in early to middle/late childhood (3-9 years), where participants described freedom to live in their bodies
and connect with others according to their own wants and desires, entrance into early adolescence significantly stifled most participants’ sense of agency. However, a few of the women throughout adolescence reflected on their ability to distance from certain groups of friends as a result of discomfort with the types of activities their peers were engaging in at the time. Having other groups of friends to rely on, as well as positive parental influences, supported these women in expressing resistance to peer group conformity. Further, participants who exhibited greater expressions of agency throughout adolescence were more likely to express agency in relation to distancing from peer conformity in adulthood.

The second theme of Clarity and Locating Oneself in Relation to the Peer Group reflected each of the participants’ insight and awareness to the cumulative, shaping experiences of peers across their lives, which have enhanced their desire to resist pressures of conformity and compliance in adulthood, and/or surround themselves with more positive social influences. For instance, several of the women reflected on the impact of experiences of peer rejection throughout childhood or adolescence, which have encouraged their own expressions of agency, confidence and independence as adult women today. Further, at least four participants who struggled with eating disorders in the past, reflected upon their susceptibility to pressures of peer conformity throughout adolescence, and their desire to distance from negative social influences as adults. Finally, all women reflected on the interview process itself as a positive and rewarding experience which contributed to their own clarity of the influence of friends and peers on their bodies over time, and their desire to remain cognizant of the social influences that impact how they live in their bodies as adult women.

Overall Summary of the Implications of Peer Processes on Social Power and Acceptance

The second model, ‘The Implications of Peer Processes on Social Power and Acceptance’ emphasized the body as the central domain through which participants’ social inequity and/or
privilege became internalized and expressed within their peer environments, and through which their social power and identity were obtained through their conformity and compliance to socially constructed norms and ideals. This model was comprised of two core categories: Promoting Pressures of Conformity and Compliance; and Resisting Pressures of Conformity and Compliance.

Under the first core category were the two categories: The Internalization of Social Inequity and/or Privilege; and Consequences of Social Disempowerment and Peer Rejection. Specifically, the Internalization of Social Inequity and/or Privilege included the five themes of: i) Body Size and Shape; ii) Sexuality and Desirability; iii) Clothing; iv) Ethnocultural Differences and Cultural Transitions; and v) Relational Connections. Across each of these themes, participants demonstrated acquiring an understanding of their social privilege, or lack thereof, within their peer environments, beginning as early as middle childhood and extending into adulthood.

Consequences of Social Disempowerment and Peer Rejection included the three themes of: i) Controlling the Body; ii) Dressing to ‘Fit In’; and iii) Pressures of Cultural Assimilation, which typically surfaced throughout the period of adolescence, and continued for several participants into adulthood. Disempowerment and rejection on the basis of non-adherence to dominant peer norms and ideals resulted in participants’ discomfort in their bodies, fuelling pressures to conform and comply to attain power, privilege, acceptance and status among their peers. Participants who did not conform or comply often endorsed feelings of social isolation or withdrawal from their peer environments.

Under the second core category of Resisting Pressures of Conformity and Compliance were the two categories: Group Protective Factors; and Individual Protective Factors, each demonstrated to help participants distance from pressures of adherence to dominant appearance
norms and ideals within their peer environments. Specifically, Group Protective Factors included the two themes of: i) Accepting, Nonjudgmental Peer Groups; and ii) Alternative Group Norms. Although these themes were less prevalent during the period of adolescence, they significantly supported participants in resisting dominant peer pressures and retaining greater comfort in their bodies within the context of their friends and peers.

Individual Protective Factors included the two themes of: i) Agency; and ii) Clarity, and Locating Oneself in Relation to the Peer Group. Although expressions of Agency were most commonly exhibited in middle to late childhood, when participants described freedom to live in their bodies and connect with others according to their own desires, expressions of Agency throughout development significantly supported participants in distancing from peer conformity. Further, participants’ Clarity in adulthood of the cumulative, shaping experiences of their peers across their lives was shown to similarly support women in positioning themselves apart from negative peer pressures and influences, fostering greater respect, comfort and freedom in their bodies.
CHAPTER SIX
DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to explore the role of peers in women’s lived experiences in their bodies from childhood to young adulthood, and specifically the peer processes that have enhanced, maintained or disrupted women’s connection to their bodies over time. The investigation, which adopted a critical social perspective, focused on fourteen women’s recollections of their experiences with friends and peers over the course of their life. Women with and without current and former struggles with eating and/or their body image were included to explore the impact of peers on their diverse experiences in their bodies. Analyses of the women’s unique experiences contributed to the development of two interrelated models: the first which examined peer processes related to the promotion of dominant and alternative norms, ideals and expectations regarding appearance and ways of inhabiting the body as girls and women, and the second which uncovered the implications of these processes on social power and acceptance within peer environments.

Based on women’s life history accounts, various peer processes were identified as contributing to the transmission and internalization of norms pertaining to the ideal body appearance, and idealized ways of inhabiting the body as a girl and woman (in reference to eating, sexuality, and engagement in activities, interests and educational pursuits). Further, these widely sanctioned norms, ideals and expectations pertaining to women’s bodies and appearance were frequently expressed and internalized through concerns for status, power, belonging and acceptance. Together, these models provide a conceptual framework to illustrate some of the ways in which peers influence women’s experiences in their bodies over time.

The present study expanded the existing psychological literature pertaining to the influence of peers on women’s body image in several important ways. It is the first study to adopt
a chronological, life-history inquiry of peer processes and women’s internalized reactions to these processes, from earliest memories to the present day, allowing for an examination of shifts in women’s internalized body experiences over time. Secondly, by employing a critical social perspective to analyzing life history interviews, the study illuminated women’s subjective experiences of living in their bodies as they have been uniquely shaped by dynamic social processes that have enhanced and/or disrupted connection to their bodies across the lifespan. Thirdly, the representation of women from diverse social locations illustrated the complexity of women’s lived body experiences as they have been influenced by an interaction with social factors that afford or deny them with power and privilege. Lastly, in addition to uncovering risk factors that have contributed to women’s disconnection from their bodies, the present inquiry also attended to peer protective factors that have supported women in connecting with their bodies over time. Given that no published research accounts have systematically examined women’s life history experiences with peers collectively along these aforementioned domains, the present findings will be discussed in reference to previous research of peer influences on body image, highlighting important parallels and discrepancies. Strengths and limitations of the findings will also be presented, along with recommendations for future research and clinical implications.

MODEL 1: Peer Processes Related to Dominant and Alternative Norms, Ideals and Expectations Regarding Body Appearance and Idealized ways of Inhabiting the Body as Girls and Women

One of the ways in which the present study extends the existing research is through the development of a conceptual model, which illustrates peer processes that both promote and challenge norms, ideals and expectations pertaining to participants’ physical appearances, and also to the ways in which they inhabit their bodies as girls and women. While psychological literature has supported the role that peers play in contributing to adolescent girls’ and young
adult women’s body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, existing studies have not accounted for the complexity of girls’ and women’s internalized body experiences as they are shaped by peer processes throughout various stages of development, as well as factors supporting girls and women in retaining positive relationships with their bodies over time. Expressed across two interrelated domains presented earlier in chapters three and four, this first model supports and enhances existing knowledge of the peer influences that shape young women’s diverse experiences in their bodies across their lifespan.

Peer Processes Related to the Ideal Body Appearance

The first domain of model one addressed idealized norms of appearance within peer environments across development. It included the two core categories of: Peer Processes Promoting the Ideal Body Appearance, and Peer Processes Challenging the Ideal Body Appearance.

Peer Processes Promoting the Ideal Body Appearance

Norms regarding the ideal body appearance were widely sanctioned and transmitted within participants’ peer environments across development. Described by all participants, these norms were found in this study to be transmitted and reinforced through two types of peer processes: social comparisons, and evaluative message and appearance based conversations.

Social Comparison

All participants engaged in social comparisons with friends and peers that promoted their preoccupation with norms, ideals and expectations pertaining to the ideal body appearance, namely the ‘thin ideal.’ These results are in line with Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and previous research highlighting the role of social comparison on adolescent girls’ and young adult women’s body dissatisfaction and engagement in weight-loss behaviours (e.g., Paxton et al., 1999; Shutz et al., 2002; Shomaker & Furman, 2007). The present study expands the existing
knowledge by describing, based on these young women’s retrospective accounts, the developmental progression of women's social comparisons with peers from girlhood to womanhood. It further suggests that the developmental progression of women’s comparisons with peers needs to be examined in relation to the transmission of three different appearance related norms: norms of body size and shape, norms of pubertal changes, and norms related to ethnocultural differences. The following section describes the findings of developmental changes in social comparisons along these three appearance related norms in relation to existing research literature.

Looking first at childhood, women in the present study began to engage in social comparisons with their peers on the basis of differences in body size and shape beginning towards the end of early to middle childhood (5-7 years). Given that time spent with school-aged peers increases substantially at this stage in development, peers are understandably one of the most salient sources of social comparison at this time (Rubin et al., 2006). In the present study, arising from comparisons across distinguishable physical characteristics with their peers (e.g., height, weight, body size), participants in middle childhood developed an external awareness of their bodies, though most did not endorse critical self-evaluations of their appearance in reference to social comparisons with peers at this age. Only one participant conveyed critical self-evaluations of her body, namely feeling self-conscious of the size of her thighs in reference to her peers in kindergarten. These findings are not consistent with a few interview-based studies that have examined preschoolers’ critical evaluations of their own and their peers’ appearances. For instance, in a study of peer influences on preschool girls’ body satisfaction, Dohnt and Tiggemann (2005) concluded that by the age of 5, girls showed pronounced expressions of body dissatisfaction, which appeared to be a function of shared peer norms for thinness measured by their perceived peers’ body dissatisfaction, discussions regarding bodies and appearances; and
awareness of teasing related to body size and shape. Extending upon this research, Dohnt and Tiggemann’s (2006) prospective study of girls between 5 and 8 years of age, similarly concluded that norms and ideals regarding thinness infiltrated preschoolers’ peer environments and impacted girls’ satisfaction with their appearances and desire for thinness in reference to their peers, over time.

Generational differences may account for the age discrepancies between the current study’s findings and these former research studies. For instance, in the past ten years body dissatisfaction and the prevalence of eating disorders have risen significantly among a younger generation of girls. A study published in 2009 by the U.S. Agency for Health Care Research and Quality, indicated a staggering 119% increase in eating disorder hospitalizations for children under the age of twelve, between 1999 and 2006. Consistent with research on the sociocultural risk factors of eating disorders, this statistic suggests that girls of today’s generation are internalizing dominant messages regarding the thin ideal at a younger age than women in the generation of the present study, who frequently cited early to middle childhood as a time of “blissful unselfconsciousness” in their bodies. In addition, the discrepancies in findings between the present investigation and studies with preschoolers may relate to methodological differences. Utilizing retrospective recall, social comparisons and critical self-evaluations regarding body size and shape were not prominent in participants’ memories from early to middle childhood.

In contrast to early and middle childhood, the present study found that by the age of around 9-10, social comparisons with female peers heightened considerably and were associated with participants’ external awareness and a pronounced evaluative external gaze of their bodies. By this ‘tweens’ stage, all participants described living in their bodies often from a place of external evaluation and almost constant self-surveillance in reference to their peers. Further, social comparisons with peers heightened significantly in relation to physical changes
accompanying puberty, during late childhood and early adolescence, resulting in women becoming acutely aware of differences in their body physicality in reference to their peers and the thin ideal. Extending into young adulthood, social comparisons on the basis of body size and shape continued to remain pronounced within women’s peer environments, reinforcing the thin ideal, body dissatisfaction and preoccupation with adherence to norms of thinness.

The present findings relate to existing research examining the impact of social comparison of body size and shape, on both girls’ and young women’s internalization of norms and ideals for thinness. For instance, appearance comparisons have been proposed as one of the primary mechanisms through which internalization of the thin ideal results in body dissatisfaction and weight-control behaviours (Heinberg & Thompson, 1992; Thompson, Coovert & Stormer, 1999). Quantitative studies with adolescent girls and college-aged women have demonstrated a positive correlation between social comparisons and body dissatisfaction (Heinberg & Thompson, 1992; Paxton et al., 1999; Schutz et al., 2002; Stormer & Thompson, 1996; Streigel-Moore, McAvay & Rodin, 1986), as well as increased drive for thinness (Paxton et al., 1999; Schutz et al., 2002; Stormer & Thompson, 1996).

For instance, in a cross-sectional self-report survey study among girls in grade 10, Paxton et al., (1999) found that body comparisons with peers was associated with body image dissatisfaction, dietary restraint and the use extreme weight-loss behaviours. Further, in a large-scale study across six schools in Melbourne, Australia, Schutz and colleagues (2002) distributed questionnaires to 500 girls from grades 7, 8 and 10, assessing frequency of body comparisons, body image attitudes, eating patterns, and perceived peer and family preoccupation with weight and dieting. The researchers concluded an increase in appearance-related comparisons across age, and a significant positive association between social comparison and body dissatisfaction, value placed of thinness, and engagement in dieting. Notably, body comparisons occurred most
frequently in reference to female peers as opposed to other family members and media figures. Further, in their respective studies with women between the ages of 17 and 23 years of age, Stormer and Thompson (1996), and Thompson and Heinberg (1993), each concluded that the frequency of women’s body comparisons predicted increased body dissatisfaction, dieting and body image disturbances. However, differences across sources of comparison (e.g., peers, friends, family members, media figures) were not analyzed.

Although these existing quantitative studies support the role of social comparison in girls’ and women’s body dissatisfaction and propensity to engage in weight control behaviours, they have relied on quantitative scale measurements to infer about the nature of the relationships between social comparisons and body image, and few delineate differences between sources of comparison (e.g., peers, media figures, etc.). Two qualitative studies have attempted to expand this literature by analyzing girls’ narratives regarding the impact of social comparisons with their peers. Wertheim and colleagues (1997) interviewed thirty adolescent girls with respect to various sociocultural pressures to be thin (e.g., media, family and peers). Social comparison emerged as an important contributor of girls’ tendency to engage in dieting and weight-watching. Further, across various social influences (e.g., models depicted in the media, family members, and peers), close friends and other girls at school were cited as the most frequent sources of comparison. However, little information was gleaned regarding the nature of girls’ comparisons with their peers or their internalized reactions to them at the time.

Extending upon these findings, Mafrici (2009) examined prospective interviews from ten girls’ at pre- (10-12) and post-puberty (13-15), revealing important distinctions in the nature of appearance comparisons across development. Specifically, social comparisons among girls in pre-puberty occurred predominantly along the domains of clothing and body hair, whereas social comparisons in post-puberty revolved almost exclusively around body size and shape. Further,
appearance comparisons, in general, were demonstrated to result in girls’ internalization of an evaluative external gaze of their body, maintained throughout puberty and beyond. Two significant strengths of the research were the attention paid to internal processes that arose in response to body comparisons with peers (e.g., internalization of the evaluative external gaze), as well as the prospective design that allowed for consideration of changes between pre- and post-puberty. Given that the majority of research on social comparisons among peers has focused exclusively on adolescent and young adult women, this research highlighted the significance of appearance comparisons in promoting an evaluative gaze of the body as young as 10 years of age; a finding consistent with results from the present study.

However, no known qualitative studies exist on the nature of body comparisons with friends and peers on adult women’s experiences in their bodies. As previously mentioned, although former quantitative studies support the relationship between comparisons across body domains (e.g., size and shape) and women’s body dissatisfaction and weight-control behaviours (e.g., Heinberg & Thompson, 1992; Shomaker & Furman, 2007; Thompson et al., 1999), no information has been gleaned on developmental trends regarding women’s body-based comparisons with their peers. For instance, among several women in the present study, transitioning into young adulthood, and an often new and unknown peer environment, such as college or university, heightened processes of social comparison with female friends and peers, contributing to their evaluative gaze of their bodies and subsequent dissatisfaction and preoccupation with adherence to norms of thinness. This pattern was especially pronounced among women who struggled with disordered eating during adolescence. These findings are important in light of identifying predictors of body-based comparisons for the prevention of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. While little research has been devoted to uncovering such predictors, in Schutz and colleagues’ (2002), quantitative study with adolescent girls, regression
analysis demonstrated the significant impact of placing high value on thinness on girls’ susceptibility to engage in body-based comparisons with their peers. Consistent with the present study’s findings, body weight and shape preoccupation and the strong internalization of thinness within peer environments in adolescence appear to make some women vulnerable to heightened body comparisons among friends and peers in young adulthood.

In addition to comparisons across body size and shape, differences associated with pubertal changes emerged as another important source of comparison among peers in late childhood to early adolescence. Prevalent across all women’s narratives, social comparisons with peers at this stage gave rise to the strongest reported sentiments of discomfort and self-consciousness in inhabiting the body across development, frequently resulting in several women hiding or concealing their bodies out of embarrassment or shame, and refraining from previously enjoyed activities with their peers throughout adolescence.

Theoretical literature on self-development highlights the cusp of early adolescence as a time when girls become increasingly preoccupied by the perceptions their peers hold of them, leading them to engage in self-evaluation and comparisons, particularly across attributes of physical appearance (Harter, 2006). However, empirical research on the impact of puberty on girls’ body experiences remains mixed. For instance, in a review of the quantitative research assessing the influence of pubertal status and timing on girls’ body dissatisfaction and subsequent engagement in weight-control strategies, Stice (2003) outlined several studies that have supported the notion that girls who reach menarche earlier than their peers experience heightened body dissatisfaction and eating pathology (Field et al., 1999; Koff & Rierden, 1993; Stice, Presnell & Bearman, 2001), whereas other studies have found no significant effects (Cattarin & Thompson, 1994; Swarr & Richards, 1996). Inconsistency between these results has been attributed to methodological issues, such as the reliance on survey questionnaires and self-report data, rather than on structured
interviews that may have illuminated the processes that shape girls’ understanding of their bodies at this time in development.

Lending support for the value of qualitative research within this domain, two recent interview studies with girls and young adult women, respectively, have demonstrated the importance of puberty in shaping girls’ experiences in their bodies, particularly in reference to their peers. For instance, a prospective study that inquired about body anchored experiences among girls, ages 9 to 18, found puberty as a significant point of transition in the lives of young girls who develop a new awareness of their bodies as they mature into adult women (Mafrci, 2009; Piran et al., 2002, Piran & Teall, 2012). As their bodies naturally deviated from the widely sanctioned (prepubescent) thin ideal, pubescent girls were found to inhabit their bodies from an objectified gaze, resulting in preoccupation with adherence to social molds and ideals that restricted their physical desires and appetites and disrupted comfort in their bodies (Piran et al., 2002; Piran & Teall, 2011). Expanding upon these findings, in her dissertation exploring women’s life history experiences with food and eating, Antoniou (2009) discovered that early or late pubertal development negatively influenced participants’ relationships to their bodies, and to food and eating. Most notably, these studies problematized existing quantitative research that has largely ignored the underlying social processes that contribute to girls’ cognitive and behavioural reactions to puberty. For instance, both studies highlighted the role of self and peer evaluations based on social comparisons as a frequent experience among girls who developed earlier or later than their peers.

The results from the present study lend additional support to these findings while deepening our understanding of participants’ internalized reactions to social comparisons in relation to pubertal timing. For instance, as girls’ compared their bodies to female peers who were more or less developed, they internalized discrepancies across widely sanctioned norms and ideals of the
female body (e.g., differences in pre- and post-pubescent body size, breast development), resulting in heightened body-surveillance, pronounced sentiments of discomfort in their bodies, and preoccupation with conforming to dominant body norms and ideals, which continued for many participants throughout adolescence.

Alongside social comparisons across body size and shape, and pubertal changes, ethnocultural differences and cultural transitions were similarly shown to accentuate processes of comparison between peers throughout all stages of development, reinforcing the internalization of the thin ideal. Described by over half the participants who appeared physically different than their peers because of their ethnicity, and/or who travelled to different countries that accentuated noticeable differences in their physical appearances, comparisons on the basis of ethnocultural differences contributed to women’s internalization of dominant cultural norms of attractiveness, resulting in heightened body surveillance and consciousness as a result of perceived discrepancies between their self and the cultural ideal.

Literature on sociocultural risk factors for the development of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating among girls and women has addressed the role of the internalization of cultural standards of attractiveness, namely the thin ideal (Cafri et al., 2005; Stice, 2002; Stice & Whitenton, 2002). Further, research on adolescent girls’ comparisons with idealized media images (Durkin et al., 2007), as well as female peers (Jones & Crawford, 2006), supports the role of social comparison in influencing women’s internalization of these cultural standards of attractiveness and subsequent weight and shape preoccupation. However, until recently eating disorders and body image disturbances have largely been understood as “culture-bound” syndromes predominantly affecting Caucasian women living in Western societies (Attie & Brooks-Gunn, 1995; Striegel-Moore & Smolak, 2000). For instance, many studies have supported the notion that compared to other female groups, European American women are at an increased
risk for developing eating disorders as a result of their internalization of Western beauty ideals. Striegel-Moore and Smolak (2000) argue, however, that many of these studies have failed to consider important cultural factors, such as acculturation, discrimination or ethnic identity, and instead compare minority groups to Caucasian groups based simply on ratings of eating pathology.

Over the past decade, however, greater attention has been given to the influence of internalizing cultural norms of female attractiveness across different ethnic minority groups (see Stiegel-Moore & Smolak, 2000). For instance, stress accompanying acculturation and pressures associated with assimilating to the dominant culture, have been proposed as mechanisms through which ethnic minority females internalize and ultimately adopt North American standards of female attractiveness (e.g., the ‘White ideal’). Further, several studies have demonstrated an effect of acculturation on weight concerns and disordered eating among minority girls and women (Ball & Kenardy, 2002; Furnham & Patel, 1994; Lauderdale & Rathouz, 2000), however, none have specifically explored the role of the peer domain and the influence of social comparisons in contributing to the internalization of cultural norms for thinness.

Results from the current study add to this existing literature in two important ways. Firstly, by suggesting that the internalization of the White ideal and cultural norms of attractiveness, are activated through social comparisons with peers, and are as relevant as social comparisons to weight alone. And secondly, by delineating a developmental progression of these processes, beginning with participants’ implicit awareness of characteristic differences in skin, hair and eye colour in middle childhood, evolving into pronounced comparisons in reference to the ‘White ideal’, contributing to heightened body consciousness by late childhood and continuing into adulthood.
In addition to influences within the peer environment alone, the media and family were each demonstrated to further accentuate participants’ social comparisons with peers, fuelling their internalization of cultural standards of attractiveness, and namely, the thin ideal.

Firstly, with respect to media’s role, although previous research demonstrates that exposure to mass media images influences women’s negative self-perceptions (Levine & Harrison, 2004), the mechanisms through which women internalize cultural standards of beauty from the media have largely remained unclear. One proposed mechanism has been through social comparisons with media images, resulting in women’s internalization of the cultural ideal (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). Results from the present study expand upon this theory by suggesting that exposure to media messages not only enhances comparisons with media images themselves, but also reinforces girls’ and women’s propensity to engage in body-based comparisons with their peers, contributing to their internalization of cultural standards of attractiveness and heightened body surveillance in reference to the White ideal.

While the media was not a focus of the present study, the interaction between the presentation of social media messages and girls’ and women’s propensity to engage in appearance-based comparisons with their peers represents an important consideration for initiatives aimed at reducing the level at which young girls internalize unrealistic beauty standards. For instance, while attempts have been made to broaden the depiction of a single female beauty ideal, the media is unrelenting in changing its standards on the premise that thin images are more profitable (Dittmar & Howard, 2004). Thus, interventions focused on educating girls on the impact of mass media images and social comparisons in relation to their internalization of oppressive female representations, may help to counter some of the negative effects of the media.

Parents were similarly demonstrated to heighten participants’ propensity to engage in social
comparisons with their peers in relation to body size and shape, particularly throughout adolescence. Specifically, parents who conveyed strong norms about the importance of thinness within the home during childhood contributed to their daughters’ later engagement in body comparisons with their peers at school, resulting in increased body discomfort and dissatisfaction with their appearances throughout adolescence.

Previous research has acknowledged the role of parents in contributing to girls’ dissatisfaction and preoccupation with their bodies and appearances, through modeling disruptive eating behaviours (e.g., Pike and Rodin, 1991; Field et al., 2005; Smolak et al., 1999), as well as comments about appearances and direct encouragement to diet (e.g., Dixon, Adair & O’Connor, 1996; Pike and Rodin, 1991). For instance, Pike and Rodin (1991) discovered that mothers of adolescent girls who experienced disordered eating, were more likely themselves to engage in disruptive eating practices than girls who did not experience disordered eating. Further, these daughters were more likely to be rewarded by their mothers for restricting their food intake than girls of who did not experience disordered eating. Additionally, Smolak and colleagues (1999) assessed the effects of maternal and paternal weight-related comments and dieting on fourth and fifth grade girls and boys using a self-report survey, demonstrating that parental comments about weight were positively correlated with girls’ attempts to lose weight.

Comparing the influences of families, media and peers on girls’ body dissatisfaction and engagement in weight control behaviours, McCabe and Ricciardelli (2005) distributed questionnaires to 423 adolescent boys and 377 adolescent girls, assessing for perceived sociocultural influences on body image and body change strategies. Results revealed that while parents were more important sources of sociocultural messages regarding thinness than peers or the media, female friends played a significant role in girls’ propensity to engage in body change strategies. However, the study relied on the associations between quantitative self-report
measurements and therefore, did not examine the cognitive processes involved in participants’ understanding of the social pressures in their environment and the mechanisms through which they influenced their weight and shape preoccupation and/or eating behaviours. The present study thus broadens our understanding of the interaction between parental and peer influences by suggesting that parents impact the intensity of social comparisons with peers around body size and shape; an interaction that should be tested quantitatively in future research.

Evaluative Messages and Appearance-based Conversations

In addition to social comparisons, evaluative messages and appearance-based conversations were the second category of peer processes that promoted the ideal body appearance. These messages were either socially rewarding (i.e., praising participants for embodying the thin ideal) or disapproving (i.e., criticizing participants for their non-adherence to the thin ideal). Evaluative messages and appearance conversations were demonstrated to emerge by the end of late childhood although strengthened considerably throughout adolescence, and continued for several women into adulthood, reinforcing their internalization of the thin ideal.

Previous literature has documented the influence of appearance-based messages and conversations on body dissatisfaction and disordered eating among adolescent girls (e.g., Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2009; Jones et al., 2004; Lieberman et al., 2001; Nichter, 2000; Paxton et al., 1999). For instance, utilizing quantitative methodologies, Jones et al. (2004) found a positive correlation between appearance conversations with friends and the internalization of appearance ideals contributing to body dissatisfaction among both girls and boys in grades 7 through 10. Notably, girls reported a greater frequency of appearance conversations, stronger internalization of appearance ideals, and less satisfaction with their appearances than boys. Quantitative studies assessing developmental differences have further noted significantly more conversations related
to appearance among post-adolescent, compared to pre-adolescent girls (Clark & Tiggemann, 2007; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Sinton & Birch, 2006).

A significant limitation of these quantitative studies is the minimal information gleaned regarding the nature of appearance conversations (e.g., the content of the messages girls received), and the impact they had in promoting peer group norms for thinness. Alternatively, the use of qualitative methodologies allows for an exploration into these types of messages and how they impact girls’ experiences in their bodies in relation to their peers. For instance, Nichter (2000) conducted several interview studies highlighting the normative role of “fat talk” among adolescent girls, whereby girls conveyed dissatisfaction with their bodies and appearances, influencing a culture of thinness in the peer environment that promoted anti-fat attitudes and established group identity based on strict appearance norms and ideals.

Despite the insight acquired through Nichter’s research with adolescent girls, studies that have explored appearance-based messages with peers have not accounted for the underlying cognitive and behavioural processes that contribute to participants’ preoccupation with the ideal body. The present investigation thus adds to these existing studies by specifically exploring women’s narratives about their reactions to these messages, in particular, in relation to the ideal body appearance. Analyses revealed that both socially rewarding and disapproving messages similarly promoted an evaluative external gaze of the body, which depending on the nature of the message (positive or negative) contributed to either heightened body esteem or body consciousness, and subsequent preoccupation with sustaining or attaining the ideal.

Lending support to some of these processes, Antoniou’s (2009) qualitative dissertation exploring women’s life history experiences with food and eating, which similarly utilized a life history approach and examined women’s responses to appearance-based comments, revealed that peer appearance-based comments during adolescence, whether positive or negative, objectified
participants’ bodies, resulting in self-scrutiny and experiences of body shame. These comments were further demonstrated to contribute to women’s propensity to change their eating to conform to the ideal. While Antoniou’s (2009) study noted that these messages occurred mainly during adolescence, results from the present study revealed that socially rewarding and disapproving messages were widespread beginning in late childhood and extending throughout adolescence and adulthood, contributing to women’s pronounced evaluative gaze of their bodies across development.

Although women’s experiences with peer appearance conversations in adulthood are significantly less researched, a few experimentally controlled studies exploring college-aged women’s attitudes towards “fat talk” and appearance-based comments from unknown female confederates have suggested that the same type of self-degrading dialogue of the body observed among adolescent girls, is a normative practice among adult women (Britton et al., 2006; Stice, 2003; Tucker, Martz, Curtin, & Bazzini, 2007), and that appearance conversations contribute to self-objectification regardless of whether women interpret the comments as positive or negative (Calogero & Thompson, 2009). Further, weight-related feedback from peers has been shown to be especially important to young women’s mood and self-esteem, in addition to their body image.

In a randomized controlled study, Mills and Miller (2007) compared the effects of receiving negative verbal weight-related feedback from a “peer” experimenter (e.g., undergraduate student) versus a “non-peer” experimenter (e.g., graduate student) among 138 female undergraduate students. Compared to the non-peer condition, participants in the peer condition reported greater dissatisfaction with their bodies, and among those identified as restrained eaters, higher depressive scores following negative weight-related feedback. An acknowledged limitation of the study was the lack of a formal manipulation check regarding how much of a “peer” the experimenter was perceived to be by the participants. Overall, existing studies have not explored
the influence of “fat talk” and other appearance conversations, or weight-related feedback as they occur spontaneously within adult women’s natural peer environments.

The present investigation thus expanded the existing literature in three important domains. Firstly, by delineating women’s internalized reactions to messages they receive from friends regarding their body and appearance. Secondly, by demonstrating that “fat talk” and conversations about appearances are a normative discourse not only among adolescent girls, but also among adult women’s peer environments, similarly promoting internalization and preoccupation with ideals of thinness. And thirdly, by suggesting that in understanding the impact of evaluative social conversations, it is important to examine both messages that are disapproving or critical, as well as those that are socially rewarding, as the latter have received little to no attention in the existing research, yet evidently had an adverse impact on women’s experiences in their bodies over time in the present investigation.

In addition to diet talk and appearance conversations, many participants cited instances of appearance-based teasing and harassment, which reinforced strict norms regarding the ideal body. Teasing and harassment was most commonly directed towards body size and shape, although a few women described instances of teasing related to visible ethnocultural differences. During late childhood, women reported either being the target of, or witnessing weight-based teasing, which reinforced norms regarding the importance of thinness. However, during adolescence, in addition to teasing by other girls, the women in the present study described male peers as the most common perpetrators of appearance-based teasing. Further, particularly in early adolescence, as concerns surrounding desirability heightened, male-instigated appearance-based teasing severely disrupted participants’ experiences in their bodies, who withdrew from their peer environments as a result of severe body consciousness. In young adulthood and beyond, none of the women
reported weight-based teasing from friends or peers; with only four women describing instances of teasing from family members or other individuals in their larger social environments.

Other research findings have highlighted body size and shape as a common source of teasing and stigmatization within the peer environment. For instance, in a retrospective self-report study exploring past experiences of teasing among a sample of 111 women between the ages of 18 and 30, 72% reported a history of weight-related teasing, with peers cited as the most common perpetrators throughout childhood and adolescence (Cash, 1995). Regarding developmental trends, experimental studies have revealed that weight-based stigmatization towards overweight peers emerges in early to middle childhood (Rich, Essery, Sanborn, DiMarco, Morales & LeClere, 2008), with 4-year old children assigning negative adjectives (e.g., “mean”) to ‘chubby’ images of children and positive adjectives (e.g., “nice”) to ‘thin’ or ‘average’ images of children (Cramer & Steinwert, 1998). These findings are not consistent with the present study, which demonstrated that weight-based teasing and critical dialogue about the body did not emerge until the age of around ten. Once again, generational and methodological differences, such as the use of retrospective recall in the present study, may account for such discrepancies.

Regarding the period of adolescence, quantitative studies have demonstrated that biased attitudes towards weight and body-related teasing are especially prevalent in early to middle adolescence, and appear to decrease with age (Haines, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, van den Berg & Eisenberg, 2008; Latner, Stunkard & Wilson, 2005; Rand & Wright, 2000); a finding consistent with the present study. For instance, in their prospective study assessing self-reported instances of teasing among adolescents between 12 and 17, Haines et al. (2008) revealed that weight-related teasing by peers occurred most frequently during early adolescence and progressively decreased by late adolescence and into young adulthood. Qualitative studies further support the prominent role of weight-related teasing in early adolescence, when norms and ideals
regarding thinness are widely transmitted and internalized within the peer environment. For instance, in each of their respective interview-based studies with adolescent girls, Brown (2003), Nichter (2000) and Wertheim et al. (1997) similarly noted the heightened prevalence of appearance-related victimization by peers in early adolescence. Extending upon the existing quantitative studies by exploring not only the frequency, but also the nature of teasing in girls’ lived peer environments, Brown (2003) and Nichter (2000) articulated the role of weight-related teasing in promoting dominant cultural ideals of the female body as girls policed one another’s bodies based on their adherence or non-adherence to strict appearance norms.

Although existing literature on adult women’s experiences of weight-based peer teasing is scarce, one recent study which employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodology to assess overweight and obese adults’ subjective experiences of weight stigmatization across the lifespan, revealed that participants’ worst reported experiences of weight-based teasing and stigmatization occurred in adulthood and were instigated predominantly by peers or family members (Puhl, Moss-Racusin, Schwartz & Brownell, 2008). These results are not consistent with results from the present study, where none of the participants reported weight-based stigmatization by friends or peers in adulthood. However, methodological differences, such as the study sample, likely account for such differences. For instance, only overweight and obese individuals were included in Puhl et al.’s (2008) study. Given that overweight status is associated with higher levels of teasing (Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Hannan, Perry & Irving, 2002), it is not surprising that Puhl et al.’s sample reported higher instances of stigmatization compared to the current study, where few participants were overweight. Collectively, these results reinforce the importance of consideration into weight status as a significant risk factor for peer weight-related teasing and harassment.
Further, across development, weight-related teasing in the present study was demonstrated to significantly heighten women’s body consciousness, contributing to their preoccupation with attaining thinness. These results are supported by existing quantitative studies that have documented the harmful effects of weight-related teasing among children, adolescents and adults (Cash, 1995; Esienberg et al., 2003; Lieberman et al., 2001; Lindberg et al., 2007; Paxton et al., 1999). For instance, in a self-report study with children and adolescents between 10 and 14 years of age, instances of weight-based teasing were associated with higher weight concern, poorer self-perception of one’s physical appearance and increased dieting behaviour, particularly among overweight children and adolescents (Hayden-Wade, et al., 2005). Similar results have been found in retrospective quantitative studies among adults who recollected teasing experiences from childhood and adolescence, revealing that a history of teasing was associated with higher body image disturbances and increased eating pathology in adulthood (Cash, 1995; Fairburn et al., 1998; Sweetingham & Waller, 2008). However, several limitations exist across these studies. For instance, many have not distinguished among perpetrators of the teasing (e.g., peers, family or strangers etc.). Further, none have included an examination of the perpetrator’s gender. And lastly, none have explored the impact of vicarious weight-based peer teasing on girls’ and women’s own body experiences. The present study thus expanded the existing literature on peer appearance teasing by highlighting the important role of male peers as a common source of body-based teasing for girls, and by demonstrating that witnessing peer weight-based teasing has a significant adverse impact on girls’ and women’s disrupted experiences in their bodies, and should be explored further in quantitative studies.

In addition to teasing related to body size and shape, a few of the participants reflected on instances of teasing based on ethnocultural differences, which occurred exclusively between late childhood and middle adolescence. The present study further revealed that ethnocultural-based
teasing significantly contributed to women’s evaluative gaze of their bodies and heightened body consciousness in reference to dominant cultural beauty norms and ideals. The fact that all women who reported episodes of ethnocultural-based teasing significantly struggled in their bodies to lose weight and conform to cultural norms of thinness throughout adolescence, stresses the importance of researchers and clinicians attending to the role of oppressive social factors (e.g., racial/cultural/ethnic discrimination) on girls’ and women’s susceptibility to developing body image disturbances and/or disordered eating.

These results are in line with several former studies that have examined the impact and prevalence of ethnocultural teasing, primarily termed ‘racial teasing’ in the existing literature to imply the targeting of ethnically distinctive attributes of appearance. Among children and adolescents, for instance, Kelly and Cohn (1988) discovered racial teasing to be the most common source of teasing among 10 to 17 year-old students in England. However, the impact of teasing on participants’ body experiences were not analyzed. In their quantitative study on the impact of racial teasing among 122 college women of South Asian decent, Iyer and Haslam (2003) discovered that racial teasing was associated with increased body dissatisfaction and disturbed eating behaviours. Expanding upon Iyer and Haslam’s preliminary findings by examining the relationship across three different types of teasing (general appearance, weight/shape, and ethnic teasing) among a sample of 74 South Asian women between the ages of 18 and 30, Reddy and Crowther (2007) similarly discovered that ethnic teasing was associated with decreased body esteem and greater maladaptive eating behaviours.

Qualitative studies conducted with girls (Larkin & Rice, 2005) and women (Tee, 1997; Thompson, 1991), have lent additional support to these quantitative findings, highlighting the role of racial teasing in contributing to eating disturbances among minority girls and women. For instance, in their interviews with forty-five grade 7 and 8 female students in Ontario, Larkin and
Rice (2005) discovered that among the 35% of identified minority girls, anxieties about body weight were significantly heightened by harassment that promoted racial stereotypes about their bodies and pressures to conform to White, anglo-saxon norms. However, within each of these studies, perpetrators of the teasing were not identified (e.g., peers vs. close friends vs. family members vs. strangers, etc.), and girls’ and women’s internalized reactions (e.g., internalization of an evaluative external gaze of their body) to the teasing were not analyzed.

The present study expands these findings by examining the role of peers in instigating teasing and harassment based on ethnocultural differences beginning in late childhood and continuing throughout adolescence. Further, the study deepens our understanding of the impact of ethnocultural-based teasing in promoting women’s evaluative gaze of their bodies in relation to the dominant ideal, and greater efforts to abide by this ideal through achieving thinness.

Peer Processes Challenging the Ideal Body Appearance

In contrast to peer processes that promoted the transmission and internalization of the ideal body appearance, the second core category explored Peer Processes Challenging the Ideal Body Appearance. Given that no known literature exists on peer processes that foster girls’ and women’s connection to their bodies over time, the present study shed important light on peer processes that supported participants in distancing from internalized peer norms of thinness. Far less prevalent than the peer processes promoting the ideal body appearance, those which challenged the ideal occurred predominantly among participants in young adulthood and beyond, and included the two categories of: promoting alternative body norms, and messages that challenged and resisted preoccupation with the ideal.

Promoting Alternative Body Norms

Women in the present study described the transmission and internalization of alternative body norms, which deviated from the widely sanctioned thin ideal in most of their peer
environments. Given that adolescence evidently represented a time when norms for thinness prevailed in most participants’ peer environments, it is not surprising that the promotion of alternative body norms occurred predominantly among women in adulthood. The present investigation suggests that there are three peer processes that are involved in the promotion of alternative body norms: witnessing diversity in peers’ appearances, peers’ expressions of body comfort, and life experiences which supported comfort in the body and attempts to resist preoccupation with thinness.

In terms of diversity in peers’ appearances, witnessing such diversity contributed to some women’s ability to resist pressures for thinness in their peer environments by promoting alternative norms for women’s bodies and appearances. For instance, within adolescence, three women highlighted the importance of diversity in alternative ways of dressing that challenged dominant appearance expectations among their peers. In adulthood, women reflected not only on the significance of being surrounded by peers of diverse body shapes and sizes, but also those who conveyed comfort in their bodies. Among these peers, women reported greater expressions of comfort in their own bodies, contributing to their resistance to pressures for thinness. Further, among a few participants of non-Caucasian/European/Canadian backgrounds, exposure to peers of diverse cultural backgrounds in childhood, adolescence and adulthood, was an important protective factor for body preoccupation and pressures to adhere to dominant cultural ideals.

Although existing research on the topic is scarce, two recent qualitative research studies have highlighted the significance of memberships in peer groups that promote diversity in physical appearances on both adolescent girls’ and adult women’s ability to withstand appearance-related pressures in their peer environments. In a prospective study examining the interviews of ten girls’ pre- and post-puberty, regarding their experiences with peers in relation to their bodies, Mafrici (2009) highlighted the protectiveness of membership in peer groups that
promoted diversity in their appearances (e.g., styles of dress, body size and shape, ethnicity), which supported girls to resist dominant appearance pressures. Further, Mizevich’s (2012) qualitative dissertation exploring women’s resistance to societal pressure of thinness, which also utilized a life history approach, similarly demonstrated the protective influence of being surrounded by peers who are larger than the ideal, but who also exuded satisfaction and comfort in their bodies, ultimately promoting women’s own comfort and security in their bodies.

Five of the participants in the present study also commented on the significance of shaping life experiences, including recovery from mental health issues (e.g., addiction, depression, eating disorders), the experience of pregnancy and motherhood, as well as shared body image struggles among peers and partners, on their internalization of alternative body norms and resistance to pressures for thinness. These results support a very small domain of the existing research that has explored a trend in decreased incidences of disordered eating and body preoccupation among adult women. For instance, in a 10-year longitudinal self-report study exploring changes in disordered eating patterns among a sample of college students, Heatherton et al. (1997) discovered a significant decrease in eating disorder symptomatology from late adolescence to adulthood. Extending upon Heatherton et al.’s preliminary findings, Keel et al. (2007) explored the change in college student’s dieting and disordered eating behaviour over a twenty year time period, revealing that as women aged, they gained greater acceptance over their bodies and dieted less frequently. Further, women’s marital and parental status (e.g., being married and/or becoming a mother) was associated with a decrease in drive for thinness and disordered eating, however, the analyses only established correlations and did not assess the meaning women made of changes in these life roles on their reduced dieting behaviour. Results from the present study have expanded this literature by demonstrating the importance of consideration into contextual life events that account for changes in the preoccupation of thinness.
among adult women. Specifically, in addition to becoming a mother, recovery from mental health issues and a history of body image struggles appeared to reduce the importance women placed on their bodies and physical appearances as they matured into adult women.

Messages that Challenge and Resist Preoccupation with the Ideal

Although less prevalent among the women in the present study, messages that challenged and resisted preoccupation with the ideal was another important process that assisted women in distancing from the socially constructed thin ideal. Specifically, participants described: receiving supportive messages from their peers, as well as their own active resistance to appearance-focused messages.

A few interviewed women discussed the importance of receiving supportive messages from their peers that challenged preoccupation with the ideal. Significantly, among women who described receiving these messages, all reported receiving them from male peers and/or partners. Further, apart from one woman who reported receiving supportive messages that challenged the ideal from peers in adolescence, all women reported these messages in adulthood. Research on the significance of peer messages that reject the ideal, and support girls’ and women’s diversity in appearances, is once again, scarce. However, in her dissertation on factors that support women in resisting social pressures for thinness, Mizevich (2012) highlighted the importance of relationships with peers who do not make negative comments about women’s bodies or discuss body weight, as well as the presence of supportive romantic partnerships.

Even fewer women discussed their own active resistance to messages about the body, appearance and/or dieting within their peer groups in the present investigation. Further, they described their own agency in resisting messages about the body only in adulthood. Few studies exist to date that relate to resistant agency among girls and women. Mizevich (2012), in her retrospective life history study with fourteen adult women discovered that engaging in positive
self-talk and thinking critically about the messages they received, while rejecting conventional norms and expectations related to body weight and appearance, significantly supported women in resisting prominent social pressures for thinness. Currie et al. (2006), who studied twenty-one girls between 12 and 14 years of age, discovered the importance of girls’ active resistance to appearance-focused messages in their peer environments, and their adoption of a discourse of individualism, which distinguished them from their peer group, and distanced them from succumbing to appearance-related pressures. In conjunction with the present study, these findings suggest the necessity for further research examining processes of agency in resisting pressures for thinness among girls and women throughout the life span.

Peer Processes Related to Idealized Ways of Inhabiting the Body as Girl and Woman

Peer processes influenced not only participants’ experiences in relation to norms and ideals of body appearance, but also their experiences in relation to norms and ideals of inhabiting the body as girls and women. The domains of norms included: Food and Eating; Sexuality; and Activities; and Interests and Educational Pursuits.

Food and Eating

Across all developmental contexts friends and peers influenced participants’ attitudes and behaviours associated with food and eating. The following section begins with a discussion of: peer processes promoting adherence to norms and ideals associated with food and eating, followed by peer processes challenging adherence to norms and ideals associated with food and eating.

Promoting Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Food and Eating

Most of the participants described their adherence to peer norms and ideals for food and eating that disrupted their connection to their appetites, beginning in early adolescence, and extending for many women into adulthood. Results from the present study demonstrate that peer
processes disrupting women’s connection to their appetites emerged in relation to the pursuit of thinness, and ideals of health and wellness.

Promoting the pursuit of thinness in women’s peer environments were peer dieting, and pressures for thinness, both of which reinforced the social value of the thin ideal, and girls’ and women’s disrupted eating and appetites across development. The present study expands the existing literature of the influence of peer modeling and peer pressures for thinness, by delineating a developmental progression of these peer processes as they influenced participants from girlhood to womanhood.

In particular, peer dieting was described as a normative part of participants’ peer culture beginning in early adolescence, heightening in middle to late adolescence, and decreasing in adulthood. During adolescence, all but one participant who referenced dieting in their peer environments, described how witnessing their close female friends restrict their appetites and control their weight through food, reinforced strong social norms for thinness, resulting in heightened body consciousness and their own appetite restriction. Further, women who reported histories of disordered eating and/or struggling with their weight throughout adolescence were particularly susceptible to the influence of their friends’ and/or/partner’s dieting behaviours in adulthood, reinforcing their own desire to restrict their eating and appetites.

Existing research supports the finding that peers influence girls’ and women’s disruptive eating behaviours through modeling of dieting behaviours (Eisenberg & Neumark-Sztainer, 2010; Gravener et al., 2008; Keel et al., 2013; Lieberman et al., 2001; Paxton et al., 1999; Wertheim et al., 2007). In a quantitative longitudinal study examining friends’ dieting and disordered eating, Eisenberg and Neumark-Sztainer (2010) distributed surveys to 2516 adolescents in grades 7 through 8 from 29 middle and high schools in ethnically and socio-economically diverse communities across Minnesota. Results showed that friends’ dieting at baseline was positively
associated with girls’ chronic dieting, unhealthy and extreme weight control behaviours, and binge eating five years later. In a quantitative, cross-sectional study exploring the influence of friendships cliques on adolescent girls’ dieting behaviours and body image concerns, Paxton et al. (1999) demonstrated the frequency of friends’ weight loss behaviours as a significant predictor of girls’ own engagement in dieting and reported body image concerns. Lieberman et al. (2001) similarly found that peer modeling was predictive of adolescent girls’ own dieting behaviours in their cross-sectional survey study among girls in grades 7 through 10. Furthermore, a qualitative study conducted by Wertheim et al. (1997), examining sociocultural pressures for thinness among thirty grade 10 adolescents revealed that 50% of girls perceived their close friends’ own dieting behaviours to have influenced their own beliefs about dieting and watching their weight, even in the absence of direct verbal encouragement from their friends to diet.

Among adult women, only a few quantitative studies have explored the specific influence of peer dieting on women’s own susceptibility to restrict their appetites. Keel et al. (2013) explored the long-term influence of college peers on men and women’s disordered eating. Results showed that college roommates’ dieting significantly predicted women’s own drive for thinness and bulimic behaviours at 10 years follow-up. Further, in their attempt to compare developmental differences of peer dieting and drive for thinness, Gravener et al. (2008) surveyed women and men from three distinct age groups (late adolescence, adulthood and midlife). Results demonstrated significant associations between perceived peer dieting and drive for thinness in women, with strongest associations in late adolescence, and among same-sex peers. While Gravener et al.’s (2008) research suggests a developmental decline in the influence of peer dieting and drive for thinness among women, the researchers acknowledged the limitation of their cross-sectional design and the need for future studies that incorporate a developmental exploration across the same sample of individuals. Results form the present study, which included an analysis
of the developmental progression of these peer processes, lend support for the decline of peer
dieting influences on women’s own restricted eating and appetites as they transition from
adolescence to adulthood. In addition, the present study expanded the existing literature by
demonstrating that women with histories of disordered eating and body preoccupation in
adolescence are particularly susceptible to peer processes that continue to promote the pursuit of
thinness in adulthood; a finding that should be tested in future quantitative studies.

Perceived pressures for thinness, which included explicit comments from peers regarding
the importance of thinness, and women’s own perceptions of the value their friends place on
thinness, followed a similar developmental progression as peer dieting, surfacing in early
adolescence, heightening in middle adolescence, and decreasing in adulthood. Among all
participants, pressures for thinness within the peer environment contributed to their own
heightened body consciousness and subsequent restriction of their eating and appetites.

Previous quantitative research has largely supported the impact of peer pressures for
thinness on adolescent girls’ weight-control behaviours (Hutchinson & Rapee 2007; McCabe &
Ricciardelli, 2005; Paxton et al., 1999). For instance, in a self-report study of peer influences on
early adolescent girls’ body image and dieting behaviours, Hutchinson and Rapee (2007) found
that perceived peer influences of weight-related attitudes were predictive of girls’ own body
image concerns, dietary restraint and extreme weight loss behaviours. Additionally, in their
prospective quantitative study on pressures from parents, peers and the media on weight change
behaviours among grade 7 girls, McCabe and Ricciardelli (2005) showed that perceived pressures
to lose weight were positively correlated with girls’ own weight loss strategies over a period of
eight months, with the strongest sources of influence being female friends and mothers. In
contrast to these findings, in their cross-sectional survey study of girls in grades 7 through 10,
Lieberman et al. (2001) found that while peer modeling was an important predictor of adolescent
girls’ dieting behaviours, perceived pressures for thinness from peers, measured through ‘social reinforcement’ (e.g., “it is important to my friends that I am thin”), was not, suggesting that indirect forms of peer pressure (e.g., peer modeling), may be more important in influencing eating pathology than direct pressures. Wertheim et al.’s (1997) interview study with thirty grade 10 adolescents similarly suggested the importance of indirect over direct peer pressures, in influencing girls’ dieting and weight preoccupation. Results from the present study, however, are in line with Hutchinson and Rapee’s (2007) and McCabe and Ricciardelli’s (2005) studies, demonstrating that both indirect and direct peer pressures are equally important contributors to adolescent girls’ dieting behaviour.

Expanding upon McCabe and Ricciardelli’s (2005) study of the impact of multiple social influences (peers, family, media) on girls’ adoption of weight-control strategies, the present study also demonstrated the interrelatedness between family and peer influences on girls’ attitudes towards food and eating. For instance, all participants who experienced pressures for thinness, originating primarily from their mothers, in middle to late childhood, appeared particularly susceptible to peer pressures for thinness throughout adolescence. While future quantitative research is necessary to evaluate this correlation, the present study suggests that norms for thinness transmitted within the family environment in childhood may contribute to girls’ increased susceptibility to later internalize social pressures for thinness within their peer environments, contributing to disrupted eating attitudes and behaviours.

Within adulthood, significantly fewer women reported continuing to experience pressures for thinness from their peers. Apart from peer dieting, limited research has explored perceived peer pressures for thinness on adult women’s internalization of social norms for the female body and their subsequent restriction of food and eating. Among the few quantitative studies that exist, researchers have demonstrated that college-aged women who perceive thinness to be important to
their peers have lower body esteem and greater concern for their appearances (Krcmar et al., 2008; Shomaker & Furman, 2007). For instance, in a self-report study among 427 female college students at a private university in the United States, Krcmar et al. (2008) found that young women who perceived that their peers valued thinness had lower body esteem. In an experimental study where 80 female undergraduate students were assigned to observe one of two prearranged conversations with female confederates (one in which one confederate pressured the other to be thin; the other in which the confederate provided positive encouragement), Shomaker and Furman (2007) demonstrated that participants in the ‘pressure to be thin’ condition experienced lower body satisfaction following the conversation, but only among participants characterized by high degrees of social comparison and appearance orientation. These results suggest the importance of social comparison in mediating the relationship between peer pressures for thinness and body dissatisfaction. Further, in their quantitative, cross-sectional study with college-aged women, van den Berg et al., (2002) discovered that peer pressures for thinness directly influenced women’s restrictive and bulimic behaviours. However, all of these studies have been cross-sectional in nature and/or experimentally manipulated, making it impossible to determine the influence of these perceived pressures over time within women’s natural peer environments.

One exception is Keel et al.’s (2013) prospective self-report study, which revealed that college-aged women living with roommates who placed considerable importance on adhering to ideals of thinness (evident in their own weight-control behaviours), predicted women’s own disordered eating at ten years follow-up. The researchers postulated that women exposed to peers who highly value thinness may be particularly prone to internalizing the thin ideal, reinforcing their own belief of the importance of thinness, and their engagement in behaviours that ensure adherence to the thin ideal. Once internalized, they hypothesized that the social value of thinness continues to influence women’s attitudes and behaviours even in the absence of their peers who
first promoted the importance of the ideal; yet Keel and colleagues were not able to assess for these internalized processes among the women in their study. The present study, through its qualitative, life history methodology allowed for an exploration of the internalized reactions women had to peer pressures for thinness over time. For instance, in the present study women were found to experience heightened body consciousness, and subsequently internalized pressures to conform to the thin ideal, ultimately impacting their food and appetite restriction, in the presence of peer pressures for thinness. Further, among women in young adulthood who continued to restrict their eating, earlier peer pressures for thinness throughout adolescence appeared to have an enduring impact on their internalization of norms for the female body, reinforcing the social value of thinness and the need to continue restricting their appetites in the context of different friends and peer groups in adulthood. The present inquiry thus extends Keel et al.’s (2013) research by shedding light on the enduring nature of peer and friend influences from adolescence through adulthood, on girls’ and women’s internalization of the social value of thinness and their propensity to restrict their appetites accordingly.

In addition to the pursuit of thinness, participants’ ability to respond to their appetites was also influenced by the transmission and internalization of ideals associated with health and wellness, which unlike the pursuit of thinness, occurred predominantly within peer environments in young adulthood and beyond. Specifically, women in the present study reflected on their internalization of the dichotomy of ‘healthy’ versus ‘unhealthy’ eating, as well as pressures associated with upholding the healthy ideal, which similar to peer dieting and pressures for thinness, promoted women’s heightened body consciousness and negotiation of their eating and appetites.

Of particular significance was the finding that participants’ concerns over health and wellness appeared to legitimize body weight and shape preoccupation; a finding supported by a
recent qualitative study exploring adolescent girls’ reflections on the appearance culture in an all-girls’ school (Carey, Donaghue, & Broderick, 2011). Specifically, these researchers identified that while girls frequently expressed the belief that weight should not be obsessed over, a strong commitment to ‘healthy’ eating and exercise provided a ‘legitimate cover’ for their own body surveillance and adherence to widely held norms for the thin ideal within their peer environment. While the present inquiry suggests the internalization of ideals associated with health and wellness predominantly in adulthood, together with Carey et al.’s (2011) research, these findings suggest that preoccupation with ideals of health and wellness similarly promotes vigilance regarding careful control over one’s eating and appetite in pursuit of thinness.

One way in which ideals of health and wellness shaped women’s body experiences, was through the dichotomy of ‘healthy’ versus ‘unhealthy’ eating. Only two participants described their internalization of messages regarding ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ foods and eating in late childhood and early adolescence, communicated exclusively within the home environment. For these women, early parental influences promoting a distinction between ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ foods, reinforced the importance of monitoring body weight and shape through the consumption of food; a mentality later reinforced within their peer environments in adolescence and young adulthood. Half of the participants described the dichotomy of ‘healthy’ versus ‘unhealthy’ food and eating emerging in young adulthood, when the normalcy of ‘healthy’ eating among friends reinforced the importance of controlling one’s appetite to maintain a ‘healthy’ weight and shape.

Past research on social ideals of food and eating have demonstrated that stereotypical thinking related to ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ foods impacts individuals’ food and appetite restriction (Antoniou, 2009; Carper, Fisher & Birch, 2000; Francis, Stewart, & Hounsell, 1997; Knight & Boland, 1989). Among children, Carper et al., (2000) examined the impact of parents’ controlling feeding practices on their 5-year-old daughters’ eating behaviours. Self-report data
was collected from the parents, while the children completed structured interviews to determine their perceptions of their parents’ restricting practices and/or pressures to eat. Results demonstrated a positive relationship between controlling feeding practices and children’s disinhibited eating. Further, parents were noted to distinguish foods as ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ as a means to regulate their daughters’ eating. Results from the present study lend support to the influence of parents in socializing children to a dichotomy of ‘healthy/good’ versus ‘unhealthy/bad’ eating, subsequently impacting their appetite restriction. Further, among adult women, Antoniou’s (2009) qualitative study on women’s life history experiences with food and eating revealed that women who regularly engaged in weight control behaviours often perceived food choices as moral decisions (good vs. bad) and judged themselves negatively when they consumed ‘bad’ or ‘unhealthy’ foods. Given that no other research to-date, apart from Antoniou’s dissertation, has explored the progression of women’s internalization of ideals of health and wellness on their negotiation of eating and appetites, the present study provided new insight to the role of the peer domain in socializing women to the dichotomy of ‘healthy’ versus ‘unhealthy’ food and eating in young adulthood.

Participants also described pressures to uphold the healthy ideal within their peer environments in adulthood, which similarly served to disrupt their eating and appetites in the context of their peers. Specifically, the majority of participants communicated that eating with friends promoted fear of judgment on the basis of one’s food choices, and perceived pressures to select ‘healthy’ foods, such as salads, as opposed to ‘unhealthy’ foods, such as hamburgers, despite their desire to consume the ‘unhealthy’ foods. Extending upon Antoniou’s (2009) findings regarding women’s judgments pertaining to ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ food choices, as well as previous quantitative research that has highlighted the impact of perceived negative evaluations by others on women’s tendency to restrict their eating (Gilbert & Meyer, 2005), the present
inquiry expands the existing literature by describing the influence of peers in fuelling women’s judgments pertaining to food choices and expectations of healthy eating, thereby promoting restriction of their appetites.

Challenging Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Food and Eating

While the pursuit of thinness and ideals of health and wellness promoted participants’ adherence to social norms and ideals associated with food and eating and subsequent restriction of their appetites, other peer processes challenged women’s adherence to these norms and ideals, supporting comfort in their bodies, and permitting them to respond to their appetites. These included exposure to peers who modeled comfort in their appetites, and with whom the appreciation of food could be enjoyed. Throughout early to late childhood, most participants described the normalcy of their peers’ comfort with eating, together with their own comfort in their bodies, and their ability to respond to their appetites. This was largely contrasted with the period of adolescence, where no women spoke about their peers modeling comfort in their appetites. In adulthood, six of the participants described the significance of female friends and peers who modeled comfort in food and eating, which in turn, promoted their own comfort and ability to respond to their appetites. Further, three women who endorsed clinical eating disorders throughout adolescence highlighted the importance of developing relationships with new female friends in adulthood, who, through modeling comfort in their appetites and challenging feminine ideals of eating, supported them in reconnecting with their desire for food, and ability to respond to their appetites accordingly.

While much research has been devoted to the role of negative peer modeling (e.g., dieting or unhealthy weight control practices) on girls’ development of disordered eating (e.g., Lieberman et al., 2001; Paxton et al., 1999; Wertheim et al., 1997), with the exception of the present inquiry, no research-to-date has identified the significance of positive peer modeling on
women’s ability to respond to their appetites. Previous qualitative studies that have explored the protective influence of alternative peer group norms, (e.g., Antoniou, 2009; Currie et al., 2006; Mafirci, 2002; Mizevich, 2012), however, do corroborate the current findings by highlighting the influence of peer groups who reject dominant feminine ideals of thinness on girls’ and women’s enhanced ability to resist preoccupation with the ideal. In addition, a recent quantitative study that explored socio-environmental factors associated with body satisfaction among adolescence girls, demonstrated that girls with higher body satisfaction were part of peer groups that were less likely to diet, and placed value on healthy eating and exercise (Kelly, Wall, Eisenberg, Story & Neumark-Sztainer, 2005).

Adolescence evidently represented a time when most participants’ connection to their appetites was significantly disrupted, particularly in the context of peer processes emphasizing the social value of thinness. Further, among the few women that retained comfort in eating throughout adolescence, all were naturally thin, supporting existing quantitative research which has revealed an association between higher body mass index and girls’ increased susceptibility to peer appearance-related pressures and engagement in weight control behaviours (Jones & Crawford, 2006).

Further supporting participants’ ability to respond to their appetites, were shared experiences of enjoyment and appreciation of food with friends and peers. Similar to modeling comfort in appetite, participants described the period of childhood as a time when they freely enjoyed and appreciated food with friends, unaware of socially constructed body ideals and the need to control their appetites to conform to such. Conversely, adolescence represented a time when expressions of enjoyment in food and eating with friends were relatively obsolete. In adulthood, while relatively few women described connecting with their friends and peers over a
shared appreciation and enjoyment of food and eating, these important socializing experiences supported several women in re-connecting with their appetites.

Once again, these findings support the plethora of literature illustrating adolescence as a period when girls are particularly susceptible to peer pressures for thinness that promote their engagement in weight control behaviours (e.g., Carey et al., 2011; Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007; Jones et al., 2004; Paxton, et al., 1999). The present study, however, expands the existing literature by demonstrating the significance of protective peer influences, like being a part of friendship groups who view food and eating as social and pleasurable, in helping girls and women retain connection to their appetites and eating. Supporting this finding, Antoniou’s (2009) qualitative life history study on women’s food and eating practices demonstrated that eating experiences which fostered social connection among friends who valued food and eating as an enjoyable and pleasurable experience, assisted women in responding to their appetites. The present study adds to these findings by delineating a developmental progression of these positive peer influences over time, and also by suggesting the healing nature of new relationships with friends in adulthood who value food as social and pleasurable, supporting women who struggled in their bodies during adolescence in re-connecting with their appetites.

**Sexuality**

In addition to food and eating, peers influenced participants’ experiences related to sexual attractiveness and sexual desire. The following section includes a discussion of: peer processes promoting adherence to norms and ideals associated with sexuality, followed by peer processes challenging adherence to norms and ideals associated with sexuality.

Promoting Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Sexuality
Results from the present study demonstrate that peer processes influencing participants’ adherence to norms and ideals associated with sexuality emerged in relation to the male evaluative gaze, and sexual harassment.

Most women described the onset of their internalization of the male evaluative gaze in early adolescence. Once internalized, the male gaze continued to remain pronounced throughout development, intensifying during the period of middle to late adolescence, and continuing into adulthood. Within both adolescence and adulthood, the male evaluative gaze reinforced all participants’ critical self-appraisals of their bodies, introducing the practice of judging themselves and other peers “through male eyes”, according to cultural ideals of femininity and sexual attractiveness (Brown, 2003, p. 119). For many participants, the male evaluative gaze also invoked body comparisons with female peers who they perceived as more successful in attracting attention from their male peers, contributing to expressions of shame and discomfort in their bodies, as well as vigilance in ensuring their bodies adhered to cultural standards of attractiveness. Among some women, the male evaluative gaze also contributed to disconnection from their sexual desire.

No existing research to-date has delineated the progression of girls’ internalization of the male evaluative gaze, specifically within their peer environments, across development. Instead, the majority of literature has focused predominantly on the impact of the male peer gaze on adolescent girls’ body image (e.g., Brown, 2003; Currie et al., 2006; Mafrici, 2009; Nichter, 2000; Wertheim et al., 1997). Within adolescent populations, qualitative research, such as Wertheim et al.’s (1997) study exploring the pursuit of thinness among 15-year-old girls, shed important light on the role of male peers in promoting girls’ preoccupation with thinness. In her interview study with girls, ages 13-15, Nichter (2000) similarly noted the “watchful gaze” girls described being under, and the importance of maintaining their bodies and appearances in order to
be attractive and desirable to their male peers. Extending upon these findings, in a prospective exploration of pre- (10-12) and post-pubescent (13-15) girls’ experiences with peers in relation to their bodies, Mafrici (2009) revealed that several girls began referencing an internalization of the male gaze in pre-puberty, impacting their choice of clothing as a means to attract positive attention from male peers. Within adult populations, however, the male peer gaze has been far less researched. One experimental study exploring the effects of the male versus female gaze among a sample of 115 female undergraduates found that women exposed to the male gaze condition, in which they were informed they would have to converse with a male peer, experienced higher body shame, as well as social and physique anxiety, compared to the female gaze condition (Calogero, 2004).

The impact of the male gaze on girls’ and women’s heightened appearance anxieties and pressures to conform to dominant cultural beauty ideals is explained by Fredrickson and Robert’s (1997) Objectification Theory, which posits that girls’ and women are socialized to internalize an outsider’s perspective of their physical selves, whereby their bodies are regarded as objects to be looked upon and evaluated. Raised in a society where sexualized images of girls and women are widely broadcasted in the media, the Objectification Theory argues that as a woman internalizes a sexually objectifying male gaze, her “body, body parts, or sexual functions are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or regarded as if they were capable of representing her” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 175). Internalizing their bodies as objects to be appraised by others (particularly men), girls and women engage in persistent self-monitoring of their bodies in relation to cultural standards of beauty, fuelling expressions of body shame, and ultimately pressures to adhere to said standards (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Subsequently, the objectification of women’s bodies has been linked to negative mental health consequences, including greater appearance anxiety, disordered eating, and depression (Calogero, 2004;
Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Noll & Fredrickson, 1998; Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004). Consistent with these findings, participants’ internalization of the male gaze in their peer environments throughout development promoted expressions of shame and discomfort in their bodies, which reinforced preoccupation with adherence to norms and ideals of female attractiveness in order to appear desirable to their male peers.

The present study also demonstrated the importance of considering ethnocultural differences, which appeared to strengthen women’s evaluative gaze of their own bodies in reference to their perceived desirability in the eyes of male peers. Beginning in adolescence and continuing into adulthood, participants of diverse ethnocultural backgrounds often measured their sexual attractiveness in reference to the White, thin ideal, and the lack of attention they received from their White male peers. Supported by empirical literature highlighting the role of peers in promoting the transmission and internalization of White ideals of female attractiveness that disadvantage girls of diverse social locations, who evaluate their bodies in reference to these dominant ideals (e.g., Brown, 2003; Piran, 2001b, 2009), the impact of macro-social variables, such as ethnocultural group membership on girls’ and women’s internalization of the male peer evaluative gaze represents an important yet understudied area of research.

Related to the White ideal, a few participants of East Asian background in the present study also acknowledged the promotion of cultural stereotypes of female sexual desirability, such as the “Asian female exotic” that promoted objectification of their bodies within the context of their Caucasian friends and peers. Theoretical literature highlights the influence of the media in promoting highly sexualized images of Asian women as “gentle geishas or China Dolls” who appear submissive and servile to men (Prasso, 2005). One recent qualitative study exploring racial micro-aggressions experienced by ten Asian Americans, revealed the “exoticization” of Asian women who were perceived in the media as “sexual objects, domestic servants…and exotic and
passive companions to White men” (Sue et al., 2009, p. 95). While their study did not explore the impact of this “exoticization” on participants’ experiences in their bodies, the present investigation demonstrated that these cultural stereotypes promoted in the media, are reinforced within the peer environment, strengthening girls’ and women’s internalization of the male evaluative gaze and their subsequent preoccupation with adherence to cultural standards of attractiveness and sexual desirability.

In addition to a preoccupation with adherence to appearance norms and ideals, in the present study the male evaluative gaze also contributed to some women’s disconnection from their sexual desire, both in adolescence and adulthood. Feminist literature is in agreement with these findings, describing the suppression of adolescent girls’ and women’s sexual desires as a result of objectification of their bodies (e.g., Brown, 2003; Bartky, 1988; Blood, 2005; Bordo, 1993, Fine, 1998; Tolman, 2002a, 2002b). For instance, in her interviews with adolescent girls, Michelle Fine (1998) pioneered research on the discourse of female sexuality and desire, demonstrating the role of the peer environment in promoting girls’ fears surrounding sexual encounters and silencing their sexual desires. Similarly, in her interviews with girls ages 15-18, living in urban and suburban areas of the United States, Tolman (2002a) further described the social consequences girls feared in acting upon their sexual desires, and the confusion that resulted in choosing to respond to their desires versus facing stigmatization from their peers. In relation to the male evaluative gaze, researchers like Tolman (2002b) have argued that as girls begin to be treated as objects of desires by others in early adolescence, they internalize an objectified view of their bodies and ultimately lose their ability to recognize and express their own physical needs and desires. The present study lends support to this argument: as participants internalized the male evaluative gaze in their peer environments, promoting perceptions of their bodies as objects of heterosexual male desire, several women described confusion and
disconnection when interpreting and expressing their own sexual desires, both during the time of the study, and earlier during adolescence.

In addition to the male evaluative gaze, experiences of sexual harassment further contributed to a few participants’ shame and discomfort in their bodies in childhood and adolescence. Incidences of sexual harassment within the peer environment were described by relatively few of the participants. Three women acknowledged sexual harassment by their peers between middle childhood and early adolescence, whereby boys verbally and physically harassed girls’ bodies (e.g., flipped their skirts, snapped their bras, made explicit sexual comments). Only one woman reported instances of sexual harassment in late adolescence; and none reported instances of sexual harassment by their peers in adulthood. Among participants who described instances of sexual harassment, most acknowledged male peers as the primary perpetrators, with one woman reporting sexual harassment in the form of labeling (e.g., “slut”) by her female peers in late adolescence.

These results are surprising given the extensive literature suggesting the pervasiveness of sexual harassment among peers, particularly during the period of adolescence, as girls’ bodies sexually mature and draw attention from peers in the form of objectification (Brown, 2003; Currie et al., 2006; McKinley & Hyde, 1996; McMaster, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2002; Nichter, 2000). Further, there exist several qualitative research studies suggesting the wide-spread prevalence of sexualized comments and labels (e.g., “slut”, “whore”) girls make towards one another during adolescence, reinforcing the policing and penalization of their bodies and behaviours (Currie et al., 2006; Brown, 2003; Nichter, 2000; Mafrici, 2009). Accounting for discrepancies between the findings of the present investigation and these existing studies, are methodological differences, such as the use of retrospective recall in the present investigation. For instance, all of the aforementioned studies have either interviewed or collected self-report data
from girls about their present day experiences with peers, providing descriptions of events as they occurred in real-time. The possibility of such recall bias is therefore acknowledged as a limitation of the present study.

The adverse impact, however, of sexual harassment on participants’ experiences in their bodies is supported by existing quantitative studies demonstrating the association between sexual harassment and objectified body consciousness, resulting in heightened body surveillance, shame, and disordered eating (e.g., Harned 2000; Murnen & Smolak, 2000; Peterson & Hyde, 2013; Piran & Thompson, 2008). For instance, in a longitudinal self-report study among 406 American adolescent girls and boys in grade 5, Peterson and Hyde (2013) revealed that early experiences of sexual harassment by peers were associated with heightened body surveillance and disordered eating five years later. Similarly, in adulthood, Harned (2000) surveyed 195 college women and discovered that sexual harassment was associated with increased levels of dietary restraint and eating disorder symptoms, however the perpetrators of the harassment were not specified (e.g., peers vs. strangers vs. family members, etc.). Qualitative studies have expanded the existing quantitative literature on peer sexual harassment by exploring not only the prevalence and consequences of harassment, but also the nature of peer harassment and the meaning girls make of these experiences (Brown, 2003; Currie et al., 2006; Larkin, 1994; Larkin & Rice, 2005; Nichter, 2000; Piran, 1999b). For instance, Larkin’s (1994) qualitative investigation on adolescent girls’ experiences with sexual harassment broadened the context of sexual harassment to include consideration into factors such as race and social class, which exacerbated sexual harassment in the peer environment. Piran’s (2001b) research on a participatory action project in a dance school further highlighted the role of body-based harassment grounded in prejudicial experiences of weightism, racism and sexism, which objectified and disrupted girls’ ownership of their bodies. Together with the present findings, these qualitative studies emphasize the necessity for
prevention initiatives that extend beyond the classroom and include changes to the social environment, including raising awareness of socio-cultural factors that precipitate and exacerbate body-based harassment in schools (Piran, 2001).

Challenging Adherence to Norms and Ideals Associated with Sexuality

In contrast to the male evaluative gaze and sexual harassment which promoted participant’s adherence to norm and ideals associated with sexuality, the general absence of the male gaze in childhood, and relationships with peers that challenged pressures associated with sexuality in adolescence and adulthood, supported participants’ comfort in their bodies, and for some, helped them to connect with their sexual desire. Specifically, three women discussed relationships with gay male friends, and two women referenced intimate relationships with their partners that contributed to comfort in their bodies and helped them to challenge adherence to norms and ideals associated with female sexuality.

Although research on women’s relationships with gay men is scarce, a few existing studies have suggested that relationships with gay men may help women to challenge typical norms associated with sexuality and female sexual attractiveness, contributing to greater comfort in their bodies (Bartlett et al., 2009; Grigoriou, 2004; Jacobs, 2007). For instance, in a survey study measuring body esteem among 211 female undergraduate students in Nova Scotia, Bartlett et al. (2009) found that women who sustained close relationships with gay men endorsed higher levels of body esteem. While the researchers speculated that relationships with gay men lacked the sexual tension and expectations inherent in relationships with heterosexual men, making them particularly appealing to heterosexual women, the study did not explore the reasons behind the differences in body esteem among friendships with gay versus straight men. Grigoriou (2004) conducted semi-structured interviews with eight dyads of friends in an attempt to examine the meaning heterosexual women make of their relationships with gay men. Results revealed that in
these friendships, women perceived a general freedom from sexual pressures. Further, several women articulated feeling valued and appreciated by their gay male friends for their personality and not their sexuality, as they typically did in relationships with heterosexual men. The present study contributes to this growing literature by lending further empirical support to the role of relationships with gay men in helping women to distance themselves from pressures associated with the male objectifying gaze, ultimately supporting women to live with greater freedom and comfort in their bodies.

In addition to relationships with gay men, two participants described intimate relationships in adulthood that similarly helped to challenge adherence to oppressive norms and expectations associated with female sexuality and desire. Both women acknowledged the healing nature of these intimate relationships, which allowed them, for the first time, to freely connect with their sexual desire. While one woman referenced her relationship with her husband, the other, who identifies as bisexual, described her first intimate relationship with a woman that challenged the dominant heteronormative view of sexuality and ideals and expectations associated with female sexual attractiveness and desirability that ensue. These results lend further support to theoretical and empirical literature addressing the suppression of girls’ and women’s sexuality and desires in the context of patriarchal norms, ideals and expectations that promote women’s bodies as objects of heterosexual male desire (e.g., Bartky, 1998; Blood, 2005; Bordo, 1993; Brown, 2003; Fine, 1998; Piran & Teall, 2012; Tolman, 2002a, 2002b).

Activities Interests and Educational Pursuits

In the present study, peers also influenced participants’ engagement in activities, interests and educational pursuits, which, in turn, shaped their experiences of their bodies. The following section includes a discussion of peer processes promoting norms and ideals associated with engagement in activities, interests and/or educational pursuits, followed by peer processes
challenging norms and ideals associated with engagement in activities, interests and/or educational pursuits

Promoting Norms and Ideals Associated with Engagement in Activities, Interests and Educational Pursuits

All participants described their adherence to peer norms and ideals that disrupted their engagement in activities, beginning in childhood and continuing for many women into adulthood. Results from the present study demonstrate that peer processes disrupting women’s engagement in activities, interests and/or educational pursuits, emerged in relation to gender segregation, passivity, and activity for weight control.

Beginning in middle to late childhood, participants’ internalization of gendered norms for play within their peer environments promoted a heightened focus on their bodies and appearances during their participation in various activities. By early adolescence and continuing into adulthood, this heightened focus on appearances, and often times, objectification of the body during participation in activities, promoted participants’ discomfort and self-consciousness in their bodies, causing many to refrain from previously enjoyed activities with friends. As participation in these activities decreased, participation in activities for the purposes of weight control increased for some women in early to middle adolescence, and intensified in young adulthood.

Literature on psychosocial development has demonstrated the emergence of gender segregation in girls’ and boys’ activities in middle to late childhood (e.g., Frawley, 2005; Manaster & Jobe, 2012; Mehta & Strough, 2009). In a review of the literature exploring gender segregation across the lifespan, Mehta and Strough (2009) found that segregation across same-gender peer groups increased dramatically from preschool to elementary years, with less than 10% of time spent with other-sex peers. Further, the gender segregation continued into early
adolescence, as peer groups and cliques emerged (Mehta & Strough, 2009). By middle to late adolescence, although gender segregation declined slightly as heterosexual romantic relationships formed, adolescents continued to place considerable importance on their same-gender friendships (Mehta & Strough, 2009).

The impact of gender segregation on the types of activities children engage in is also supported by existing quantitative literature (e.g., Martin & Farbes, 2001; Manaster & Jobe, 2012). For instance, in their observational study with 61 girls and boys, 5 years of age, Martin and Farbes (2001) demonstrated that the more children played with their same-gender peers, the more their behaviour became gender differentiated (e.g., boys playing with trucks or cars, and girls playing dress-up or dolls.) Results from the present study support this research by demonstrating that as participants progressed through middle childhood to early adolescence, they engaged in considerably more feminine activities with peers, such as playing with dolls, dress-up and make-up. The present investigation, through its use of retrospective life history interviews, also shed important light on girls’ reactions to gender segregation, beginning in childhood. For instance, several participants expressed their desire to engage in traditionally masculine activities, such as soccer or football, yet felt restrained from doing so because of gendered norms that permeated their peer environments, creating fear of how they would be perceived by their peers if they challenged these norms. Consistent with research on gender schema development, children begin to formulate cognitive representations of gender based on their interactions and observations with individuals in their immediate social environment (Martin & Ruble, 2004), reinforcing their conformity to norms, ideals and expectations of male and female behaviour (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). The present study revealed that these gender schemas were internalized by participants in middle childhood, reinforcing their reluctance to engage in activities with male peers, and
promoting engagement in feminine activities that directed attention towards their bodies and physical appearances.

Accompanying the shift in the gendered segregation of peer groups in childhood to adolescence, and the emergence of traditionally feminine activities that emphasized their bodies and appearances, participants described increased passivity, including decreasing or refraining altogether in physical activity. Specifically, women’s narratives revealed that entrance into adolescence often coincided with objectification of their bodies in previously enjoyed sports that valued thinness and/or emphasized body weight and shape, such as swimming, dance and martial arts, fuelling their desire to terminate their engagement in these activities.

Previous research has revealed a decline in girls’ participation in physical activities upon entrance into adolescence. Within this literature, quantitative studies have identified correlates of girls’ reduced engagement in physical activity, including achievement orientation (Sallis, Prochaska & Taylor, 2000), level of motivation (Robbins, Pender & Kaxanis, 2003), perceived competence (Sallis et al., 2000), limited social support (Frankish, Milligan & Reid, 1998), and lack of time (Robbins et al., 2003). Qualitative studies have expanded this literature by identifying perceived barriers to physical activity, such as stereotypical gender roles (Culp, 1998), objectifying uniforms (Krane, Waldron, Michalenok & Stiles-Shipley, 2001; Soohoo et al., 2011), peer and family expectations (Culp, 1998; Dwyer et al., 2006), access to activities (Culp, 1998; Dwyer et al., 2006), and fear of ridicule and embarrassment (Humbert, 1995).

Through focus groups and individual interviews conducted with thirty-four adolescent girls of European-American backgrounds between the ages 12 through 17, Culp (1998) identified several constraints that influenced girls’ reduced participation in outdoor recreation programs. One of the most widely cited constraints was perceived gender roles, defining ‘appropriate’ masculine and feminine behaviour. For instance, several participants articulated that it was
unacceptable for girls to get dirty and engage in the same active, outdoor activities as boys. This finding similarly reflects the sentiments of a few participants in the present study who opted out of activities for fear of getting dirty and aligning with the boys. Culp (1998) also noted the significant weight girls ascribed to the role of their peers in promoting these gendered expectations of behaviour. The present investigation lends further empirical support to Culp’s (1998) findings, and expands upon them by broadening the ethnocultural diversity of the sample, and also by demonstrating the long-term impact of girls’ internalization of gendered norms for ‘acceptable’ activities in early adolescence. For instance, out of the total sample of fourteen women in the present study, only two continued their engagement in recreational sports in adulthood.

In addition to the internalization of gendered norms, clothing also contributed to participants’ heightened body consciousness and reduced engagement in physical activity during adolescence. Lending support to this finding, Soohoo et al. (2011) similarly utilized a grounded theory methodology to explore fourteen adolescent girls’ body image in relation to their participation in cheerleading. Results revealed that participants’ uniforms significantly promoted body image concerns and pressures to “look good” in front of their peers while participating in their sport. Although the sample was limited to cheerleading athletes, and did not specifically assess a reduction in girls’ participation in physical activity, the study demonstrated the role of clothing in accentuating adolescent girls’ concerns of their bodies during sport, and fear of negative appearance evaluation in the context of their peers. The present investigation further extends Soohoo et al.’s (2011) findings by demonstrating that the schools’ enforcement of body-conscious uniforms, such as leotards, tights and bathing suits, not only accentuated participants’ concern of their bodies in the context of their peers, but led several women to terminate previously enjoyed activities as a result of severe discomfort and body consciousness. These
findings are important in light of informing school-based prevention initiatives, including revising uniform policies that evidently contribute to girls’ reduction in physical activity during adolescence.

Other factors promoting participants’ reduced engagement in physical activity in the present study included their geographical location and lack of finances. Once again, Culp’s (1998) interview study on adolescent girls’ constraints to outdoor recreation revealed that access, including expenses, location and time, were the fourth most cited constraint among girls’ participation in sport. Collectively, these finding highlight the importance of increased attention to environmental factors that act as barriers to girls’ and women’s access and opportunity to sport. Although non-profit organizations, like the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS), have attempted to enhance the public’s understanding of the multidimensional factors that facilitate and restrict girls’ and women’s participation in physical activity, without formal policies that integrate strategies promoting gendered equity in sport, as well as resources (financial, facility and human) to overcome environmental barriers, girls’ ability to participate in physical activity will remain constrained.

The present investigation also revealed that in addition to physical passivity, among three of the participants, discomfort in their bodies and fear of evaluation from their peers in adolescence, contributed to their passivity in the classroom context, including refraining from participating and speaking out. This finding is supported by qualitative literature suggesting an alarming pattern of self-silencing as girls proceed throughout adolescence (e.g., Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Orenstein, 1994) For instance, in their interviews with approximately 100 adolescent girls over the course of five years, Brown and Gilligan (1992) revealed that as girls proceeded through adolescence, they began to refrain from expressing their beliefs, desires, feelings and attitudes. Similarly, in her interviews with twenty-five adolescent girls, their parents,
and teachers, Orenstein (1994) demonstrated the pervasive tendency for girls to remain silent in the classroom setting, often due to a fear of how they appeared to their peers. In conjunction with the present investigation, these findings highlight the relationship between girls’ concern over their bodies and physical appearances, reinforced by widely sanctioned peer norms regarding the ideal body, and girls’ physical passivity and loss of voice during the period of adolescence.

Lastly, coinciding with participants’ discomfort in their bodies during adolescence, participation in activities for the purposes of weight control began to emerge. Strongly related to ideals of health and wellness, attempts to become ‘healthy’ often disguised women’s attempts to control their body in an effort to maintain thinness. Particularly in young adulthood, over half of the participants reported exercising at fitness facilities with friends to maintain or reduce their weight; a finding consistent with research highlighting weight control/loss as the most cited reasons for engagement in physical activity among adult women (McDonald & Thompson, 1992). The transition from outdoor recreational activities to indoor fitness facilities further appeared to contribute to women’s social comparisons with their peers and heightened discomfort and self-consciousness in their bodies; a finding supported by existing theoretical and empirical literature.

Critical social theorists, for instance, have argued that fitness discourses, activities and facilities, represent ways of disciplining women’s bodies to adhere to cultural standards of female attractiveness (Bordo, 1993). Quantitative studies have further demonstrated significant associations between women’s engagement in exercise for the purposes of weight control and higher self-objectification, greater body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem (Cash, Novy, & Grant, 1994; McDonald & Thompson, 1992; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005; Tiggemann & Williamson, 2000; Wasilenko et al., 2007). For instance, in a self-report study measuring self-objectification among 97 aerobic participants in a fitness centre, Prichard and Tiggemann (2005) demonstrated that certain elements of fitness facilities, including mirrors and revealing clothing,
promoted women’s self-objectification of their bodies. Further, in a study exploring the influence of social comparison within a campus fitness facility, Wasileko et al. (2007), revealed that women’s exposure to same-sex peers who were perceived as “fit” contributed to heightened processes of social comparison, fuelling reduced body satisfaction and shortened engagement in physical activity. Results from the present investigation support these findings, while shedding new light on the progression of the peer processes that disrupt girls’ and women’s engagement in activities, interests and educational pursuits across development, beginning with the internalization of gendered norms that contribute to a heightened focus on the body physicality and increased self-consciousness and discomfort.

Challenging Norms and Ideals Associated with Engagement in Activities, Interests and/or Educational Pursuits

While gender segregation, passivity, and activity for weight control disrupted participants’ engagement in activities, other peer processes challenged their adherence to dominant norms and ideals, supporting their engagement in activities and pursuits with a sense of joy, comfort and competence in their bodies. These included physical immersion, expressions of passion, and shared ambitions.

The absence of an evaluative external gaze within participants’ peer environments in early to middle childhood afforded participants considerable freedom in their bodies to immerse themselves in physical activities with no external consciousness of their appearances to interfere with their enjoyment in play with friends and peers. Women’s reflections from this age demonstrated a general unconsciousness of feminine norms and expectations of behaviour, allowing them to express comfort and competence in their physical abilities, “running and jumping like the boys”, their bodies “going with [them] wherever [they] wanted.”
The protective aspect of immersion in fun, enjoyable activities is in line with Smolak et al.’s (2000) conclusion from her meta-analysis of studies on female athletes and eating problems, which emphasized the value of participation in activities for pure fun and enjoyment. Women’s narratives from the present study, however, highlighted the internalization of the evaluative external gaze as a significant barrier preventing girls from continuing to immerse themselves in recreational sports and physical activities as they mature into women.

A few of the participants, however, articulated their passion for various activities in adolescence and adulthood, which reduced self-surveillance of their appearances in the context of their peers, permitting them to express comfort, joy and competence in their bodies. In describing their participation in these meaningful activities, such as singing, boat racing, and burlesque dancing, women utilized words such as “love”, “confidence”, and “freedom” to describe how they felt in their bodies. This finding is significant given that apart from organized and elite sports, research on the value of passion and involvement in meaningful activities is scarce. Mizevich’s (2012) qualitative dissertation with fourteen adult women demonstrated the protective influence of women’s pursuit of their passions in helping them to resist pressures for thinness. The present investigation expands this existing literature by demonstrating the significance of pursuing one’s passions in reducing body-surveillance within the context of friends and peers, ultimately supporting girls’ and women’s joy, comfort and competence in their bodies as they engage in meaningful activities.

Shared ambitions towards pursuing educational and/or career-related goals were similarly expressed by over half of the participants in adolescence and adulthood in helping them to distance from appearance-related pressures and support a sense of competence in their abilities. Specifically, women talked about connecting with friends who were “more about substance”, “independent”, had “other priorities” and stayed “grounded” on their focus of education, as
opposed to preoccupied with their physical appearances. Mizevich’s (2012) qualitative life history study similarly highlighted the value of women prioritizing education and intelligence over and above concern with their appearances, in resisting the preoccupation with thinness. The present study expands this research by highlighting the role of similar-minded friends, who encourage women to remain focused on their educational pursuits, fostering a sense of competence irrespective of their appearances. Supporting the importance of these shared ambitions on women’s lives was the fact that all fourteen women were currently pursuing or had completed, post-secondary education, and six were enrolled or had already completed a graduate program.

Collectively, these findings contribute to the existing literature by enhancing the understanding of the ways in which peer processes shape girls’ and women’s engagement in physical and other meaningful activities throughout development, and the role that physical immersion, passion and shared ambitions play in shifting girls’ and women’s attention away from their appearances, while enhancing joy, comfort and competence in their bodies.

**MODEL 2: The Implications of Peer Processes on Social Power and Acceptance**

The second model that emerged from the present investigation conceptualizes the body as the primary domain through which social inequity becomes internalized and expressed within the peer environment, and through which girls’ and women’s power and status is procured and equated with their conformity and compliance to widely sanctioned peer norms and ideals. While previous literature has highlighted the impact of concerns for status and acceptance on adolescent girls’ weight and shape preoccupation and disordered eating (e.g., Field et al., 2005; Gerner & Wilson, 2007; Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007; Paxton et al., 1999; Schutz & Paxton, 2007), existing studies have not examined the intersection of these peer processes with different aspects of social location (e.g., gender, social class, ethnocultural background, sexual orientation, etc.).
Experiences of social inequity thereby increased susceptibility to appearance conformity within the peer environment. The present model expands the existing literature by demonstrating the developmental progression of women’s internalization of their social inequity and/or privilege in relation to a number of domains within their peer environments, and how this has shaped their conformity and compliance to peer norms and ideals. It also examines both individual and group protective factors that support women’s resistance to peer conformity and compliance. These results are discussed along the two core categories of: Promoting Pressures of Peer Conformity and Compliance, and Resisting Pressures of Peer Conformity and Compliance.

Promoting Pressures of Peer Conformity and Compliance

In the present investigation, participants’ conformity and compliance to dominant norms, ideals and expectations within their peer environments developed in relation to their internalization of social inequity and/or privilege, and consequences of social disempowerment and peer rejection.

Internalization of Social Inequity and/or Privilege

Participants internalized differences in their inequity and/or privilege within their peer environments in relation to five domains: body size and shape, sexuality and desirability, clothing, ethnocultural differences, and relational connections. Predominantly developing in late childhood, accompanying a pronounced evaluative external gaze of their body, the internalization of social inequity or privilege in relation to these domains had a profound impact on women’s experiences of power or disempowerment within their peer environments. Heightening in early adolescence, in accordance with the emergence of peer groupings, cliques and popularity norms, the internalization of social inequity continued to impact women’s experiences in their bodies throughout adolescence, and for several women, into adulthood.

Regarding differences in body size and shape, emerging in late childhood and intensifying
throughout adolescence, all participants acknowledged an understanding of the social privilege afforded by thinness within their peer environments, and their subsequent internalization of social inequity related to their degree of conformity to the thin ideal. Among women in the present study, thinness was always equated with popularity, belonging and acceptance, resulting in many women feeling disempowered in their bodies, particularly throughout adolescence. Although the importance of thinness as a primary determinant for peer acceptance decreased upon entrance into adulthood, many participants’ engagement in social comparisons and appearance-based conversations, as well as the emerging preoccupation with ideals associated with health and wellness, contributed to their continued internalization of the privilege afforded by thinness.

The social value of thinness in the peer environment, particularly during adolescence, is supported by qualitative literature demonstrating an association between heightened body preoccupation and strict norms for thinness among peer groups that embody higher social status (e.g., Carey et al., 2012; Mafrici, 2009; Nichter, 2000). For instance, in an interview study exploring the appearance culture among adolescent girls, ages 14-15, and their peers, girls’ narratives revealed that ‘popular’ groups consistently placed higher social value on thinness and appearances, with “looking good” described as an important determinant to peer acceptance (Carey et al., 2012). In prospective interviews with fourteen pre- and post-pubescent girls, Mafrici (2009) further noted the importance of thinness to peer popularity, which appeared to increase from late childhood to early adolescence; a finding consistent with results form the present study.

However, apart from the few existing studies discussed earlier in the chapter, that have examined the perceived peer importance of thinness on college-aged women’s own weight control behaviours (e.g., Krcmar et al., 2007; Shomaker & Furman, 2007), or weight stigmatization (e.g., Puhl et al., 2008), no known studies have explored the social value of
thinness related to peer status and the internalization of social inequity and/or privilege among peer groups in adulthood. The present inquiry adds to the existing literature by demonstrating the progression of women’s internalization of social inequity or privilege related to their body size and shape within peer groups in adulthood. For instance, although the importance of thinness as a primary determinant for peer acceptance decreased substantially in adulthood compared to adolescence, most women continued to internalize their social privilege and/or inequity related to their body size and shape in the context of their peers. In particular, women who struggled in their bodies throughout adolescence to attain status and power within their peer environments appeared to retain their strong internalization of the social value of thinness within peer groups in adulthood.

Although the internalization of thinness is developed and maintained through a number of social influences (e.g., media, family, peers, etc.), by examining women’s experiences specific to the peer domain, through a life history methodology that allowed for an exploration into the meaning women made of their body experiences, the present study suggests the enduring influence of peers in promoting and maintaining women’s preoccupation with thinness in relation to their friends and peers throughout development. Future qualitative research should prospectively examine girls’ internalization of the power afforded by thinness as it is shaped by a variety of these social influences, and the degree to which they interact to impact girls’ and women’s conformity to appearance norms and ideals.

In addition to body size and shape, participants internalized their social inequity and/or privilege in relation to norms and ideals pertaining to sexuality and desirability. In late childhood to early adolescence, the emergence of the male evaluative gaze and differences in the timing of puberty invoked many women’s sentiments of social disempowerment and feeling like “the odd one out” compared to their female peers who appeared physically more mature, and/or had begun
dating at the time. These sentiments continued for several women as they transitioned into young adulthood and witnessed the attraction their female peers acquired from men. Many participants immediately attributed these differences to ‘negative’ characteristics of their physical appearances (e.g., “not being thin enough” or “lacking femininity”).

In light of the literature demonstrating that girls and women are socialized to view their bodies as objects of male desire (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), sexuality and desirability understandably represent important sources of social meaning regarding the power and privilege their bodies hold within the peer environment (e.g., Mafrici, 2009; Nichter, 2000; Wertheim et al., 1997). For instance, in an interview study examining sociocultural pressures for thinness among thirty grade 10 adolescent girls, Wertheim et al. (1997) discovered that many girls strictly maintained their weight and appearances in order to be accepted by their male peers. Further, in a prospective study among pre- and post-adolescent girls, Mafrici (2000) noted the status and social privilege that was afforded to girls during adolescence who developed and maintained dating relationships with male peers. However, no empirical studies presently exist on women’s internalization of their social power and privilege pertaining to their perceived sexuality and desirability within their peer environments in adulthood.

Clothing represented another important source of social power and status among peers, predominantly in childhood and adolescence, but also among some participants in adulthood. Beginning in middle childhood, clothing brands highlighted important differences in social class within their peer environments. Further, in adolescence, and extending for some women into adulthood, pressures associated with dressing in more revealing, sexualized clothing, reinforced participants’ internalization of social inequity related to their lack of conformity to feminine norms for appearance (e.g., wearing low-cut tops, dresses, high heels).
Substantiating these findings, prospective qualitative research with adolescent girls has demonstrated that social class, apparent through visible differences in clothing, interacts with the establishment of peer social hierarchies and popularity rankings, resulting in girls of lower social class frequently becoming the target of peer victimization and bullying (Mafrici, 2009; Piran et al., 2007, 2009; Piran & Teall, 2012). Further, critical social research has demonstrated the impact of the peer environment in socializing girls to practice femininity through dress and behaviour, resulting in sentiments of social disempowerment and rejection when they do not adhere to the same feminine molds and ideals sanctioned by their peer group (Brown, 2003; Currie et al., 2006; Piran et al., 2009; Nichter, 2000). For instance, Currie et al.’s (2006) interviews with twenty-one girls between 12 and 14 years of age highlighted the social importance of girls’ style of dress at school, with clothing being one of the most policed aspects of girls’ self-representations. Further, girls were frequently noted to internalize pressures to dress ‘feminine’ and ‘look pretty’, while those who fell outside of these carefully defined boundaries experienced judgment, rejection and disempowerment in their peer environments (Currie et al., 2006). Once again, no empirical studies exist on women’s internalization of their social inequity or privilege pertaining to their style of dress or clothing within peer environments in adulthood. The present study therefore expands the existing literature by describing the continued influence of clothing norms on women’s social power among their peers in adulthood. For instance, several participants in adulthood spoke about feeling disempowered and “out of place” in relation to their peers who embodied greater social privilege by having the money and/or body to wear the latest clothing trends.

Ethnocultural differences and cultural transitions further contributed to several participants’ internalization of their social inequity within their peer environments. Beginning in middle to late childhood, women of non-Caucasian/Canadian and/or European backgrounds
described their internalization of the White ideal, embodying status, power, belonging and acceptance within their peer environments. Transitions from multicultural peer environments to homogenous ones during the period of adolescence significantly reinforced participants’ understanding of White privilege, and contributed to strong sentiments of social disempowerment, exclusion and rejection among their peers. These sentiments continued into adulthood for many women in light of cultural transitions, experiences of sexual objectification, and/or ethnic discrimination within their peer environments.

Although, not specific to the peer domain, the few studies discussed earlier, that have explored the impact of macro-social variables, such as ethnocultural background, immigration and acculturation on girls’ and women’s body image, have alluded to experiences of social inequity as girls and women internalize dominant cultural ideals and are faced with pressures to “fit in” within their desired communities (Iyer & Haslam, 2003; Larkin & Rice, 2005; Streigel-Moore & Smolak, 2000). Further, in a prospective interview study examining the body-anchored experiences of girls, ages 9-18, Piran and her colleagues demonstrated that girls’ post-puberty established a clear stratification of their social standing related to their social location, such that White girls were seen as the most popular in their peer environments (Piran et al., 2007, 2009; Piran & Teall, 2012); a finding consistent with results from the current study. However, no known studies have explored the progression of girls’ internalization of their social inequity related to their ethnicity or cultural background within their peer environments as they transition from girlhood to womanhood. Results from the present study thus expand the existing peer literature by demonstrating the enduring influence of norms pertaining to the White ideal in adolescence, on women’s continued internalization of social inequity among their Caucasian friends and peers in adulthood.
The final domain that influenced participants’ internalization of their social inequity and/or privilege within their peer environments across development was the quality of their relational connections with peers. As the importance placed on adhering to popularity standards and ‘fitting in’ to peer groups and cliques intensified in early adolescence, several participants expressed loneliness stemming from their perceived lack of connection and acceptance among their peers. Throughout adolescence, women who were already disadvantaged in relation to their social location and/or lack of adherence to dominant peer norms and ideals, expressed challenges navigating their social system, feeling “lost”, “awkward”, “out of place”, or “left behind” by former friends and peers. Although fostering relational connections did not appear to present with as many challenges for participants in adulthood, several women who were socially disempowered throughout adolescence as a result of peer rejection and lack of conformity to dominant norms and ideals, alluded to their continued difficulty forming friendships and feeling a lack of belonging and acceptance among their peers in adulthood.

These results are supported by the Developmental Theory of Embodiment (DTE), which highlights the role of connection to one’s desired community as an important contributor to social empowerment and positive embodiment (Piran & Teall, 2012). Indeed, previous quantitative literature has demonstrated that children and adolescents who sustain close companionships with friends are less likely to be victimized or rejected by their peers (Hodges; Boivin, Vitaro & Bukowski, 1999; Hodges, Malone & Perry, 1997; Vernberg, 1990), and are more likely to perceive greater social acceptance within their peer environments (Vernberg, 1990). However, little is known regarding the long-term impact of relational connections in childhood and adolescence on relationships with friends and peers in adulthood. Although theoretical literature suggests that individuals who sustain friendships in adolescence develop skills and competencies that support their success in building future relationships (Sullivan, 1953), the only prospective
quantitative study exploring the long-term impact of relationship competence and friendship quality in pre-adolescence, found no significant differences between individuals with reciprocal best friendships in pre-adolescence and those who reported few or no connections with peers, on their quality of relationships with friends in young adulthood (Bagwell, Newcomb & Bukowski, 1998). Results from the present study, however, are not in line with Bagwell et al.’s findings, in that a few women who faced difficulties forming relational connections with peers in adolescence, continued to face challenges in developing or sustaining relational connections in adulthood, contributing to their internalization of social inequity which fuelled discomfort in their bodies. Methodological differences may account for differences in these findings. For instance, unlike the existing quantitative studies that have used objective measures to gather data on the nature of participants’ friendships, through the use of life-history interviews, the present study allowed for an exploration into the subjective meanings women made of their relational connections with peers throughout development, including how these connections, or lack thereof, contributed to their internalization of social inequity and/or privilege within their peer environments. In particular, women who struggled in forming relational connections often felt powerless in their peer environments, resulting in self-consciousness and discomfort in their bodies.

Consequences of Social Disempowerment and Peer Rejection

As women in the present study internalized their social inequity within their peer environments, those who were disempowered or rejected by their peers conveyed discomfort and self-consciousness in their bodies, fuelling pressures to conform or comply with dominant norms and ideals by altering their bodies to attain or sustain social privilege. Specifically, conformity and compliance occurred along the dimensions of: controlling the body, dressing to “fit in”, and cultural assimilation.
These results are in line with Piran and Teall’s (2012) construct of ‘social disempowerment’ within the Developmental Theory of Embodiment, which explains how experiences that contribute to an individuals’ social inequity, marginalization, and a lack of social connection, fuel disruptions in their body experiences. For instance, retrospective life history interviews with young women and prospective interviews with girls, ages 9-18, have demonstrated how girls’ and women’s social inequity contributes to their attempts to modify their bodies in an effort to restore social power (Piran et al., 2002; 2007; 2009). The present study expands this empirical literature by exploring, through young women’s retrospective accounts, how social disempowerment manifests specifically within the peer environment and impacts women’s conformity and compliance to dominant peer norms and ideals throughout development.

Beginning with conformity related to controlling the body, the importance of thinness in achieving social power and peer acceptance was widely internalized by all participants in their peer environments beginning in late childhood and intensifying during adolescence. Consequently, most women described a sense of disempowerment and intense discomfort in their bodies as a result of failing to adhere to expectations for thinness at the time, resulting in many of their attempts to conform to dangerous and unrealistic ideals, in order to enhance their social power and privilege within their peer groups. So powerful were these sentiments of disempowerment that five of the participants developed clinical eating disorders as a result of subsequent pressures to conform or comply with their peers’ standards at the time.

A handful of quantitative and qualitative studies on adolescent girls’ experiences within the peer environment support these findings, emphasizing concerns for acceptance and status as a source of social reinforcement for weight-related preoccupation (e.g., Carey et al., 2012; Lieberman et al. 2001; Wang, Houshyar, & Prinstein, 2006), and severely disrupted weight-control attitudes and behaviours (e.g., Mafrici, 2009; Piran et al., 2009; Wertheim et al., 1997).
For instance, in their cross-sectional survey study among girls in grades 7 through 10, Lieberman et al. (2001) found that girls who believed thinness would make them more popular and accepted by their peers were more likely to engage in disordered eating. In prospective interviews with girls, ages 9-15, Mafrici (2009) found that girls’ preoccupation with attaining thinness was a function of their desire to attain popularity and peer acceptance, beginning as early as late childhood and continuing post-puberty.

No studies, however, have explored the progression of women’s conformity and compliance to norms for thinness as a function of social disempowerment within their peer environments across development. Through the use of a retrospective life history methodology, the present study identified how earlier peer experiences of social disempowerment and inequity, not only in relation to differences in body size, but also in relation to differences across ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and disrupted relational connections, continued to influence women’s ongoing attempts to control their body in an effort to sustain or maintain social power among their peer groups in adulthood.

In addition to participants’ attempts to conform to widely sanctioned norms and ideals of thinness, many women reflected on the importance of dressing to ‘fit in’, in an effort to attain or sustain power and privilege in their peer environments, beginning in late childhood and continuing well into adolescence. These findings support quantitative research demonstrating a correlation between conformity to dress code standards and adolescents’ social acceptance (Beaudoin & Lachance, 2006; Smucker & Creekmore, 1972). For instance, in a self-report study among 121 boys and 110 girls from a high school sophomore class, Smucker and Creekmore (1972) revealed that adolescents’ conformity to clothing norms served a strategic function to gain social acceptance by their peers. Additionally, a few qualitative studies on girls’ experiences with their peers during adolescence demonstrated how pressures to conform to peer clothing norms
disadvantage those who are unable to comply to their peers’ expectations as a result of financial limitations, thereby promoting further disempowerment and peer rejection (e.g., Brown, 2003; Carey et al., 2012 Mafrici, 2009); a finding consistent with results from the present study.

However, no research exists on adult women’s conformity to clothing norms and ideals as a means to attain social power and privilege among their peers. While not as prevalent among participants in adulthood, one woman of a higher socioeconomic background than most participants in the study endorsed continued pressures to adhere to her peers’ clothing norms out of fear of being ostracized or rejected. Collectively, the current findings highlight the role of social class as variable that mediates girls’ and women’s internalization of their social inequity and subsequent pressures to conform to their peer groups’ norms and ideals for clothing.

Lastly, several participants of non-Caucasian/Canadian and/or European backgrounds experienced social disempowerment related to differences in their ethnocultural background within the context of their peers who embodied White privilege, ultimately fuelling pressures of cultural assimilation. Beginning in childhood, and extending throughout adolescence and adulthood, many of these women expressed pronounced sentiments of discomfort and self-consciousness in their bodies, and the subsequent desire to assimilate with their White peers, “mix in with the masses”, and at the most severe end of the spectrum “breed out” one’s cultural heritage. Most notably, women’s internalization of their social inequity pertaining to their culture, ethnicity or religion was undeniably linked with pressures to control their bodies’ weight and shape in an effort to attain social privilege, acceptance and belonging among their peers in adolescence and adulthood.

These findings are once again supported by empirical literature highlighting the role of oppressive social factors that promote body dissatisfaction, weight preoccupation and eating disturbances in diverse groups of girls and women (Larkin & Rice, 2005; Piran et al., 2002, 2007,
The results also support limited quantitative research that has examined the impact of acculturation on women’s internalization of dominant beauty ideals and subsequent weight preoccupation and eating disturbances (e.g., Ball & Kenardy, 2002; Furnham & Patel, 1994; Lauderdale & Rathouz, 2000;). For instance, Ball and Kenardy (2002) mailed out surveys to 14,779 Australian women between 18 and 23 years of age, incorporating questions on country of birth, length of time spent in Australia, body weight, weight dissatisfaction, dieting, binge eating, and compensatory disordered eating behaviours. Results demonstrated a significant acculturation effect, such that the longer time women spent in Australia, the more they reported weight-related values and behaviours similar to those of Australian-born women (Ball & Kenardy, 2002). However, Ball and Kenardy’s (2002) study, along with the aforementioned studies on acculturation, have all been quantitative in nature, utilizing only adult populations, and none have gathered data on participants’ reactions to transitioning to a different culture, and the social processes that influence their conformity and compliance to dominant norms and ideals. The present study, through its qualitative life history methodology, uncovered the meaning women made of their experiences transitioning from their countries of origin in adolescence and adulthood, to new and unknown communities where they were the minority among their peers. Specifically, the peer environment was shown to promote women’s internalization of their social inequity pertaining to their ethnicity and/or cultural background, which fuelled pressures of conformity and the desire to assimilate to with their White peers. These findings highlight the necessity of integrating macro-social variables, such as ethnicity, culture and social class, into future research on peer influences pertaining to girls’ and women’s experiences in their bodies; as well as incorporating consideration of these variables into educational settings to influence policies and norms that counter oppressive social structures resulting in girls’ and women’s disempowerment in their peer environments.
Resisting Peer Conformity and Compliance

In addition to processes that promoted participants’ conformity and compliance to dominant appearance norms and ideals, the present study examined both individual and group protective factors that supported women’s resistance to peer conformity and compliance. Given that much of the existing peer literature has been devoted to risk factors that contribute to girls’ and women’s body preoccupation and disordered eating, little remains known about the factors that support girls and women in retaining a connection to their bodies in light of pervasive social pressures for thinness. The present study therefore expanded the existing literature by attending to protective factors, and exploring their influence on girls’ and women’s experiences in their bodies over time.

**Group Protective Factors**

Group protective factors that assisted participants in resisting pressures of peer conformity and compliance emerged in relation to: accepting, nonjudgmental peer groups, and alternative group norms.

**Accepting, Nonjudgmental Peer Groups**

The majority of participants described the period of early to middle childhood as a time when they felt the most acceptance and belonging among their peers. However, by the age of around ten and throughout adolescence, these sentiments decreased as pressures associated with achieving popularity within the peer environment intensified. Nonetheless, a few participants described how supportive relational connections, built on loyalty, acceptance and freedom from judgment contributed to positive feelings in their bodies, and helped them to resist pressures of conformity that prevailed in their larger peer environments at the time. Further, in adulthood, accepting, nonjudgmental friends and peer groups appeared to increase for many of the women,
and were particularly instrumental in supporting women who struggled in their bodies throughout adolescence, to experience greater comfort and confidence in their bodies.

Although no previous research has explored the developmental progression of these protective influences within the peer group on girls’ and women’s experiences in their bodies, the results are partially explained by a few existing studies that have examined positive relational constructs on girls and women’s resistance to appearance pressures. However, quantitative and qualitative studies have yielded mixed results. For instance, in their self-report study with 324 girls in grade 10, Schutz and Paxton (2007) discovered that while negative relational constructs, such as feeling alienated and rejected by one’s friends, were associated with greater levels of body dissatisfaction, positive relational constructs, including communication, acceptance and trust, were not associated within any increases in body satisfaction. The authors acknowledged inherent limitations to their quantitative design, such as the cross-sectional nature of the study and the use of self-report measures that did not evaluate girls’ subjective experiences in their bodies, or resistance to peer pressures for thinness. They further highlighted the need for qualitative designs to confirm their findings and broaden the understanding of the influence of relational constructs.

Two more recent qualitative studies involving adolescent girls and young adult women have disconfirmed Schutz and Paxton’s (2007) original findings, by demonstrating the importance of supportive and accepting relational connections among peers on girls’ and women’s body experiences (Mafrici, 2009; Mizevich, 2012). For instance, in prospective interviews with girls, ages 9-15, Mafrici (2009) revealed that relationships with supporting, accepting and nonjudgmental friends, contributed to several of the girls’ ability to resist dominant peer appearance-related pressures. Further, in her life history study on young adult women’s resistance to social pressures for thinness, Mizevich (2012) similarly demonstrated the positive
role of peers and romantic partners who were supportive and accepting of women, and appeared to strengthen their ability to resist social pressures for thinness. The present inquiry lends additional support to these more recent qualitative findings, suggesting that while accepting, nonjudgmental peer groups do not remove girls and women from appearance-related pressures inherent in their peer environments, they do significantly support girls and women in resisting pressures of peer conformity.

The present study also expanded the existing literature by illustrating the developmental trajectory of the influence of positive relational constructs, such as acceptance, loyalty and non-judgmentality, on women’s resistance to peer group appearance conformity. Further prospective research should explore the influence of other positive relational constructs in supporting girls and women to distance from dominant peer appearance-related pressures.

Alternative Group Norms

Emerging exclusively during adolescence and adulthood, establishing relational connections with friends and peer groups who embodied alternative norms for appearance, dress and/or behaviour, similarly contributed to several participants’ enhanced comfort in their bodies, and their ability to resist typical pressures of peer appearance conformity.

These findings corroborate literature on the significance of identifying with ‘alternative subcultures’, and distancing from individuals who have internalized and adopted norms of the mainstream culture (e.g., Currie at al., 2006; McVey, Lieberman, Voorberg, Wardrope & Blackmore, 2003; Mizevich, 2012; Piran, 1999). For instance, in her life-history study of resiliency to socio-cultural pressures for thinness Mizevich (2012) demonstrated that women who identified with ‘alternative subcultures’ that fell outside of traditional femininity (e.g., tomboys, Goths, nerds), were better able to resist beauty ideals of the dominant culture. Similarly, Currie et al.’s (2006) interview study on agency, subjectivity and empowerment among adolescent girls
revealed that girls who positioned themselves against the “emphasized femininity” embodied by their dominant peer group were more equipped to resist typical pressures of appearance conformity and compliance.

Literature from eating disorder prevention programs has similarly acknowledged the importance of subcultures that establish alternative norms, ideals and expectations. For instance, in her participatory action research project from a ballet school, Piran (1999) argued that despite the prevalence of unhealthy body weight and shape pressures within a school environment, it is feasible to establish alternative subcultures that embody more realistic and healthy norms. McVey and her colleagues (2003) have similarly revealed the importance of peer support groups that target both individual and subcultural levels for the prevention of eating disorders. Further, in a recent quantitative study exploring the effects of a 12-week school-based peer support program on social pressures for thinness in early adolescence, Yuile and McVey (2009) demonstrated the value of a peer model early prevention program that allowed girls to interactively discuss and challenge negative social influences in their peer environments, and develop new critical thinking skills, which assisted them in distancing from the dominant social pressures for thinness in their peer environments. Among adult women, Jasper (1993) has similarly highlighted the benefit of body image groups that assist women in creating a counterculture where beauty and thinness are not seen as synonymous, and where prejudice related to body size and shape is challenged and discussed.

Collectively, findings from the present study stress the importance of strengthening and supporting subcultures within the peer environment, where one’s identity and social power are not equated with body size and shape. Early school-based interventions, as described by McVey and colleagues (e.g., Piran, 2001; McVey et al., 2003; Yuile & McVey, 2009), are particularly important in supporting girls, from a young age, to challenge dominant norms of the mainstream
culture and develop alternative group norms, making them better equipped to withstand peer appearance-related pressures throughout development.

*Individual Protective Factors*

Individual protective factors that assisted participants in resisting pressures of peer conformity and compliance emerged in relation to agency, and clarity regarding locating oneself in relation to the peer group.

**Agency**

Expressions of individual agency were described by just under half of the participants in the present study, most commonly during early to middle/late childhood, when they referenced considerable freedom to live in their bodies, not confined by oppressive feminine norms for appearance and behaviour. However, as concerns for popularity, status and acceptance intensified in early adolescence, many women struggled to express agency within their friendships, challenging their ability to resist pressures of conformity and compliance. Among the few participants who demonstrated expressions of agency during adolescence, maintaining supportive relationships with other peers as well as internalizing strong values from their parents, were acknowledged as important contributors to their ability to stand up to, and resist peer conformity.

Although research on girls’ agency in relation to their resistance to peer appearance pressure is scarce, Currie et al.’s (2006) qualitative study lends support to the importance of fostering adolescent girls’ agency and empowerment within their peer environments. For instance, the study demonstrated how girls’ agency, evident in their ability to claim space within their peer environment, and actively challenge gendered norms, largely supported their ability to position themselves against dominant pressures of peer conformity. Expanding upon these findings, results from the present inquiry demonstrated the enduring pattern of girls’ agency, if adequately supported during adolescence. For instance, women who were encouraged to exhibit
greater expressions of agency throughout adolescence were more likely to exhibit similar expressions of agency in relation to distancing from pressures of peer conformity in adulthood, supporting enhanced comfort in their bodies. These results once again highlight the need for early school-based interventions that promote girls’ agency and empowerment by encouraging them to take up space, voice their opinions, and remain attuned to their bodies’ needs and desires.

Clarity and Locating Oneself in Relation to the Peer Group

Clarity, acquired through participants’ self-reflections about their cumulative life experiences with peers, similarly supported women in choosing to resist dominant norms and position themselves differently in relation to their peer group as adult women. Due to the fact that this is the first interview study to explore women’s life history experiences with their peers in connection to their bodies, it is significant to note that the interview process itself provided women with the space to reflect on their peer relationships in a unique way, promoting new insight and awareness to the impact their peers have had on their bodies, and for many, how they intended to position themselves differently in an effort to resist preoccupation with appearance norms and ideals.

These findings lend strong support to the importance of life-history interviews in facilitating a dual process of interviewer and participant reflection, insight and awareness, whereby participants are encouraged to relate past and present events and understandings of their life, evidently promoting a sense of clarity in terms of their current life experiences. For instance, several women in the present study reflected on the fact that they had never considered the influence of their peers and friends, and yet discovered the instrumental role they played in shaping their connection/disconnection to their bodies at various times throughout their lives.

These results also demonstrate the importance of providing girls and women with supportive relational spaces to critically examine the impact of social influences on their bodies,
thereby enhancing their clarity, self-awareness and desire to position themselves against dominant appearance-related pressures. For instance, Levine and Piran (2004) have argued that groups providing a relational space where alternative norms can be practiced, can help women to critically examine and counter oppressive social systems that promote pressures for thinness.

Though protective factors remain a significantly understudied realm of the existing literature, the present study emphasized the importance of both group and individual factors in supporting participants, at all stages of development, in their ability to resist peer conformity.

Strengths and Limitations of the Current Investigation

The present inquiry employed a qualitative, life history methodology to uncover the influence of peers on women’s experiences in their bodies over time. The current findings are grounded in both methodological strength and limitations, which are discussed following.

Strengths

One of the primary strengths of the present study was the use of a qualitative methodology, which afforded insight to the multiple social processes that relate to women’s experiences in their bodies as they are shaped by peers throughout their lives. Given that the majority of research on peers has been conducted within a quantitative framework, which often use objective measures that promote an evaluative discourse of body image, the current methodology was able to uncover women’s subjective experiences of living in their bodies as they are shaped by dynamic social factors that enhance or restrict their connection to their bodies.

A related strength of the study was the use of a life history approach (Cole & Knowles, 2001), which contributed to an understanding of the peer processes that influence women’s body experiences within their evolving relational contexts across development. As the first known study to adopt a chronological, life-history inquiry of the influence of peers on women’s experiences in their bodies, the current methodology contributed to the emergence of two
interrelated models which uncovered peer processes that exert influence throughout development, as well as shifts in women’s internalized reactions to these peer processes from childhood to adulthood. Employing a life history methodology thus allowed for consideration into the influence of changes in peer influences and evolving social contexts, in shaping former and current ways of living in the body. For instance, women in the study referenced multiple transitions across peer environments throughout development (e.g., relocating to a different country, entering college or university), which contributed to their internalization of socially constructed norms and ideals pertaining to their appearances and behaviours, as well as their understanding of the social power procured through their conformity/compliance to dominant peer norms and ideals. For many participants, experiences in former peer contexts had an enduring impact on current ways of relating to their friends/peers, and consequently, how they lived in their bodies. Given that there exists a dearth of literature on the influence of peers among adult women, the present inquiry shed important light on the evolving nature of peer processes throughout development that shape adult women’s lived experiences in their bodies.

Another strength was the diversity among the sample of women interviewed for the present study. Participants embodied diversity in terms of their ethnocultural group membership, social class, religious affiliation, immigration status, sexual orientation, and former eating problems. This diversity was significant in light of the fact that little research has been devoted to the many social factors that influence girls’ and women’s connection to their bodies, and their relationships with friends and peers.

A related strength was the adoption of a critical social perspective to the analyses, which has afforded consideration into the influence of peer processes as they intersect with multiple social factors that afford or deny women with power and privilege in their peer environments. Specifically, the second model emphasized the body as the primary domain through which social
inequity became internalized and expressed within the peer environment, and through which women’s social power was procured through their conformity to widely sanctioned norms and ideals pertaining to their appearances.

Another contribution of the current study was the attempt to understand both adverse and protective peer influences. Existing literature has largely problematized the influence of peers on girls’ and women’s internalization and adoption of appearance norms and ideals. Rather than exclusively depicting peers as a negative social influence, the present inquiry provided insight to the larger sociocultural context within which oppressive gender-based norms originate, and within which peer processes are enabled to exert their influence on girls and women. Further, the study addressed positive peer influences and individual protective factors that supported women in distancing from dominant peer appearance pressures, and which facilitated enhanced comfort and connection with their bodies. Collectively, this broadened the understanding of women’s experiences in their bodies as they were shaped by peers across development.

**Limitations**

One of the main limitations of the study is the size of the group of participants. While the number of women interviewed was guided by “sufficiency of the data” (Morrow, 2007), at which point no new findings were generated, it is possible that including more participants may have increased levels of diversity, or brought additional themes.

Another limitation of this study was that despite the ethnocultural diversity of the sample of women there was no diversity in terms of physical (dis)ability, in that all the women who participated in the study were able-bodied. Additionally, the study participants were all highly educated; all women had either completed or were currently pursuing post-secondary education. Including a more diverse group of women along the domains of (dis)ability and educational level may have resulted in additional themes based on the body experiences of a broader group of
women. Further, at least five of the participated endorsed a history of eating disorders, and most women who were interviewed acknowledged struggling in their bodies, and with food and eating, throughout some point in their lives. Thus, the possibility of self-selection bias exists, in that the study may have attracted women with a personal interest in the topic.

Additionally, the study included participants between the ages of 25 to 35 years of age, to avoid generational biases and allow for women to reflect on the differences between more recent peer experiences within young adulthood compared to adolescence. However, the retrospective nature of the study does introduce the possibility of recall bias, thereby potentially skewing participants’ recollections of their experiences with friends and peers throughout childhood and adolescence. For instance, in comparison to the majority of existing quantitative and qualitative peer literature that have studied adolescent girls within their current social contexts, women in the present study may have under-reported certain peer processes (e.g., teasing, bullying and victimization).

Finally, an inherent limitation in any qualitative research approach is the subjectivity of the researcher. Consequently, from the outset of the study it was important that the researcher stay as close as possible to the data. This was achieved through involvement of the participants themselves in the initial phase of the data analysis. For instance, each participant was provided with a chronological summary of their experiences with peers related to their bodies, as well as the interview transcript, to ensure an accurate understanding of their life history experiences. While the final stage of analysis was then guided primarily by the researcher’s interpretations of the participants’ experiences contextualized within a critical social perspective, the described themes and overarching models were discussed and validated by the researcher’s academic supervisor.

Areas for Future Research
The present study resulted in the conceptualization of two interrelated models about peer influences on girls’ and women’s body experiences: the first that examined peer processes related to the promotion of dominant and alternative appearance and other gender-based norms, ideals and expectations, and the second, which uncovered the implications of these processes on social power and acceptance within women’s peer environments. The development of these models has undoubtedly generated questions for future research, and hypotheses regarding the impact of peer processes on women’s lived experiences in their bodies across the lifespan.

First, the study identified several peer processes, along with women’s internalized reactions to these processes, which promoted and challenged norms pertaining the ideal body appearance and the way participants inhabited their bodies as girls as women. With the exception of the male evaluative gaze, the majority of women referenced the influence of female peers in shaping their experiences in their bodies along these domains. Given that the influence of male peers remains a relatively underexplored area in the existing literature, it would be important for future studies to critically examine differences in male and female peers in relation to influences associated with maintaining versus rejecting appearance ideals, responding versus negotiating food and eating, and engaging versus restricting participation in activities, interests and educational pursuits. For instance, in the present study, gay male peers as well as male and female partners had a protective influence on women in terms of their resistance to preoccupation with dominant appearance ideals. Further research, however, is necessary to expand upon, and uncover other domains in which male peers and mixed-gender peer groups exert their influence over girls and women throughout development. Ideally, future research should also explore boys and men’s experiences within their peers in relation to their body experiences throughout development.

A second area of research includes the influence of peers as they intersect with other social influences to shape women’s experiences in their bodies over time. For instance, references to
family and the media were made by several women in the present study, and were acknowledged to augment the influence of peers throughout development. While quantitative research has attempted to integrate social influences into a framework of the sociocultural risk factors that contribute to eating disorders (e.g., Stice, 2002), no peer studies have prospectively examined women’s lived experiences in their bodies as they are shaped by the intersection of multiple social processes across development. For example, in the present study familial messages and modeling, as well as exposure to media images, were demonstrated to enhance women’s social comparisons with their peers, fuelling their preoccupation with adherence to appearance ideals and socially constructed norms for living in their bodies as girls and women. Further research should collectively examine these three social influences (peers, family and media) as they intersect along the core categories presented within the derived models.

Related to this recommendation is the critical importance of consideration to macro-social variables (e.g., gender, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, social class, etc.) that interact with peer processes, as well as other social influences, that afford or deny women with social privilege and power. The second model in the present study articulated the importance of attention to some of these factors, as they fuelled women’s conformity and compliance to socially constructed norms within their peer environments. However, the large majority of research to-date has not considered different aspects of social location that inform the transmission and internalization of various norms, ideals and expectations pertaining to women’s bodies and appearances. Inclusion of girls and women from diverse social backgrounds in future research studies is essential to expand the current literature and adequately inform interventions and prevention initiatives aimed at helping girls and women to deconstruct socially constructed norms, and resist related pressures within their peer, and larger social environments.
Additionally, attention to adult women’s experiences related to peers remains relatively scarce in the current literature. By employing chronological, life-history interviews the present study afforded exploration into both the enduring and evolving influences of peers across women’s lives, including how former experiences with friends and peers have shaped current ways of relating to friends and living in the body. Given that several women in the present study alluded to the corrective, and/or healing impact of new relationships with friends or peers later in development, future research should devote specific attention to the role of peers on women’s experiences in their bodies in adulthood, as this research can potentially inform prevention initiatives for girls and women at-risk for eating disorders.

Future research should also explore differences in the influence of close friendships versus the larger peer environment, as women who participated in the present study were invited to speak about either in relation to the influences they had on their bodies throughout development. It would be particularly beneficial to conduct a prospective longitudinal interview study, similar to the approach employed by Piran and her associates (e.g., Piran et al., 2002, 2007, 2009; Piran & Teall, 2012), with girls from childhood, adolescence and young adulthood to specifically track changes in immediate friendships groups and larger peer environments, and their influence on girls’ experiences in their bodies over time. Such a study would also eliminate recall bias and help to capture the experiences of girls throughout development. Related to this approach, future interview studies ideally will include girls within the same peer group in order to evaluate ways in which girls may differentially internalize and adopt the same dominant social discourses in their environments.

The models derived in the present study illustrated both the peer processes that promoted and challenged women’s preoccupation with appearance norms and idealized ways of inhabiting their bodies as girls and women. However, the processes that encouraged women to disengage
from socially constructed norms that are widely disseminated within their peer environments have been largely ignored in the literature, neglecting their important influence on women’s abilities to live with greater freedom and comfort in their bodies. Instead, peer influences have predominantly been problematized in contributing to disrupted body image and disordered eating. Thus, future research should examine, in greater detail, the peer processes that both promote and challenge women’s adherence to socially constructed norms, ideals and expectations across the domains of the ideal body and idealized ways of inhabiting the body as a girl and woman. Eventually, future quantitative studies should aim to test the structure and content of the two models by distributing measures to samples of girls and women at different developmental stages.

Lastly, future research must explore practical applications for the information gleaned from the present study. There remains a dearth of literature on peer-focused interventions for the prevention of eating disorders, yet the current findings stress the importance of early school-based interventions that encourage girls to challenge rigid gender-based social constructions that prevail within their peer environments and significantly impede on their ability to live comfortably and freely in their bodies throughout development.

Preventative and Clinical Implications

The findings from the present study have the potential to inform clinical and prevention initiatives aimed at reducing disordered eating, and promoting girls’ and women’s positive connection to their bodies throughout development.

Beginning in middle childhood, women in the present study referenced the transmission and internalization of gendered norms for play within their peer environments, which quickly began to constrict their freedom to move in their bodies. As they approached late childhood and began to internalize an evaluative external gaze of their bodies in reference to their peers, women became even more immobilized in their ability to respond to their needs, wants and desires in an
effort to adhere to widely sanctioned norms and ideals. These early internalized norms transmitted within the peer environment, continued to shape women’s experiences within the context of their friends and peers throughout adolescence and into adulthood, promoting discomfort in their bodies and preoccupation with adherence to oppressive social constructions related to idealized ways of inhabiting their bodies as girls and women.

Collectively, these findings stress the necessity for early, school-based interventions aimed at educating students around the implications of social constructions of gender, and encouraging them to challenge these within their peer environments. Although school-based prevention programs for body image and eating disorders have risen in the last decade, these programs tend to ignore critical interpretations surrounding social constructions of femininity, which evidently begin to adversely impact girls’ experiences in their bodies as early as middle childhood. To facilitate this process, it is necessary for parents, school educators and authorities to collectively maintain equitable social environments, whereby gender segregation is discouraged and girls are provided with the space to explore their passions and interests in a supportive and nurturing environment.

Further, as participants approached early adolescence, changes accompanying puberty combined with heightened concerns associated with peer social status, intensified women’s almost constant self-surveillance of their bodies in reference to their peers. Social comparisons with peers and critical, evaluative dialogue about their bodies also escalated in intensity and frequency and severely restricted many women’s abilities to live comfortably in their bodies, restricting their eating and appetite and their pursuit of previously enjoyed activities. Women’s narratives from puberty therefore conveyed sentiments of loneliness, extreme discomfort and self-consciousness in their bodies, highlighting the importance of early education for girls regarding the changes that accompany puberty and the impact these changes have on their physical and
emotional selves. School authorities should also include the provision of supportive spaces for girls’ to express the challenges they face during this pivotal time in their lives, and encourage them listen to, and value their body’s needs and desires, with the intention of reducing the self-silencing that unfortunately plagues many girls throughout the period of adolescence.

Further, as girls physically and emotionally mature throughout adolescence it is essential that they are encouraged to develop a critical awareness of the social processes that utilize the body to attain social privilege, and learn to counteract these processes both within their immediate peer environments and their larger cultural context. Schools again play a particularly important role within this domain, for instance, by enforcing policies related to body-based harassment, educating students on the respectful treatment of girls’ and women’s bodies, as well as consideration to equity within academic curricula. Teachers and parents further augment the influence of school policies by modeling equity for their students in their relationships with family, friends, staff and girls themselves.

Additionally, attention to protective factors that helped to counteract some of the processes which disrupted women’s connections to their bodies throughout development similarly have the potential to inform preventative and clinical interventions. For instance, the significance of peers who rejected ideals of thinness and who established alternative group norms, highlights the importance of supporting alternative subgroups within schools, providing girls the opportunity to express themselves across domains irrelevant to their appearances, such as their involvement in school clubs, extra-curriculars, and pursuit of their educational and/or career-related goals. Immersion in physical activity, though severely disrupted during the period of adolescence was demonstrated to provide girls’ and women with joy, comfort and competence in their bodies. It is therefore essential that schools and communities invest in the resources to support girls’ continued engagement in physical activity, particularly as they mature in adult women.
Further, the importance of identifying with accepting, nonjudgmental and loyal peers reinforced the value of being part of a supportive relational community, which helped women to distance from typical pressures of conformity and compliance. Even in regards to the interview process itself, women articulated the clarity and insight they gleaned in their ability to share their experiences of living in their bodies in relation to their friends and peers across development. The benefit of such spaces that enable women to reflect on their social histories, and the multiple shaping experiences that impact how they live in their bodies, is currently an undervalued, but critical area to encourage, particularly among women who are struggling in their bodies. Additionally, providing greater opportunities for girls and women within the community to come together within a supportive space, to share their experiences in their bodies and the meanings they make of these experiences, would undoubtedly be a powerful intervention.

The findings from the present study also highlight the importance of clinicians remaining attuned to peer factors that enhance or disrupt girls’ and women’s connections to their bodies over time. Without careful consideration of the multiple social processes that interact to shape girls’ and women experiences in their bodies, clinical interventions will have limited efficacy in helping women to overcome problems with eating. The emergent knowledge from the present study can therefore inform approaches to therapy. Particularly within feminist and relational modalities, the information derived from the study can assist girls and women to critically examine their internalization of socially constructed feminine norms and ideals widely transmitted within their peer environments, and encourage them to explore the influence of various peer relationships that have promoted or challenged their preoccupation with adherence to oppressive social norms and ideals.

Further, the understanding of peer processes gleaned form the present investigation can inform group therapy programs, particularly among girls struggling with disordered eating. Based
on the current findings, group programs should ideally employ a social justice perspective that encourages girls to develop a critical perspective of the complexity of social processes that influence their experiences in their bodies, including the impact of peer group norms that fuel competition around body size and shape. Group programs should also raise awareness and knowledge surrounding harmful peer processes, such as sexual harassment, which are often ignored and/or normalized within the peer environment. Within a group context, girls can be taught to examine contributors to social power and privilege, and encouraged to look critically at power within the peer environment. They can also be supported in the peer selection process itself, including how they choose to surround themselves with peers who support greater comfort in their bodies.

Overall, it is essential that parents, educators, school authorities and clinicians work together to enable girls and women to develop a critical awareness of the transmission and internalization of socially constructed norms and ideals within their peer environments, and the social processes that use their bodies to establish social power and privilege. Young girls must be taught to resist social pressures that silence their voices, feelings, passions, needs and desires, and counter their internalization of social inequity in order to foster healthy relationships with their bodies throughout their lives. By empowering girls and women to remain connected to their bodies in this way, and encouraging relational connections within supportive and validating communities, we can strengthen girls’ and women’s resiliency to peer-related pressures, and enable them to remain healthy, active, strong and confident in their bodies over time.
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FEMALE PARTICIPANTS WANTED
FOR A STUDY ON PEER RELATIONSHIPS
AND BODY IMAGE

Are you a woman between the ages of 25-45 and interested in contributing to the understanding of how friendships affect our relationships to our bodies?

Who We Are
My name is Nina Mafrici and I am Doctoral student in the Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology at the Ontario Institute for the Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). I am working on this project for my Doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Niva Piran.

Purpose of the Study
Friends and peers are important influences on our appearances and behaviours. These influences significantly influence how we feel towards our bodies. The aim of this study is to explore how women’s interactions with friends and peers affect their body image and their relationships to their bodies.

How Can You Participate?
We are looking for women of diverse backgrounds between the ages 25-35. We are interested in a broad range of women’s experiences with their friends and/or peers. However, this particular study will not include women who have current severe eating problems. This includes women who are: bingeing and vomiting twice per week or more for the past three months, and/or women who have lost more than 25% 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 beneficial to talk about your experiences regarding your friends and/or peers in connection to your body. Your participation in this study may also help others develop a greater understanding of how these relationships affect women’s body image across the lifespan which may, in turn, help professionals better support girls' in their development of a healthier body image.

If you are interested, or would like further information about this study please contact us at:

Email: peer&bodystudy@gmail.com; or
Tel: 416-525-7414

(Tear 3away strips below containing the following information: ‘Peer & Body Study’, Email; Phone Number)
APPENDIX B

Telephone Screening Interview

Hello, my name is Nina Mafrici. You left a message for me indicating that you might be interested in taking part in a research project I am conducting that focuses on peer relationships in connection to the body.

Would it be okay to take a few minutes now to speak with you?

**Introduce Researcher and Purpose of the Study:**
I am a graduate student at the Ontario Institute for the Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. I am currently completing my Doctoral degree in Counselling Psychology. As part of my degree I am conducting a research project that will explore between 10 and 16 women’s experiences with peers across their lives and how these experiences have influenced their relationship with their bodies.

**Limits of Confidentiality:**
In talking with me it is important that you understand the limits of confidentiality: Any conversation that we have is confidential. However, there are several exceptions to this, including: if you indicate that you are a danger to yourself or to others, or if you disclose details about apparent, suspected or potential current child abuse. If any of these exceptions arise I would be required both legally and ethically to contact the appropriate authority whether that be emergency services, or children’s services. Do you have any questions about this?

Address any questions.

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:**
I want to ensure that you noticed the criteria on the poster advertisement that may exclude some women from participating in this study. These criteria include:
1) Age, in that you need to be between the ages of 25-35; as well as
2) Current and severe eating problems, including bingeing and vomiting twice per week or more for the past three months or a loss of more than 25% of your body weight due to extreme dieting and are experiencing loss of menses as a result.
If any of these criteria apply to you, unfortunately you will not be eligible to participate in this study at the present time, but I thank you for your interest.
If these criteria do not apply to you, then I would like to tell you more about the study if you are still interested in participating.

**Nature and Procedure of Study:**
Now I would like to tell you about the nature of the study and what would be involved in your participation to help you decide whether you are interested in partaking.

If you were to take part in this research it would involve your participation in one 2-3 hour interview, depending on the time you require. Further, an additional 1 hour after our interview would be required for you to review the transcripts and summaries from the interview to ensure their accuracy. This would done on your own time.
The interview sessions would be audio recorded and these recordings will be transcribed. All information that you would provide during the interviews is kept strictly confidential. However, some excerpts from the interview transcripts may be used in the publication and presentation of the research findings with your name and any other identifying information changed to ensure your confidentiality.

**Benefits and Potential Harm:**
You will be asked in the interview to explore your relationships with significant friends or peers across your life and how these experiences may have affected your relationship with your body.

Talking about your experiences may be an enlightening experience for you. However, there is the chance that speaking about your experience may elicit some discomfort as a result of painful or upsetting experiences. I would not be available to provide you with psychotherapy services because this is strictly a research project, however, should the need arise I would assist you with connecting to an appropriate mental health professional or services.

**Compensation:**
To thank you for your participation in the study you will be provided with a $20 gift card.

**Address Questions:**
Do you have any questions about the study or any information I have presented?
Address any questions.

After hearing about the research project do you think you might be interested in taking part?
*If the individual demonstrates interest in participating:*
I would like to send you the informed consent letter so you can more carefully read through the guidelines for the study, and decide whether you would like to commit to taking part. I will then contact you in about a week's time and you can let me know if you would like to participate. Is this okay with you?

*If the individual is not interested in participating:*
Thank you for taking the time to speak with me.
APPENDIX C

Informed Consent Form

(Printed on OISE/UT letterhead)

THE INFLUENCE OF PEER RELATIONSHIPS
ON WOMEN’S LIVED BODY EXPERIENCES ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

Dear Participant,

My name is Nina Mafrici, and 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 requesting your permission to participate in the research project I am conducting on women’s experiences with peers across the life span and how these experiences affect their relationships with their bodies. This study will be conducted under the supervision of Dr. Niva Piran, Professor in the department of Counselling Psychology at OISE/UT.

I ask that you please read the following information carefully, and notify me of any questions or concerns that you might have, prior to signing your consent.

Purpose of the Research
Research to date has suggested that close friends and peers play an important role in girls’ development of body image and disordered eating. However, we need to do more research with women in order to understand how relationships influence body image and other body experiences. In order to do that, it is essential that we hear from women themselves, and how they describe the unique ways in which they have been influenced by their relationships with friends and peers over their lives.

Description of the Research
Ten to sixteen women of diverse backgrounds and experiences will participate in this research study.

Because negative body image is related to eating problems, and in order to ensure each participant’s safety, women who are currently experiencing serious eating problems will be excluded from this research study.

If you consent to participate, I will interview you one time for approximately 2-3 hours, depending on how much time you need. In the interview, I will ask you about your relationships and experiences with peers and friends in childhood, adolescence, as well as your current experiences with friends and peers. I will also ask how these experiences have possibly influenced your relationship with your body over time. I will be using a digital mp3 digital recorder to audio tape all the interviews. Within a month of the interview, you will be mailed a summary of our interview, as well as a typed copy of the interview itself in order to correct any misinterpretations that may have arisen during the process of transcription. I ask that you please review the summary and interview and return them with any feedback or corrections within 2 weeks. I will be conducting the interviews at a private room in the Ontario Institute for Studies in
Education of the University of Toronto or at another place of your choosing.

**Confidentiality**
Confidentiality will be respected and your identity will be protected unless required by law. The mp3 recordings will be immediately transferred to a password protected and encrypted computer file for 1 year, and then destroyed. The mp3 files on the recorder will also be deleted at this time. The audio files will be identified by a research code name only. The audio files will be transcribed and all identifying names and information will be removed from 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. This material will all be kept in locked files until 5 years following the completion of the study, and then will be shredded. For any publications related to this research, we will ensure that all identifying information is removed to protect your identity. 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, or if you report that you were sexually abused by health care professional. If that were to happen, I am obligated by law to make a report to the relevant officials.

**Potential Benefits**
With respect to potential benefits, you might find it enlightening and rewarding to talk about your life history experiences in your body. Further, a greater understanding of peer relationships that affect women’s body image across the lifespan may help professionals to better support girls in developing a healthier body image.

**Potential Harms or Discomforts**
There are no known harms associated with participation in this study. The only potential risk is that you may feel some discomfort when talking about experiences that may be painful or upsetting. If this should arise then you may decline to participate, and/or you may skip any question, request a break, or withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw, audio recordings of your interviews will be deleted, and transcripts of your interviews will be destroyed. You will be free to keep any compensation that had already been provided to you. Throughout the interview I will check in with you with regards to how you are feeling. Please let me know at any time should you feel any discomfort. Following our interview, if you continue to experience discomfort, please contact me so that we can discuss ways in which I can support you in connecting with a mental health professional. Should you decide to withdraw your permission to participate in this study at any time, please let me know by contacting me at the number below.

**Compensation**
To thank you for your participation in this study, a gift card in the amount of $20.00 will be provided to you.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me, Nina Mafrici, at the telephone number or email address listed below.

If you would like to receive a copy of the research findings after the study has been completed, please fill out the attached form that will be kept in a separate locked file in my office.
If you have any further questions or comments, please contact either myself, Dr. Niva Piran, or the Ethics Review Office.

Sincerely,

Nina Mafrici, M.A. OISE/UT
Email: nina.mafrici@utoronto.ca
Tel: (416) 525-7414

Niva Piran, Ph.D. OISE/UT
Tel: (416) 978-0712

Ethics Review Office
Tel: (416) 946-5606

**Consent to Participate**
I have read and understand this consent form and what is required of my participation in this research study. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from this study at any time without consequence, and that I may choose to skip any questions I feel uncomfortable answering. I consent to my participation in this research study, and to being audio taped during the interview.

Name (printed): _________________________  Signature: _________________________

Date: __________________
APPENDIX D

Request for Summary of Research Findings

(Printed on OISE/UT letterhead)

I wish to receive a summary of the findings for the research entitled:

“The Influence of Peer Relationships on Women’s Lived Body Experiences Across the Lifespan”

Yes________  No________

Name:  __________________________________

Address:  __________________________________

_____________________________________

Phone Number:  __________________________

Email Address:  __________________________________
APPENDIX E

Interview Questioning Guide

Childhood Experiences with Friends/Peers:
- Tell me about your relationships with peers and friends in childhood.
  o What are some of your earliest memories with friends/peers?
  o Were you someone who had a few close friends or a large group of friends?
  o Were your friendships/peer groups predominantly same-sex or mixed?
  o How were your friends/peers similar to you? (e.g., in terms of ethnicity, familial background, general interests, etc.)
    ▪ How were they different?
- What (if any) significant changes in friendships/peer groups did you experience throughout your childhood?
- What influenced your choice of friends/peer groups as a child?
  o How did your family (or cultural background…) influence your choice of friends/peers?
- Did you have a best friend in childhood?
  o How would you describe your relationship with your best/closest friend?
- What were some of the strongest influences your friends had on you as a child? (i.e., behaviour, appearance, activities, etc.)
  o How did your friends/peers influence the way you felt about your appearance or your body?
  o How did your friends/peers influence your eating attitudes or behaviours?
  o How did your friends/peers influence your choice of, or participation in, activities?
- What were some of the positive experiences you had with friends/peers in childhood?
  o Tell me about a time when you felt the most comfortable with your friends.
    ▪ How did you feel in your body in relation to this experience?
- What were some of the negative experiences you had with friends/peers in childhood?
  o Tell me about a time when you felt uncomfortable, or ‘bad’ about yourself, when you were with your friends.
    ▪ How did you feel in your body in relation to this experience?
  o Were you ever teased/bullied/harassed? (Can you tell me a bit about these experiences?)
    ▪ How did they make you feel about yourself?/How did you feel in your body at the time?
- In general, how did your experiences with peers/friends at this time impact how you felt about yourself and your body?
  o How did being with different friends/peers change these feelings (if at all)?

Adolescent Experiences with Friends/Peers:
- Tell me about your relationships with peers/friends in adolescence.
  o Did your friendships/peer groups change from childhood? (In what ways?)
    ▪ Was this a positive or negative change for you? (In what ways?)
  o Were your friendships/peer groups predominantly same-sex or mixed?
  o How were your friends/peers similar to you? (e.g., in terms of ethnicity, familial background, general interests etc.)
- How were they different?
- Were you part of any peer groups/cliques?
  - Tell me about the group(s) you belonged to?
    - How were they different from other peer groups?
    - What defined the group(s)?
- What influenced your choice of friends/peer groups during adolescence?
  - How did your family (or cultural background) influence your choice of friends/peers?
- Did you have a best friend in adolescence?
  - How would you describe your relationship with your best/closest friend at this time?
- What were some of the strongest influences your friends had on you during adolescence? (i.e., behaviour, appearance, activities, etc.)
  - How did your friends/peers influence the way you felt about your appearance or your body?
  - How did your friends/peers influence your eating attitudes or behaviours?
  - How did your friends/peers influence your choice of, or participation, in activities?
- What were some of the positive experiences you had with friends/peers in adolescence?
  - Tell me about a time when you felt the most comfortable with your friends.
    - How did you feel in your body in relation to this experience?
- What were some of the negative experiences you had with friends/peers in adolescence?
  - Tell me about a time when you felt uncomfortable, or ‘bad’ about yourself, when you were with your friends.
    - How did you feel in your body in relation to this experience?
  - Were you ever teased/bullied/harassed? (Can you tell me a bit about these experiences?)
    - How did they make you feel about yourself?/How did you feel in your body at the time?
- In general, how did your experiences with peers/friends at this time impact how you felt about yourself and your body?
  - How did being with different friends/peers change these feelings? (e.g., male vs. female peers; peers in different social contexts)

**Experiences with Friends/Peers in Emerging Adulthood (most notably, after high school):**
- Tell me about your peer relationships/friendships after high school (or in early adulthood – early 20s).
  - Tell me about any significant changes that occurred in your friendships.
  - Tell me about your closest friendships.
  - How were your friends/peers similar to you? (e.g., in terms of ethnicity, familial background, general interests, etc.)
    - How were they different?
  - How did your experiences with peers/friends in childhood and adolescence influence your experiences with peers/friends in young adulthood?
- What influenced your choice of friends/peer groups during this time?
- What were some of the strongest influences your friends had on you at this time? (i.e., behaviour, appearance, activities, etc.)
How did your friends/peers influence the way you felt about your appearance or your body?
- How did your friends/peers influence your eating attitudes or behaviours?
- How did your friends/peers influence your choice of, or participation, in activities?
- What were some of the positive experiences you had with friends/peers?
  - Tell me about a time when you felt the most comfortable with your friends.
    - How did you feel in your body in relation to this experience?
- What were some of the negative experiences you had with friends/peers in adolescence?
  - Tell me about a time when you felt uncomfortable, or ‘bad’ about yourself, when you were with your friends.
    - How did you feel in your body in relation to this experience?
  - Did you experience any teasing/bullying/harassment by friends/peers in young adulthood? (Can you tell me a bit about these experiences?)
    - How did they make you feel about yourself?/How did you feel in your body at the time?
- In general, how did your experiences with peers/friends at this time impact how you felt about yourself and your body?
  - How did being with different friends/peers change these feelings? (e.g., male vs. female peers; peers in different social contexts)

Current Experiences with Friends/Peers:
- Tell me about your current relationships with friends/peers?
  - How have your relationships with friends/peers changed or stayed the same since:
    i) childhood? ii) adolescence? and iii) young adulthood?
  - How are your friends/peers similar to you now?
    - How were they different?
- What influences the nature of you relationships with peers/friends currently?
- Tell me about the most positive experience(s) you have had with your friends/peers currently?
  - How do you feel in your body in relation to these experiences?
- Tell me about any negative experience(s) you have had with friends/peers currently?
  - How do you feel in your body in relation to these experiences?
- How does being with your friends/peers currently impact your feelings about yourself and your body?
  - Has this changed since childhood/adolescence/emerging adulthood? (In what ways?)
  - Are there times when you feel better/worse about yourself with certain friends? (Tell me about these experiences.)

Conclusion:
- After speaking about your relationships with friends/peers across your life, how would you say these experiences have shaped how you currently feel about, and live in, your body?
- Is there anything else that we have not talked about today that you think would be important for our understanding of how your relationships with peers/friends have influenced how you feel about your body?
- What was it like for you to participate in this interview?
APPENDIX F

Initial Coding Tree

Demographics
- Age
- Level of education
  - High school
  - Post-secondary
  - Graduate (M.A./Ph.D)
- Socioeconomic status
  - Growing up/family
  - Presently
- Urban vs. rural
- Ethnocultural background
- Immigration status
- Religious affiliation
  - Christian
  - Jewish
  - Muslim
  - No religious affiliation
- Sexual orientation
  - Heterosexual
  - Gay
  - Bisexual
- Family composition
  - Parents
    - Married/separated/divorced/deceased
  - Siblings
    - Brother(s)/sister(s)
- Present relationship status
  - Single
  - Dating
  - Married
  - Other committed relationship
  - Children
- Current or past eating issues
  - Anorexia
  - Bulimia
  - Binge eating
  - Eating and/or weight struggles
- History of mental/physical health issues
  - Depression
  - Anxiety

Schooling Experiences
- Public vs. private vs. Catholic and/or religious affiliated
- Co-ed vs. same-sex
- Uniform vs. non-uniform

**Peer Context in Childhood/Adolescence/Young Adulthood/Present Day**

- Primary peer socializing context(s)
  - School friends
  - Neighbourhood friends
  - Family friends
  - Other (teams, clubs, etc.)

- Co-ed vs. same-sex
  - Gendered activities

- Close friends vs. acquaintances

- Similarities vs. differences
  - Physical characteristics/appearance
  - Ethnicity/culture
  - Interests
  - Social class

- Peer/friend transitions
  - Changing schools
  - Friend separation
  - Friend falling out
  - Childhood to adolescence
    - Greater complexity in relationships
    - Increase in male peers

- Influences on choice of friends/peers
  - Proximity
  - Shared interests/similar personalities
  - Parents

- Best friendships

- Groups/cliques
  - Popular vs. unpopular

**Significant Life Transitions Related to the Body Experience**

- Puberty
  - Awareness of the body changing

- Adulthood
  - Heightened focus on health and well-being

- Changing schools
  - Transition into high school
  - New peer environment

- Immigration

- Living/working abroad

- Marriage/wedding

- Pregnancy/children

**Peer Influences**

- Norms for appearance and body size
- Appearance
  - Hair
  - Clothing
- Body size and shape
- Eating attitudes and behaviours
  - Healthy vs. unhealthy foods
  - Social eating
  - Dieting
  - Eating disorders
  - Appreciation for the body and physical health
- Activities/pastimes
  - ‘Feminine’ vs. ‘unfeminine’ activities/pastimes (e.g., shopping)
  - Popular vs. unpopular
  - Imaginative or free play
  - No external body consciousness
  - Exercising
  - Following the crowd
- Academics
- Intimate/Dating relationships
  - Appearance-related comments or attitudes
  - Sexuality
- General unawareness of peer influences

**Positive Peer Experiences**
- Context for shared understanding and support
- Peer connectedness
  - Shared interests/experiences
- Loyalty and trust
- Peer/friend acceptance
- Peer encouragement
- No external body consciousness
- Shared rejection of negative/harmful peer activities
- Shared respect for individual differences/diversity (within or outside of peer group)
  - Appearance
  - Body size
  - Ethnicity
  - Social class
  - Sexual orientation
- Unconcern and/or shared rejection of social molds/labels/ideals
  - Dominant appearance standards
  - Dieting
  - “Feminine” activities
  - Preoccupation with boys
  - Popularity
- Close (non-intimate) male peers
  - Body/appearance comfort
  - Gay male friends
- No peer division according to groups/cliques
- Peer solidarity in response to teasing/harassment

**Negative Peer Experiences**
- Arguments/fighting
  - Betrayal
  - Related to male peers
- Discomfort with peers dating
- Activities that heighten external body consciousness
- Preoccupation with food/eating/weight
- Peer/friend separation
- Peer/friend alienation
  - Outcast/outsider
- Fat talk

**Peer Teasing/Harassment**
- Appearance vs. non-appearance-based
  - Fat/thin associations
- Related to popularity
- Related to sexuality
- Female vs. male perpetrators
- Singled out vs. prevalent across peer socializing context

**Body Experiences in Reference to Peers**
- External body consciousness (evaluative gaze)
  - Related to puberty
  - Related to food and eating
  - Male peers
    - Appearance
    - Body teasing and harassment
    - Attraction/desirability/dating
  - Body comparison
    - Weight/body size/appearance
    - Height
    - Clothing
  - External awareness vs. objectified body consciousness (i.e., directly targeted via comments/actions; self-consciousness)
    - Weight/body size/appearance
    - Height
    - Clothing
    - Intellectual or physical competence
    - Body teasing and harassment
    - Competition
  - Awareness or adherence to social molds/labels/ideals
    - Femininity
      - Food and eating
      - Appearance/clothing
- Pastimes/activities
  - Popular vs. unpopular (i.e., ‘fitting in’)
  - Appearance/clothing
  - Pastimes/activities
  - Puberty/sexuality

- Physical activity
  - Play
  - Dance
  - Swimming
  - Freedom vs. restriction of clothing and uniforms
  - ‘Feminine’ vs. ‘unfeminine’ activities

- Agency (social power)
  - Rejection of dominant peer/friend norms
    - Drinking/smoking/etc.
    - ‘Feminine’ or ‘unfeminine’ activities
  - Fighting back against teasing/harassment
  - Expressing emotions
  - Dressing for comfort (or according to desires)
  - Choice of friends
  - Joy in physical activity
  - Competence
    - Academics
    - Physical activity/sport
  - Passion and creativity

- Acquiring social power vs. social disempowerment
  - Cliques/friendship groups
  - Popularity status
  - Fitting the ‘ideal’
  - Social class
  - Pubertal timing
  - Feeling like an outsider/outcast
  - Pressure to maintain power

- Food and eating
  - Responding to vs. controlling appetite/hunger (e.g., dieting)
  - Eating according to desires/preferences
  - Enjoyment

Emotions
- Enjoyment
- Comfort
- Relaxed
- Energized
- Anger
- Discomfort
- Embarrassment/Humiliation
- Upset
- Fear
- Nervousness
- Jealousy
- Shame
- Guilt
- Exposed

**Social Class or Social Location**
- Participation in activities or choice of pastimes
- Education/schooling experiences
- Clothing
- External body consciousness
- Social power

**Ethnicity/Culture**
- Fitting in/embodying the ‘ideal’
- External body consciousness
- Responses to puberty
- Activities
- Attitudes towards appearance and/or cultural ideals
  - Preoccupation with adherence vs. rejection of social molds/labels/ideals

**Family/Parental Influences**
- Eating
- Appearance and clothing
  - Preoccupation with appearances
  - Adherence to social molds/labels
  - Access to clothing
  - Body comparisons
  - Sexuality
- Activities/pastimes
- Time spent with friends
- Freedom (agency) vs. restriction
- Experiences of social power/disenpowerment within the home
- Family support/protection vs. non-supportiveness
- Teasing
  - Body size/appearance
    - Social molds/labels
- Response to puberty and the body

**Partner/Dating Influences**
- Heightened appearance pressure or external body consciousness
- Critical stance towards social molds/labels/ideals
- Food/eating
- Sexuality and desire
- Supportiveness
- Providing comfort/confidence in body
- Providing social power
Other Misc Barriers and Contributors to Embodiment

- School
  - Rules for uniform/clothing
    - Uniform/clothing that objectifies the body (e.g., ballet leotards)
    - Uniform/clothing that protects the body from objectification or external body consciousness
  - Academically enriching/rewarding environment
  - Open and supportive school environment

- Media
  - Appearance standards (“ideal”)

- Physical and mental health/well-being

- Aging
  - Increased comfort/confidence in body
  - Increased independence
  - Different priorities

- Critical stance or rejection of social molds/labels/ideals
  - Eating as enjoyable
  - Dressing for comfort
  - Embracing individuality

- Activities that heighten external body consciousness
- Self-awareness
- Sense of accomplishment/competence
- Body/health appreciation
- Recovery/healing journey

Interview Experience

- Enlightening/new awareness
- Self-reflection
- Providing voice
APPENDIX G

First Comprehensive Coding Scheme

Peer variables contributing to positive embodiment
Supportive relational contexts
Peer connectedness
  Loyalty, trust, understanding and acceptance
Shared respect for individual differences/diversity
  Appearance and body size
  Ethnocultural background
  Social class
  Sexual orientation
Unconcern and/or shared rejection of dominant social molds/labels/ideals
Femininity
  Appearance norms (clothing – restrictive versus freedom)
  Dieting (responding to appetite; eating according to desire/preferences)
  Activities (expressions of physical freedom)
  Preoccupation with boys/men
Popularity
Close (non-intimate) male peers as a source of body/self comfort
  Reduced body objectification
  Pertaining to sexuality/desirability
    Gay male friends

Peer variables contributing to disrupted embodiment
Evaluative external gaze
  Appearance norms
  Eating attitudes/behaviours
  Intellectual/physical competence
  Adherence to social/molds/labels/ideals
Femininity and the feminine ideal
  Controlling body weight/shape
  Feminine vs. unfeminine activities
  Sexuality/desirability
Popularity
  Clothing
  Body size
  Food and eating
  Pastimes/activities
Self-surveillance (objectified body consciousness)
  Related to puberty
  Body/self comparison
    Direct evaluative comments
Male peers
Attraction/desirability
Sexuality
Teasing and harassment
  Pertaining to physical appearance
  Pertaining to popularity and/or social status
  Sexual harassment

Social power and disempowerment in relation to peer factors contributing to positive versus disrupted embodiment
  Acquiring and/or sustaining social power/privilege
    Critical stance or rejection of social molds/labels/dominant peer norms
    Eating according to desire/for enjoyment
    Dressing for comfort
    Refraining from dominant beauty practices
    Embracing individuality
  Joy/competence/passion in physical activity
  Ideal girl/woman
Social disempowerment
  Pressure related to maintaining social status
    Concern for peer acceptance
    Maintaining popularity status
  Pertaining to differences in social class
  Pertaining to ethnocultural differences
  Pertaining to pubertal timing

Mediating Variables
  Primary Peer Context
    Similarities vs. differences
      Physical characteristics/appearance
      Ethnicity/culture
      Social class
      Interests/personality
      Peer group transitions
  Significant life transitions
    Puberty
      Heightened body awareness
      Male peers and sexuality
    Emerging adulthood
      Heightened focus on health and well-being
    Cultural transitions (immigration/living or working abroad)
    Motherhood
  Current or past eating issues
    Eating disorder
    Ongoing struggle with weight
  Media
    White Ideal
  Family/Parental Influences
Attitudes towards appearance
Attitudes towards food and eating
Instilling values; protection
Partner Influences
Supportive in rejecting dominant norms
Reinforcing dominant norms
APPENDIX H

Final Coding Scheme

**MODEL #1**

**PEER PROCESSES RELATED TO DOMINANT AND ALTERNATIVE NORMS, IDEALS AND EXPECTATIONS**

**DOMAIN #1**

1. **IDEAL BODY APPEARANCE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Promoting the Ideal Body Appearance</th>
<th>Challenging the Ideal Body Appearance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>a. Social Comparison</strong></td>
<td><strong>a. Promoting Alternative Body Norms</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. <strong>Differences in Body Size and Shape</strong></td>
<td>i. <strong>Diversity in appearances</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• emerges in early to middle childhood with an external awareness of the body</td>
<td>• begins in early to middle childhood in relation to ethnocultural diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• intensifies in late childhood to early adolescence with a pronounced evaluative external gaze of the body</td>
<td>• continues in middle to late adolescence in relation to alternative ways of dressing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• continues through to adulthood</td>
<td>• continues in adulthood in relation to diversity in body size and shape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internalized Body Experiences:</strong></td>
<td><strong>ii. Expressing body comfort</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External awareness of the body → evaluative external gaze of the body → body dissatisfaction → preoccupation with adherence to body norms and ideals</td>
<td>• predominantly in adulthood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ii. Pubertal Changes</strong></td>
<td><strong>iii. Shaping life experiences</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• late childhood to early adolescence</td>
<td>• exclusively in adulthood in relation to pregnancy/motherhood, recovering from mental health issues, and sharing body struggles with significant others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internalized Body Experiences:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Internalized Body Experiences:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heightened body surveillance → body discomfort</td>
<td>Processes that promote alternative body norms → body comfort →</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
iii. Ethnocultural Differences and Cultural Transitions
- begins in middle childhood with an internalization of inherent differences and cultural norms of attractiveness
- intensifies in late childhood/early adolescence
- continues through to adulthood

Internalized Body Experiences:
Internalization of inherent differences and cultural norms of attractiveness
→ heightened body surveillance and body consciousness

b. Evaluative Messages and Appearance-based Conversations
i. Messages That Socially Reward
- begins in early adolescence
- continues through to adulthood

Internalized Body Experiences:
Evaluative external gaze of the body → heightened body esteem → preoccupation with sustaining body norms and ideals

ii. Disapproving and/or Critical Messages
→ Diet and appearance talk
- begins in late childhood
- increases in early to middle adolescence
- continues to remain pronounced in adulthood

→ Teasing and harassment
- begins in late childhood
- increases in early to middle adolescence
- none reported by peers in adulthood

Internalized Body Experiences:
Evaluative external gaze of the body → heightened body consciousness → preoccupation with attaining body norms and ideals

b. Messages that Challenge and Resist Preoccupation with the Ideal
i. Receiving supportive messages
- all, but one participant in adulthood; all from male peers

ii. Active Resistance to Messages
- only within young adulthood/adulthood

Internalized Body Experiences:
Supportive messages and active resistance to appearance-focused messages → distancing from pressures of conformity to the ideal

DOMAIN#2

II. IDEALIZED WAYS OF INHABITING THE BODY AS A GIRL AND WOMAN
# Promoting Adherence to Idealized Ways of Inhabiting the Body as a Girl and Woman

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. Food and Eating</th>
<th>Challenging Adherence to Idealized Ways of Inhabiting the Body as a Girl and Woman</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i. The Pursuit of Thinness</td>
<td>i. Food and Eating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ <strong>Peer dieting</strong></td>
<td>→ <strong>Modeling Comfort in Appetite</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• emerges in early adolescence</td>
<td>• predominantly in early to late childhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• intensifies in middle to late adolescence</td>
<td>• only two participants in early to late adolescence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• continues for some participants in adulthood</td>
<td>• approximately half of the participants in adulthood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ <strong>Pressures for thinness</strong></td>
<td>• <strong>Absence of the male evaluative gaze</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• emerges in early adolescence</td>
<td>• exclusively in early to late childhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• intensifies in middle adolescence</td>
<td>• <strong>Relationships that challenge pressures associated with sexuality</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• significantly less pronounced in adulthood</td>
<td>• exclusively in adulthood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Ideals for Health and wellness</td>
<td><strong>Internalized Body Experiences:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ <strong>Healthy vs. unhealthy eating</strong></td>
<td>Internalized body comfort → responding to appetite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• among a few participants in late childhood and adolescence</td>
<td><strong>Internalized Body Experiences:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• communicated by family members</td>
<td>Body comfort → connection with desire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• pronounced in young adulthood and beyond</td>
<td><strong>Internalized Body Experiences:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ <strong>Upholding the healthy ideal</strong></td>
<td>Body shame and/or discomfort → preoccupation with adherence to ideals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• exclusively in young adulthood and beyond</td>
<td><strong>Internalized Body Experiences:</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Internalized Body Experiences:
- Heightened body consciousness → internalized pressures to conform to the pursuit of thinness/ideals of health and wellness → negotiation of appetite
- Body comfort → connection with desire

## Internalized Body Experiences:
- Body shame and/or discomfort → preoccupation with adherence to ideals

### b. Sexuality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>i. Male Evaluative Gaze</th>
<th>ii. Sexual Harassment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• predominantly in early adolescence</td>
<td>• one participant in middle childhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• heightens in middle to late adolescence</td>
<td>• two participants in early to middle adolescence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• continues for most participants through to adulthood</td>
<td>• none by peers in adulthood</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Internalized Body Experiences:**
- Body shame and/or discomfort → preoccupation with adherence to ideals
of female sexual attractiveness and disconnection from desire

c. Activities, Interests and/or Educational Pursuits
   i. Gender Segregation
      - begins in middle to late childhood
      - heightens in early to middle adolescence
      - less frequent in adulthood
   
   ii. Passivity
      - begins in early adolescence
      - continues through to adulthood for most participants
   
   iii. Activity for Weight Control
      - emerges in middle adolescence
      - pronounced in young adulthood and beyond

Internalized Body Experiences:
Internalization of gendered norms ➔ heightened focus and/or objectification of body ➔ discomfort/self-consciousness ➔ engagement in activities and pursuits ➔ engagement in activities for weight control/loss

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model #2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IMPLICATIONS OF PEER PROCESSES ON SOCIAL POWER AND ACCEPTANCE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Promoting Pressures of Peer Conformity and Compliance</th>
<th>Resisting Pressures of Peer Conformity and Compliance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Internalization of Social Inequity and/or Privilege</td>
<td>a. Group Protective Factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Body Size and Shape</td>
<td>i. Accepting, Nonjudgmental Peer Groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- begins in late childhood</td>
<td>- early to middle childhood most acceptance from peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- intensifies in early to late adolescence</td>
<td>- reduces drastically in adolescence, although protective for several participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- continues throughout adulthood</td>
<td>- increases in adulthood for several participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Sexuality and Desirability</td>
<td>ii. Alternative Group Norms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- begins in late childhood</td>
<td>- exclusively in adolescence and adulthood supporting greater freedom/comfort in participants’ bodies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- intensifies in early adolescence accompanying changes in puberty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- continues throughout adolescence and adulthood in response to</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
perceptions of desirability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>iii. Clothing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>\• begins in middle to late childhood</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>\• intensifies in early adolescence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>\• less pronounced in adulthood</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>iv. Ethnocultural Differences and Cultural Transitions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>\• begins in middle to late childhood</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>\• intensifies throughout adolescence in relation to White privilege and cultural transitions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>\• continues to remain prevalent in adulthood</td>
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<tr>
<th>v. Relational Connections</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>\• emerges in early adolescence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>\• intensifies throughout adolescence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>\• continues for a few women in young adulthood who were disempowered and lacked connection with their peers in adolescence</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>b. Consequences of Social Disempowerment and Peer Rejection</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i. Controlling the Body</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>\• emerges in early adolescence</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>\• intensifies throughout adolescence</td>
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<tr>
<td>\• less pronounced in adulthood, although evident among women who struggled with eating disorders in adolescence</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>ii. Dressing to ‘Fit In’</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>\• predominantly in early to middle adolescence</td>
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<td>\• significantly less pronounced in adulthood</td>
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<tr>
<th>iii. Pressures of Cultural Assimilation</th>
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<tr>
<td>\• only one participant in middle childhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>\• intensifies throughout adolescence in relation to the White ideal</td>
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<td>\• continues for a few of the participants in adulthood</td>
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**Internalized Body Experiences:**
Internalization of social inequity → body discomfort/consciousness → conformity/compliance to dominant norms/ideals to establish social

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<tr>
<th>b. Individual Protective Factors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ii. Agency</td>
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<td>\• most prevalent in middle to late childhood</td>
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<td>\• a few participants in adolescence who had other groups of friends to rely on, as well as positive parental influences</td>
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<td>\• continues for several in adulthood</td>
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<tr>
<th>iii. Clarity and Locating Oneself in Relation to Peer Group</th>
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<td>\• exclusively in adulthood in response to reflecting on current and former experiences with peers</td>
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**Internalized Body Experiences:**
Group and individual protective factors → resistance to/freedom from typical pressures of peer conformity and compliance
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<th>privilege or social withdrawal/isolation</th>
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