Impact of Television on the Perception of Body Image by Male Children

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Abstract

The study aimed to explore the impact of television on perceptions of body image in male children. Focus group methodology was employed in order to access participants' perceptions of two television programs, and explore whether young children are able to differentiate between themes and messages presented within television programming and the extent to which they are able to select, process, and evaluate the information. Five African-Canadian males, age's seven to nine from the Dartmouth Boys and Girls Club in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia viewed 10 minute clips from two age appropriate television programs which displayed different themes (educational vs. teen comedy) and then participated in the focus group.

The participants in this study offered insight and information regarding their level of awareness with regard to selected television themes and messages. The participants demonstrated an understanding of the main themes (educational vs. teen comedy) presented within the television shows. Older participants (age 9) exhibited some awareness of the rehearsed fantasy of television whereas the younger participants (age 7) believed that most things portrayed on television were real. Overall, the participants described characters with larger body shapes as "different" yet not necessarily negative. Although these young boys demonstrated an awareness of extreme body types, they did not appear to possess an association between body size and negative body image, but expressed the insignificance of body size and attractiveness in relation to popularity. This suggests that although the boys were able to distinguish between body size and type, their cognition may not yet be developed to allow for a complete awareness of the association between body size and negative body image. Thus, the framework of

unrealistic body shape expectations may unknowingly be set in childhood, but it is not until later in adolescence (which includes physical growth, onset of puberty, and increased importance of peer relationships and peer pressure), that the incentives for a change in behavior becomes great enough and the full impact of negative body image occurs.

Chapter I

Introduction

During the past 30 years, there has been considerable interest in the topics of body image perception, distortion, and satisfaction in young female students. More recently, the focus has shifted to children as body image distortion at a young age may predispose to later development of eating disorders and obesity (Furnham, Badmin, & Sneade, 2002). Media can influence children and adolescents perceptions of their body by projecting images that suggest the ideal body is extremely thin, an ideal that most children and adolescents cannot normally achieve. This can lead to internalized negative feelings, which can begin the downward spiral toward disordered eating (Andrist, 2003). Body image disturbance may also be related to lowered self-esteem and impaired psychosocial functioning, including social anxiety and the onset of adolescent depression (Smolak & Levine, 2001).

Sociocultural factors, such as parents, peers, and the media in particular, have a strong influence on the development of body image. Boys and girls as young as five express anxiety over body image and a desire to be thin (Andrist, 2003). The transition from childhood to early adolescence is a high risk period for the development of body dissatisfaction because of the physical changes that occur with puberty (Harrison, 2000; Smolak & Levine, 2001). Young children may also be the most susceptible to hidden themes and media messages because their identities and attitudes are continuously evolving and more malleable (Strasburger, 1995). Thus, body image disturbance among young children deserves theoretical and empirical attention.

Statement of the Problem

The majority of children and adolescents are concerned about their size, shape, weight, and body image. As a result, they may experience lower self-esteem and may be at risk for developing eating disorders (Harrison, 2000; Morris & Katzman, 2003). Media, especially television, may contribute to body dissatisfaction by portraying unrealistic images, which may in turn increase risk of eating disorders and adolescent depression (Morris & Katzman, 2003; Polce-Lynch, Myers, Kliewer, & Kilmartin, 2001).

With a few exceptions (Moore & MacKinnon, 2001; Tiggeman, Gardiner, & Slater, 2000; Wertheim et al., 1998), children and adolescents' negative body image and the impact of media have been investigated mainly by quantitative methodology. A large number of these studies have demonstrated that the majority of preadolescent and adolescent girls and boys ages nine and older are worried about their weight, are afraid of being fat, and experience body dissatisfaction as a result of media pressures (Andrist, 2003; Gustafson-Larson & Terry, 1992; Hofschire & Greenberg, 2002; Wood, Becker, & Thompson, 1996). While many assumptions have been made about such behavior, we know little about younger children's understanding of messages portrayed in the media and what children themselves see as contributing factors to negative body image.

Further, given that longitudinal studies are beginning to show that body dissatisfaction is a risk factor for the later development of eating disorders and depression (Attie & Brooks-Gunn, 1989; Killen et al., 1996; Stice, 1998; Stice, Spangler, & Agras, 2001), it is vital to understand young children's own views and meanings in order to formulate successful interventions regarding the media's impact on body image, self-esteem, and eating disorders. This study may provide health care providers, parents,

teachers, school psychologists, and other professionals with a better understanding of young children's awareness of media as well as the media-associated health risks. In addition to media literacy, the results of this study may also help with the development of educational programs and materials that teach young people how to evaluate program and advertising content more critically. The development of school-based programs that demonstrate how television programs are produced, how special effects are accomplished, and how television differs from real-life can play a role in creating media-literate children. Also, the use of focus groups in this study may help to establish the benefits of peer or group-based interventions in generating commitment to attitudinal and behavioural change. Ultimately, the increased knowledge surrounding television and its impact on children's body image can lead to the development of many programs which may, in turn, lead to the prevention of body image disturbance as well as disordered eating.

Research Questions

This research explored the impact of television on perceptions of body image in male children aged seven to nine by comparing responses to two television programs, one designed for educational television with few messages on body image and the other being a teen comedy designed for commercial television. The specific objectives of this research were:

1) To assess whether young children are aware of themes and messages, including body image that are presented within each television program;

2) To determine whether young children are able to differentiate between the themes and messages presented in each television program;

3) To examine the extent to which they are able to select, process and evaluate the

information presented in the programs; and

4) To evaluate factors that are perceived by young children to contribute to negative body image within television programming.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Defining Body Image

Body image is a concept consisting of related, yet distinct, dimensions including thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about body shape and size (Nathanson & Botta, 2003). Body dissatisfaction, which is only moderately related to actual body appearance, occurs when these thoughts, feelings, and perceptions are distorted and negative (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002; Nathanson & Botta, 2003). Disturbed body image thoughts can include chronic thoughts about weight loss and weight gain, and overestimating one's body shape and size (Nathanson & Botta, 2003).

Historical Trends

Perceptions of the ideal body image have changed over time. For example, the average American fashion model is 5 foot 11 inches tall and weighs 117 pounds while the average American women is 5 foot 4 inches tall and weighs 140 pounds (Andrist, 2003). The size and weight of both male and female models depicted in the media changed with time, with the shape and size of women's bodies becoming considerably thinner and leaner while men's body size and shape has become larger and more muscular (Morris & Katzman, 2003). Katzmarzyk and Davis (2001) examined changes in the weight and shape of the body of Playboy centerfolds from 1978 to 1998 and found that there was a significant decrease in the models' body weights and measurements, with 70% of the women being classified as underweight. In contrast, when male centerfold models in

Playgirl magazines from 1973 to 1997 were assessed, male models had become significantly more muscular (Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001). The British Medical Association Board of Science and Education (2000) reported that models and actresses in the 1990's had 10% to 15% body fat, whereas the average body fat for a healthy woman is 22% to 26%. Consistent with this, the weight of Miss America winners has decreased by 12% since the 1920's and is now at a point where the pageant participants are classified as undernourished according to World Health Organization standards (Nathanson & Botta, 2003).

Body Image in Young Children

Children begin to compare themselves to others at an early age, a behaviour that is proposed to reduce uncertainty and to enhance self-concept (Dakin & Arrowood, 1981). By second grade, children begin to show an increasing interest in social comparisons to other children in terms of their ability to complete a task (Lawrence & Thelen, 1995). Preschool girls tend to engage in more sophisticated reasoning about social situations than same age boys and are better able to interpret subtle social cues (Woolfolk, Winne, & Perry, 2006). When comparing themselves to others, girls are also more likely than boys to regard themselves negatively (Desmond, Price, Gray, & O'Connell, 1986; Simmons & Rosenberg, 1975). This trend continues to exist throughout adolescence. Although self-esteem appears to decrease for both boys and girls during early adolescence, boys' general self-esteem increases dramatically during late adolescence while girls' self-esteem stays the same, leaving girls with significantly lower general self-esteem and a more negative self-concept than boys (Woolfolk, Winne,

& Perry, 2006).

Children, as young as the age of five, express body dissatisfaction and are concerned about their body shape and weight (Gustafson-Larson & Terry, 1992; Harrison, 2000). For example, 17% of boys and 33% of girls in a sample of American children aged nine to eleven were "very often" worried about their weight (Gustafson-Larson & Terry, 1992), and 55% of American girls and 35% of American boys aged eight to ten were dissatisfied with their size (Wood, Becker, & Thompson, 1996). According to the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), 42% of first through third grade girls wish to be thinner, and a startling 81% of girls the age of ten are afraid of being fat (Andrist, 2003).

Body dissatisfaction seems to increase with age among girls (Andrist, 2003; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001; Smolak & Levine, 2001). When compared to second grade girls, fourth and fifth grade girls were more concerned about being fat and expressed a stronger desire to be thinner (Lawrence & Thelen, 1995).

Children begin to discriminate based on body build at an early age. When 6 year old children were asked to rate body size, obese figures were given a negative rating compared to thin and normal weight figures, and the heaviest figure was least likely to be selected as a playmate (Musher-Eizenman, Holub, Miller, Goldstein, & Edwards-Leeper, 2004). This preference for thin ideals persisted as age increased.

Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to images and messages portrayed in the media (Morris & Katzman, 2003). The years between ages six and 11 can play an important role in determining attitudes about sex, violence, and body image primarily because this time period is marked by significant physical, cognitive, social,

and psychological development. Because these early adolescents are just beginning to experience the physical changes of puberty, they may focus on media images because they are concerned about how they look and how their appearance will impact their relationships with peers (Brown, Steele, & Walsh-Childers, 2002). Also, many children cannot distinguish between what is real and what is fantasy. For example, most children and adolescents are unaware of the digital technology and enhancement, also known as air brushing, that is used to compliment features and present the perfect or ideal body. These images promote unrealistic standards that are impossible to achieve (Morris & Katzman, 2003). In some respects, young children and adolescents may be the most susceptible population to television's hidden themes and messages because their identities and attitudes are evolving and more malleable (Strasburger, 1995).

Biological Factors

Biological factors are unlikely to make a direct contribution to body image concerns. However, given that body weight and shape are influenced by one's genetic profile, and that obese body weights and shapes are seen as socially undesirable, body type, or body composition, may act as an indirect biological contributor to body dissatisfaction (Smolak & Levine, 2001). Body Mass Index (BMI), a measure of weight relative to height that correlates with body fat, is positively related to body dissatisfaction, meaning that body dissatisfaction increases in proportion to the increase in BMI (Hofschire & Greenberg, 2002). This appears to be true for children: overweight children, as young as five, have lower body esteem and express the wish to be thinner, when compared to normal weight children. For example, of children aged eight to 12

years, 76% of the overweight girls and 56% of the overweight boys wanted to be thinner (Smolak & Levine, 2001).

Socio-cultural Factors

Media

Television is the dominant media format in North American culture. It is estimated that the average Canadian child between the ages of two and 11 watches approximately 14 hours of television per week, and that the average teenager watches nearly 13 hours per week of network and cable programming (Statistics Canada, 2004). When movies, video games, and computer games are included, screen time for children and teenagers may be as high as 30 to 40 hours per week (Statistics Canada, 2004). To put this into perspective, children and teenagers spend more time watching television than doing any other leisure activity except sleeping. By the time today's children reach the age of 70, they will have spent approximately seven to 10 years of their lives watching television (Strasburger, 1995). The amount of time spent watching television directly impacts perceptions and behaviour in children and adolescents (Dietz & Strasburger, 1991).

The influence of media images on body esteem is a complex issue, even among adults. It is more challenging in children and early adolescents because young children do not process information in the same way as adults. Like adults, children see skewed gender roles on television, including the representation of the thin-ideal. However, they lack the experience and judgement to evaluate what they see.

The effect of age on the impact of television can be explained by differences in

cognitive development. According to Piaget's theory, cognitive development occurs in stages with each stage being characterized by the cognitive structures the child uses to understand events and to process information from the environment. For example, children in the preoperational stage (two to seven years) have poorly organized ways of thinking about objects or ideas, concentrating only on dominant dimensions of a stimulus (Roedder, 1981). In relation to television programming, these children do not infer relations among television scenes well and typically tend to recall isolated events rather than plots. In addition, their comprehension of content is quite poor unless enhanced by salient formal features (Doubleday & Droege, 1993). In contrast, children in the stage of formal operations (11 years and older) have the ability to think abstractly about ideas, and reason using all possible information contained in a stimulus (Roedder, 1981). Therefore, children in this stage have an increased ability to infer missing content and their social realism judgements of television drama continue to decrease (Doubleday & Droege, 1993).

The dominant images presented on television are of thinness, beauty and youth. A multimedia content analysis of television programming reported that the body shape standard depicted on television is significantly slimmer for females than for males (Harrison & Cantor, 1997). Moreover, the main female characters in 28 popular television shows tended to be below average weight and received significantly more positive reinforcement from male characters about their body shape and weight than above average weight female characters (Hofschire & Greenberg, 2002).

Adolescent girls' images of their own bodies are influenced by the mass media's portrayal of ideal body types. Watching just one half hour of body-image-oriented

television programming, or programming focused on the display of thin females, significantly increased girl's dissatisfaction with their figures (Hofschire & Greenberg, 2002).

Media can affect perceptions of body image of males and females in several ways. Magazine and television consumption predicted disordered-eating symptoms, drive for thinness, and body dissatisfaction in women. For men, magazine and television consumption was associated positively with endorsement of personal thinness and dieting, as well as favourable attitudes toward thinness and dieting in women (Harrison & Cantor, 1997). In addition, regular viewing of popular television programming was positively correlated with depressive symptoms after viewing physically attractive television characters. Studies such as these reveal that media, especially television, appears to promote body dissatisfaction and a drive for thinness for both males and females.

In a qualitative study of body concerns of adolescent girls, media was reported as exerting the strongest pressure to be thin (Tiggemann, Gardiner, & Slater, 2000). These grade 11 girls articulately described how the constant barrage of thin, attractive, glamorous women leads to the belief that thinness and attractiveness are the cultural norm. However, the girls also demonstrated a clear understanding that the images of women portrayed in the media were unrealistic and manipulated and believed that other characteristics such as personality are more important than physical attractiveness. Contrary to assumptions made in quantitative research, despite clearly articulating a desire to be thinner, the girls described how this did not necessarily mean they were dissatisfied with their bodies. The girls' awareness of the influence of the media may

have helped mitigate against the feeling of personal dissatisfaction with their bodies, not only revealing their ability to articulate the normative pressures on them but their ability to also dissociate themselves from them in some way.

Gender

Body image and body dissatisfaction differ between males and females. When compared to objective standards, females are more likely to judge themselves overweight while males are more likely to perceive themselves as underweight (Furnham & Calnan, 1998). This suggests that both genders either misperceive their weight in comparison to others, or that they make judgements about their weight using an unhealthy standard. Males and females also differ in their interpretation of the term "underweight" in that males see being underweight as bad while females see it as good (Furnham et al., 2002). Girls usually express that they would like to weigh less, while boys indicate that they want to be bigger and stronger (Morris & Katzman, 2003). In contrast to females who focus on being thin with toned hips, buttocks and thighs; males appear to be more interested in achieving the V-shaped figure with emphasis on large biceps, chest and shoulders as portrayed in the media. (Anderson & Di Domenico, 1992).

The differences in body dissatisfaction between girls and boys may be related to the changes in body composition that occur with sexual development. While physical maturation for boys involves the development of muscle, girls experience weight gain in the form of increased fat tissue during this period (Striegel-Moore, Silberstein, & Rodin, 1986). Onset of menarche and breast development also occur at this time and have been found to be associated with increased dieting among seventh- to tenth-graders (Attie &

Brooks-Gunn, 1989).

Ethnicity

Perceptions of body image differ based on ethnicity. Most studies of body image among adolescents have examined Caucasian samples. The available data concerning African American girls generally suggests that despite higher BMI's, they have less than or equal body dissatisfaction to that of Caucasian girls (Abrams & Stormer, 2002; Smolak & Levine, 2001). In a large American sample, researchers reported that 9-and 10-year-old Black girls showed significantly lower body dissatisfaction than did White girls, despite the Black girls' heavier BMI and more advanced pubertal development (Schreiber, Robins, & Striegel-Moore, 1996). Adolescent Black males differed from White males by selecting a larger body size ideal, dieting less often, and reporting being overweight less frequently (Thompson, 1996). Thompson, Corwin, Rogan, and Sargent (1999) also found that White adolescents had more body dissatisfaction and greater concern about weight than African American adolescents. Similarly, Black children selected significantly heavier ideal sizes than White children for self, male child, female child, adult male, and adult female (Thompson, Corwin, & Sargent, 1997). These findings correspond with the fact that over 90% of severe eating disorder cases are currently diagnosed among white adolescents, especially females (Barlow & Durand, 1995).

The relatively low prevalence of eating disorder diagnoses among women and men of color as a result of greater body satisfaction and a more positive body image (Abrams & Stormer, 2002) may be, in part, due to cultural and media influences. Black

women viewed weight as part of a culture evolving from generation to generation, including foods they ate, family, and the social context of family gatherings, and stated that an ideal body weight was viewed from an individual perspective, rather than from a thin-ideal portrayed in the media. Any influence from the media seemed to concern the importance of a sense of style, and not a "body of thinness" (Gore, 1999). It appears that African-American women would rather be overweight then underweight (Bissell, 2002), and seem more flexible in their concepts of beauty and body image than their White counter-parts, who seem to express more rigid ideals and greater dissatisfaction with their body size. Additionally, unlike mainstream media, Black-oriented media tend to portray Black women with a variety of physical features that do not necessarily conform to the European or mainstream standards of beauty. There are many successful, full-figured Black models and actresses portrayed in the media who are more open about embracing the full-figure, which may contribute to Black women being more satisfied with their bodies than White women, thus having a more positive effect on Black women's body image (Patel & Gray, 2001).

Parents

Parents play an important role in transmitting socio-cultural messages regarding body image to their children. Parents select and comment on children's clothing and appearances and may require their child to look a certain way. Many parents also comment on their children's weight, noticing, for example, whether their children are too fat or too thin, and by encouraging their children to slim down (Dunkley, Wertheim, & Paxton, 2001; Smolak & Levine, 2001). This is true for both mothers and fathers, for

boys and girls, and in Black and White families. One study reported a significant correlation between the parents' reports of their encouragement to their daughters to lose weight and their daughters' desire to lose weight (Smolak & Levine, 2001). Thus it is possible that parents' attitudes and beliefs concerning eating, weight, and body shape can directly influence their children's eating behaviors and body image concerns very early in children's lives.

Parental modeling of weight concerns may also contribute to body image concerns in children. Many parents remark on the appearance of their own bodies or engage in dieting or exercise for the sole purpose of weight loss. Parental complaints about their own weight were correlated with daughters' body esteem in a sample of fourth and fifth graders (Smolak, Levine, & Schermer, 1999).

Daughters may be more affected by parental weight-related behavior than sons are. In one study, (Smolak et al., 1999) it was reported that of 30 possible parent-child correlations concerning body esteem and weight loss attempts, 14 out of 30 of the girls' correlations, but only five out of the 30 of the boys reached significance. Girls appeared to be more affected by their mothers' behavior, and direct comments appeared to be more powerful than parental modeling. Perhaps young girls, but not boys, also receive the message from multiple sources seeing they report more peer interactions concerning body and eating issues than boys do (Oliver & Thelen, 1996). The consistency of the messages may result in greater internalization among girls, making them more susceptible to parental comments.

Peers

The role of peers in shaping body image perceptions changes with age and becomes more important during the adolescent years. Social comparison appears as a factor very early elementary school (Lawrence & Thelen, 1995). This is probably one reason why young children are aware of whether they are considered overweight and why they negative feelings about their weight. It probably also contributes to children's awareness of the negative stereotypes associated with body fat. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that peer messages concerning body shape might affect children's body image. One study demonstrated such a correlation in third and fourth graders (Oliver & Thelen, 1996). In addition, fourth and fifth grade girls who thought peers would like them more if they were thinner had higher weight concerns (Taylor et al., 1998). Friends and school peers can be influential through swapping information, modeling behaviors, exerting peer pressure, and also through teasing (Dunkley, Wertheim, & Paxton, 2001). Peer modeling and teasing is more strongly related to body dissatisfaction in third- through fifth-grade girls than perceived parental concern about their weight (Smolak & Levine, 2001). When the type of relationship is considered, friends were rated most influential, with classmates and other kids at school following. Families were ranked least important, probably because of the importance placed on peer relationships during that time period of a child's life (Hofschire & Greenberg, 2002).

Chapter III

Theoretical Framework

Several theories have been proposed to explain the effect of media on children and youth. Gerbner's Cultivation Analysis Theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994) focuses primarily on television as the dominant cultural storyteller. Cultivation theorists argue that the plots and characterizations presented in the media, regardless of whether or not they are representative, encourage audiences to adopt views about society that are in line with what they have seen in the media (Carter & Steiner, 2004). As television screen time increases, those watching are more likely to accept the world view most frequently depicted on TV as real, or to believe that the real world should conform to television's rules (Brown et al., 2002; Carter & Steiner, 2004; Strasburger, 1995). Analyzing the gaps between television and the real world helps us to understand the messages, both intended and unintended, that are transmitted from the fantasy world of television to our everyday lives (Streenland, 1995).

Another theory proposed to explain the way in which popular culture may influence behaviour through mass media is the Cultural Norms Theory (DeFleur, 1966). This theory claims that popular culture or pop-culture can be defined as the vernacular culture that prevails in a modern society. The content of pop-culture is determined in large part by industries that distribute cultural material, for example, the film, television, and publishing industries, as well as the news media. A limitation of this theory is that pop-culture is more than the combined product of those industries; instead it is the result of a continuing interaction between those industries and the people of the society who

consume their products ("Pop-Culture," 2005). Essentially, the Cultural Norms Theory postulates that pop culture, through the selective presentations and the emphasis of certain themes in the mass media, creates impressions among audiences that common cultural norms are structured or defined in some specific way. Since individual behaviour in a certain situation is usually guided by cultural norms, the media would in turn *indirectly* influence conduct. The media provide a definition of the situation which the actor believes to be real. This definition then provides guides for action which appear to be approved and supported by society (DeFleur, 1966).

Bandura's Social Learning Theory identifies human behavior as an interaction of personal factors, behavior, and the environment (Figure 1).

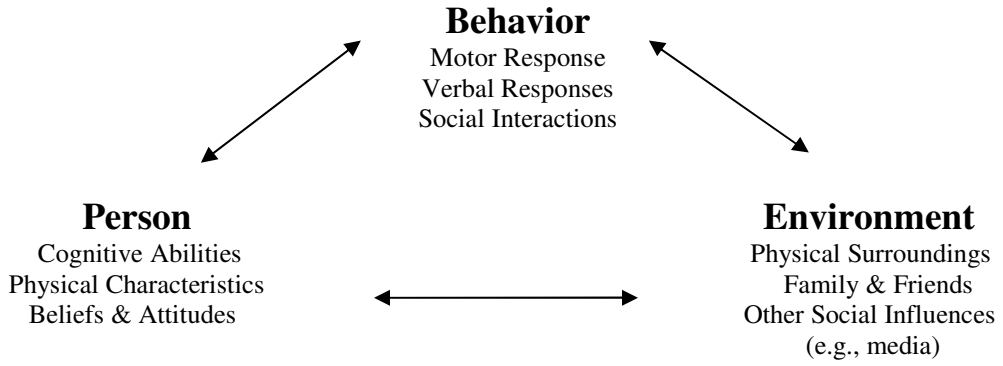

Figure 1.

This theory states that people learn by observing the behavior of others and the outcomes of those behaviours; that learning can occur without a change in behavior because although people can learn through observation alone, their learning may not necessarily be shown in their behavior; and that cognition plays a role in learning, meaning the awareness and expectations of incentives as well as reinforcements or

punishments can affect the behaviours that people exhibit (Bandura, 1977; Ormrod, 1999).

The Social Learning Theory predicts that television viewers will be more likely to assimilate and perhaps imitate behaviors they see frequently depicted by attractive models that are rewarded and/or not punished. Social Learning Theory also predicts that imitation is more likely if the viewer thinks the portrayal is realistic and identifies with or desires to be like the media character (Brown, Steele, & Walsh-Childers, 2002). According to the social learning model, negative body image can be learned from media based on the prevalence of the behaviour and the incentives to adopt the behaviour. Based on the high prevalence of diet-related images, advertisements and thin-bodied models on television and in magazines (Harrison & Cantor, 1997), modelling of these behaviours is a logical outcome of the exposure (Bandura, 1977).

Incentives, in contrast, are enticements to perform modeled behaviors. External incentives motivate modeled behavior on the basis of anticipated reward and social acceptance, whereas vicarious incentives are derived from observations of others' experiences, in real life or through some medium such as television (Bandura, 1977). Both types of incentives help make the modeling of delayed-reward behaviors (such as dieting to lose weight) more feasible (Harrison & Cantor, 1997). On television, characters are rewarded for their slim, muscular appearances by receiving attention from the opposite sex, by being popular, and by appearing to be happy and satisfied, and the viewer may think they will reap the same rewards (Hofschire & Greenberg, 2002). However, as the Social Learning Theory also states, although learning may occur at a young age, certain behaviors, such as dieting, may not be demonstrated until later, when

the learner actually becomes aware and perceives that the situation is appropriate for a behavior change (Woolfolk, Winne, & Perry, 2006).

For the purpose of this study, Bandura's Social Learning Theory will be used as the main theoretical framework as it appears to be most consistent with the purposed research and population. According to this theory, images of the thin-ideal and dieting prevail in the media; therefore, a desire to be like those depicted in the media as well as modeling of diet behaviors is a logical outcome of exposure. Young children can be easily influenced, especially when provided with incentives. Therefore, children as media consumers may be motivated to model certain behaviors, i.e., dieting, in order to achieve the "ideal" appearance that is portrayed by numerous television characters.

Chapter IV

Methodology

The research was undertaken to explore the feelings and perceptions of young children on body image in relation to the content and themes of two selected television shows. A semi-structured focus group was selected as a suitable method to obtain the relevant data. Focus groups provide a number of advantages for both participants and researchers. First, focus groups provide access to participants' own language and concepts. Because participants talk primarily to each other rather than to the researchers, they talk in a way which is similar to their everyday conversation, with the inclusion of slang, jokes, questioning and argument (Tiggemann et al., 2000).

Second, focus groups specifically investigate the interaction among participants and provide the opportunity to observe the construction and co-construction of meaning. This interaction among group members may result in the participants being more talkative due to the stimulation generated by the opinions of others in the group. As a result, more information may be generated than would otherwise be gained by individual interviews (Greenbaum, 1988; Tiggemann et al., 2000). This benefit was observed in one study where focus groups were used to investigate body concerns in adolescent girls. The discussion among one group of girls showed how an initial response about wanting to be thinner was challenged and defended and then some degree of consensus was reached (Tiggemann et al., 2000). Group interaction may also seem less intimidating for participants, because, for many, the presence of others provides security that would not be available in a one-on-one interview. Therefore, the discussion is generally more

spontaneous and honest (Greenbaum, 1988; Tiggemann et al.). Also, focus groups allow observation of the processes by which meaning is constructed by the participants; this is an examination of "not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way" (Kitzinger, 1995, p.299).

When dealing with children and adolescents, Greenbaum (1988) recommends that groups should be consist of same-sex participants to reduce distraction and provide an environment conducive to productive discussions. It is also recommended that participants be no more than two years apart in age to minimize developmental differences (Greenbaum, 1988). In addition, either monetary or non-monetary incentives may need to be given to focus group participants to enhance attendance (Morgan, 1995).

Sample

The participants were five African-Canadian males, aged 7 to 9, from the Dartmouth Boys and Girls Club located in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. Two participants were age 7, one participant was 8, and two participants were age 9. All five boys participated in one focus group. Due to low response rate, a female focus group was not completed. This study received ethical approval from the University Ethics Review Board of Mount Saint Vincent University. Parental consent was obtained before participation in the study.

Procedure

Two children's television shows were selected by the researcher to use in conjunction with the focus group. The television shows *Zoom* (educational) and *That's*

So Raven (teen comedy) were chosen based on the presence of salient features that were suggestive of certain messages and themes such as family dynamics, friendship, dating, popularity, puberty, appearance, fashion, social comparison and educational information; as well as the overall purpose of the program. A 10 minute interval from each show selected for the content messages was shown to the children during the focus group.

The Director of the Dartmouth Boys and Girls Club was contacted initially by telephone, then by letter, to introduce the purpose of the study and seek permission to distribute information sheets to children and their parents regarding possible participation in the study. An information sheet was provided to the organization to explain the nature of the study, and the Director then distributed information letters and consent forms to prospective participants and their parents who were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity, their voluntary involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without fear of any negative consequences. Parents who expressed a desire for their child to participate were instructed to return the signed consent form to the Director at the club. Parents, guardians, and children were notified that not all children who gave consent would be asked to participate. Parents and guardians were informed in the letter that the focus group would be audio-taped and that all tapes would be destroyed once they were transcribed. They were also informed that an additional person, unknown to the club, would accompany the researcher and that his role was to observe and make notes of all interaction.

When the consent forms were received, a date was established to complete the focus group. The focus group took place in a classroom at the Dartmouth Boys and Girls Club. Once the group of children arrived, the researcher introduced herself and her

assistant to the group. The focus group began with a short warm-up activity to build rapport and help make the children feel comfortable. Following the warm-up activity, the researcher informed the children that they would watch two 10 minute segments from two different television shows. The children were also informed that after watching each segment, they would be asked to talk about what they saw and answer some questions about the shows. The researcher reminded the children that it was their choice whether or not to participate and that they could stop their participation at any time and return to their regular scheduled activities. The children also had the opportunity to ask any questions prior to participation.

To begin, the children in the focus group watched a 10 minute segment of the television show, *Zoom*. After viewing the first clip, the researcher began asking focus group questions (see Appendix E) to facilitate discussion and capture their reactions to the television segment. These questions were supplemented by transition questions, as well as clarifying, challenging and probing questions that helped yield more accurate and in-depth responses. This process continued with the second 10 minute segment of the television show, *That's So Raven*. The focus group lasted approximately 1 hour. Upon completion, the children were thanked for their participation and were given refreshments and a loot bag containing stickers and a pencil.

Data Analysis

Once collected, the data were transcribed verbatim in order to best capture the grammar, voice patterns, intensity of feeling, and thought processes of the participants (Moore & MacKinnon, 2001). Names of the participants were not transcribed during the

focus group and those mentioned on the audiotape were omitted from the transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms. The transcripts were then checked for accuracy against the tape recordings by the researcher's assistant. The transcripts were subjected to a systematic analysis of themes and ideas. Key words and phrases that emerged from the transcribed data were assigned one or more codes to best describe them. Once all data had been initially coded, interrelated codes were collapsed into broader groupings or categories. As a result, major themes emerged and were examined and compared to the identified issues underpinning the research questions. The transcripts were independently rated and then discussed by two coders, the researcher and her assistant, to ensure consistency and to enhance the credibility, accountability, and trustworthiness of the data.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the research was completely voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity was assured to all participants. A dominant concern in this study is the informed consent of the participants. Due to their ages, the participants were required to have consent from their parents or guardians in order to participate in the study. Therefore, it was very important that the letters of consent were very clear and that there was an opportunity for parents/guardians to contact the researcher or advisor if the information was unclear.

Another concern in this study was that the children who gave consent to participate in the focus group would be taking time away from their usual activities at the club. However, the children were reminded that their participation in the research was completely voluntary and they could withdraw from the focus group at any time and

return to their usual activities.

Chapter V

Results

The main themes that were developed as a result of the focus group discussion of the two television segments will be examined under the general headings of *Positive Elements*, *Character Differences*, and *Features of Popularity and Social Acceptance*. The quotations in this section are the children's conversations in sequence.

Positive Elements

Each participant identified positive features within both television segments. After watching the first segment from *Zoom*, the participants spoke about how they liked the show and how they thought it was "funny" and they felt it contained humorous characters that dressed in costume, and portrayed enjoyable activities. The children additionally commented that the characters got along and played well together:

> *I liked it. I thought it was funny.*
> *I liked the game they were playing.*
> *Everybody was getting along.*
> *They looked like they were all having fun.*
> *Yeah, everyone hung out together as one group.*

The participants also identified positive elements within the segment from *That's So Raven*, a show they tend to view more regularly than *Zoom*. The participants noted that they particularly liked the art sculpture that the main character, Raven, made during the segment. Similar to *Zoom*, the boys reported that this show was also "funny", and "cool", however, they felt it "had more stuff going on" (i.e., more things happened to Raven). They also reported that the characters in *That's So Raven* participated in

activities that were less serious, such as simple everyday events and conversations:

> *There was more stuff going on than the last one.*
> *Yeah, more things happened to Raven.*
> *They don't do the same things as in Zoom. In Zoom they did activities.*
> *And that stuff is more serious.*

The participants added that *That's So Raven* was somewhat "better" than *Zoom* due to several positive elements:

> *It's cool.*
> *It's better, too.*
> *It's better because it's not as serious.*

Representation of real life. The participants stated that they make crafts and play games like the characters in *Zoom*. One boy gave an example of how his mother also tried changing his eating habits similar to a character in *That's So Raven*: *"When his mom chucks all the junk food out…that can happen because it happened to me before."* The participants also talked about how they like to hang out with friends and play together which was evident in both segments.

Further comments suggested that some participants believed that certain circumstances portrayed on television were an actual representation of real life. One boy remarked, *"Everyone gets along in real life too."* This is possibly due to his age and developmental level. However, a slightly older boy appeared to possess more insight and described how the characters got along because they had to, as actors: *"Yeah, they were all getting along like they should, because they are on the show."* In addition, two boys discussed how two characters from *That's So Raven* were popular and *"liked by their friends"* because they were actors on the show, suggesting an understanding of the rehearsed *"unreality"* of television.

Character Differences

Individual character differences. The participants identified differences between the characters (e.g., gender, age, skin color, facial features, eye color, and hairstyles). The participants identified characters as *"white"* or *"black"*, revealing their undeveloped perception of racial differences and limited understanding of various ethnicities. They used concrete terms and failed to distinguish between different ethnicities, for example, grouping together the Caucasian and Asian characters as "white".

> *Their skins are different colors.*
> *Yeah, some people are black and some people are white.*
> *And their eyes are different colors.*
> *Their faces are shaped different.*
> *Yeah, their noses and their faces are shaped different.*
> *Their clothes and their looks are different too.*
> *Yeah, the bigger ones wear bigger clothes and the small people wear small clothes.*
> *Their shoes are different. And some people had glasses and some didn't.*
> *And there were both boys and girls.*
> *And some of them were probably the same age.*

The participants' conversation involved some discussion of body image. The boys described the characters as having different body sizes, shapes, and weight. One boy described one of the characters [Corey] in *That's So Raven* as being *"fat and chubby."* Another boy commented on the character's unhealthy diet of junk food suggesting an understanding of nutrition and its impact on body weight. Several participants began laughing and appeared uncomfortable discussing this topic:

> *Yeah, some [characters] are big and some are small.*
> *Some are medium.*
> *Some people were taller and some were shorter than the taller kids.*
> *They were all different sizes too.*
> *Yes, some people were a bigger shape. They had bigger arms and legs and stuff.*
> *They had different weights too.*
> *Yeah, Corey looked different.*

Yeah, he's fat and chubby. (Covers his face. Participants giggle.)
He's eats a lot of junk food.
He's bigger than William.
Yeah, William is smaller.

The participants described the main character [Raven] of *That's So Raven* as *"not as skinny as Chelsea,"* another female character. Additional prompts were given however, no further elaboration was given.

Identification/non-identification with characters. The majority of the participants identified with characters from *Zoom* based on personal likes/dislikes regarding hobbies and activities. One boy discussed identification with a character that made crafts: *"I like making stuff. So, I'm like him [male character] because I like making stuff like the crackers he made."* Another boy stated, *"I like drawing…like when one boy was doing the drawing, that's what I like, too."* The participants stated that they didn't look like any of the characters from *Zoom*, because they didn't wear glasses.

In contrast, the participants identified with characters from *That's So Raven* based on clothing and appearance: *"I'm like Corey because I keep my pants baggy like him"*, and *"I'm like Eddy…because of his braids. I have braids, too. He's good looking and so am I."* When asked to define the term, *"good looking"*, this participant simply responded with *"I'm a gangster like him."* The term, *"gangster",* was defined with superficial characteristics (i.e., wearing braids, and being cool). The participants appeared able to repeat terminology they have previously heard but were not yet able to properly define such words.

Preference of characters. The participants identified characters from *Zoom* that they preferred to emulate based on talents:

I like telling jokes so I want be like him [joke teller].

I want be like the artist guy…who was good at drawing because I can be a good artist too and I like drawing.
I would like to be the guy making the crackers [crafts]…because I like making stuff.

The participants' reasons for wanting to be somebody else included *"so, I can draw better", "so, I can tell jokes better"*, and *"so, I can look better like the artist."* After prompting for a definition of the phrase *"look better"*, the boy responded with: *"I don't know…so, I can be good looking…and be a star."* No further elaboration was given. Another boy commented that good looking means *"attractive"* which in turn means you can do things better than others (e.g., drawing).

With regard to *That's So Raven*, the majority of the participants commented that they wanted to be like the character, Eddy, for his friendly personality:

I'd be Eddy.
I'd be Eddy too.
Yeah, cause he's nice.
And he didn't tell on Raven when she broke the statue…he was a good friend.

Character's feelings. The participants discussed the main character's feelings and attitude regarding her body size and shape. The boys stated that Raven was *"not as small and skinny"* as other female characters, that she felt *"weirder"* and that *"she looks different than Chelsea"*, and is probably aware of this. This suggested the participants' knowledge of others thoughts and feelings:

Yeah, she feels weirder.
Yeah, you know, weirder. She's different and weird.
She is a different color.
She has different eyes.
Different nose and hairdo.
Different clothes.
And not as skinny as Chelsea.
And she knows that probably.
She probably thinks about that and knows it.

The researcher asked the participants to elaborate on Raven's *"awareness"* of her body image; however, they were unable to produce a response. Their limited vocabulary and difficulty with exploring emotions is likely due to their age and developmental level.

The participants also commented on the attitudes and feelings regarding different body sizes of the characters in *Zoom*. The boys discussed that the characters did not care about differing body sizes and that *"everyone liked each other"* equally. The participants also noted that the characters felt *"good and peaceful"* as well, suggesting the participants' ability to recognize the magnitude of friendship and equality portrayed throughout the segment.

Features of Popularity and Social Acceptance

Defining popularity. The participants defined *"popularity"* as *"having a lot of friends who really like you."* After watching *Zoom*, the participants stated that each of the characters were equally popular because *"they all hung out together as one group"* illustrating knowledge of character equality and unity. In addition, the participants discussed how one character was *"good looking"* which meant *"he does stuff better…like drawing"* but it did not make him more popular than the other characters.

The participants identified Raven as the most popular character in *That's So Raven* because she was smarter and was gifted with having visions of the future. They also commented that the physical differences between Raven and Chelsea (e.g., body shape, body size, and skin color) did not make one more popular than the other.

Responses regarding popularity within *That's So Raven* also included the discussion of a female character that did not appear in the segment that was shown. The

participants stated that this character, Elaina, was more popular than other characters because she was considered *"mean"*, *"rude"*, and *"didn't like Raven"*, and was considered more popular because other kids were afraid of her. This suggested a negative aspect of popularity with the introduction of the concept of popularity and acceptance based on fear:

> *She's rude.*
> *She's rude and doesn't like Raven.*
> *She's…um…people think she's popular because…um…she has two body guards that are her friends and they beat people up.*
> *She pushes people out of the way.*
> *Well, people might be afraid of her.*
> *Yeah, people are afraid of her.*
> *Yeah, some people want to be her friend so they won't get picked on.*

Qualities of acceptance and popularity. The participants commented that *"being nice"*, *"generous"* and a *"good friend"* were considered important for a person to be liked by his or her friends. However, the two youngest participants also stated that giving gifts, such as money and toys, would promote friendship and acceptance, illustrating their juvenile thought processes. Being a *"normal person"* and *"being smart"* were identified as important qualities for acceptance, as well:

> *Be nice, and generous.*
> *Yeah, be generous and a good friend.*
> *And be honest…and don't lie and stuff.*
> *Give your friends stuff…like if you give people stuff they will be your friend.*
> *Yeah, give them stuff so they'll like you.*
> *You could give them money.*
> *Yeah, give them money.*
> *Give them toys to be your friend too.*
> *Just be normal and cool.*
> *Yeah, just be normal…like a normal person.*
> *Just be smart too.*
> *Yeah, be smart and cool and you'll have lots of friends.*

Physical appearance and popularity. The participants were asked to define the

term *"good looking"* to further explore their perceptions of physical appearance in relation to popularity. The participants were unable to produce informative responses. However, one boy stated that it meant that the character was more *"attractive."* Clarification of this term consisted of a simple response *"ladies"*, which was followed by awkward laughter amongst the participants. Although this boy was able to make a vague connection between attractiveness and the opposite sex, he was unable to articulate the processes involved in the construction of his views. Another participant continued by saying that attractive means *"he just does stuff better."* Overall, the participants expressed that although this character was considered attractive and did things better than his friends, he was not considered more popular. However, the number of friends one has is quite important.

> *Nope…they [good looks] are not really important.*
> *Nope, everyone just got along.*
> *No, cause all kinds of people are popular.*
> *I'm popular because I have almost a thousand friends.*
> *I have a million [friends].*

The participants stated that the two main male characters, Corey and Eddy, were also considered popular because they were liked by their friends. They commented that the two characters were *"liked the same"* despite their differences in body size, illustrating the insignificance of body size in relation to popularity:

> *A lot of people like them [Corey and Eddy]…their friends like them.*
> *Yeah, even though they are different…like, Corey is a bit bigger than Eddy but it doesn't matter.*
> *Yeah, Corey is probably more chubby.*
> *It doesn't matter though.*
> *No…my cousin is chubby and that doesn't matter either…he's still a nice person.*
> *I know your cousin…he is funny.*

The participants additionally commented on this view and offered Raven and

Santa as examples:

> *No, Raven is popular.*
> *Yeah., and she was more chubby than Chelsea, but she has lots of friends…and she even has her own T.V. show.*
> *Yeah, and if you were as fat as Santa it probably might be hard…but he still has a million friends though.*
> *Yeah, the whole world is his friend.*
> *Yeah, the whole universe is his friend.*
> *And Santa is magic anyways.*

Although several participants identified the insignificance of physical appearance in relation to popularity and social acceptance, one boy suggested a sense of fear of becoming overweight. He stated that this fear was due to a certain physical limitation that may be set as a result of being overweight: *"I don't want be fat…I'm glad I'm skinny. Cause if you are, you can't run as fast."*

Chapter VI

Discussion

This research provides information regarding the level of awareness that children age seven to nine possess in regards to television themes and messages. The participants in this study demonstrated an overall comprehension of the main themes (educational vs. teen comedy) presented within the television shows. Older participants (9-year-olds) exhibited some awareness of the rehearsed fantasy of television whereas the younger participants (7-year-olds) believed that most things portrayed on television were real. Overall, the participants described characters with larger body shapes as "different" yet not necessarily negative. Although these young boys demonstrated an awareness of extreme body types, they did not appear to develop a clear association between body size and negative body image, and assured the insignificance of body size and attractiveness in relation to popularity.

The target sample for the present study was children aged seven to nine. Although challenges were expected in working with children of this age, the magnitude of the challenge became clear during the actual focus group. *Learning* from children, as opposed to *studying* them, requires us to reassess what we think we know about children. The challenge was to be in the presence of children to access their cognitions and hear their thoughts and feelings as they wanted to tell them, and acknowledge the children as experts (Heary & Hennessy, 2002). Trying to conduct a focus group with young children was somewhat problematic, for it emphasized the power imbalances between the researcher and participants, manifest in their brief responses and desire to give the "right"

answer. In addition, the researcher was a white female and the participants were African-Canadian males, which perhaps furthered the gap and increased discomfort among participants. However, research suggests that the power imbalance present during a focus group would likely be less than the power imbalance in individual interviews where the participant may feel less secure and more intimidated (Greenbaum, 1988; Tiggemann et al., 2000). Although the researcher provided the information and questions in a child-friendly form and possessed sufficient knowledge and understanding to reflexively consider the children's responses as the research process unfolded (Alderson & Morrow, 2004), the level of difficulty and limitations of focus group research with young children was revealed suggesting the need for further research of the use of qualitative methods with young children.

Overall, the participants became more comfortable as the focus group discussion progressed however; their attention span appeared to diminish over time and they sometimes hesitated to provide additional information unless prompted repeatedly by the researcher. The participants aimed to please throughout most of the focus group, and therefore may have not revealed their honest perceptions in response to all questions. This was expected with this age group as young children more frequently endorse answers that are perceived to be socially desirable than ones that are not (Cugmas, 2001). At times, the participants were unresponsive and often avoided eye contact with the researcher. Their reactions to certain topics (e.g., attractiveness and the opposite sex) included blushing and giggling, revealing their discomfort and immaturity. These behaviors were expected with this age group because seven-to-nine-years-olds have limitations in what they can mentally understand, emotionally comprehend, and how they

socially interact due to continuing development. Characteristics of seven-to-nine- year-olds include deficiencies in endurance, sharing, taking turns, completing tasks, accepting criticisms, making decisions, understanding another person's point of view, attention span, being realistic, and thinking logically (Enns & Akhtar, 1989; Humphrey & Humphrey, 1989). The participants' responses were usually repetitive and predictable. Research suggests that children will sometimes repeat or adopt themes previously raised by other children rather than offering their own opinion (Lewis, 1992). However, this "tagging on" may indicate salience of the ideas within the group. At times, the participants' were able to develop and build on ideas within their discussions and relate these ideas to their own life experiences. When comparing two characters from *That's So Raven*, the participants also compared them to a family member, drawing on personal experiences and their own environment.

The focus group methodology did provide access to the participants' own language and appeared to provide a sense of assurance for the participants, allowing them to share their thoughts while feeling comfortable and accepted. Research suggests that the use of focus groups relates to the importance of the peer group in children's lives. Children are essentially social beings and spend much of their lives in groups (Dwivedi, 1993). Many of the behaviors of children are enacted within the context of groups; as such, the group setting represents a familiar and reassuring environment for children (Heary & Hennessy, 2002).

The young boys in this study demonstrated an understanding of the main themes or intentions presented within television shows. The participants identified differences in the overall themes of the television shows used in this study (educational vs. teen

comedy) and they appeared to prefer a teen sitcom rather than an educational program. This is in accord with Piaget's stages of cognitive development and the age differences in young children's reactions to television programs (Doubleday & Droege, 1993; Roedder, 1981). The participants in this study demonstrated an understanding of the general themes presented within the television shows, and used age-appropriate language and expressions, relying heavily on salient features.

The children identified with the characters in the television programs for different reasons. They identified with characters in *Zoom* based on hobbies and activities possibly due to its educational subject matter while they identified with characters in *That's So Raven* based on physical appearance possibly because of its sitcom nature in that characters are presented in everyday events and situations, and appearance was discussed. The majority of the characters portrayed in *That's So Raven* are African-American, which may further explain the participants identification with these characters based on physical appearance since they were all African Canadian. This suggests that for these young boys, racial differences may be a mitigating factor in unknowingly identifying oneself with certain characters. In addition, describing characters as "white" or "black" revealed the participants' undeveloped perception of racial differences and limited understanding of various ethnicities.

The participants' preference for characters also followed a similar pattern. They wished to be like characters in *Zoom* based on hobbies and talents, and preferred characters in *That's So Raven* based on personality features. This finding somewhat contrasts one of the viewpoints of Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) which predicts that viewers are more likely to imitate characters and their behaviors based on

attractiveness that is usually rewarded. The participants in this study preferred characters based on talents and personality rather than attractiveness suggesting that attractiveness does not appear to be a primary observable factor for young boys. However, possessing a certain talent or being "good" at a certain activity, and being a likeable person does appear to be quite important. This appears accurate as relationships and preference of friends is usually more action-oriented among young boys (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998).

The participants identified differences in the characters body shapes and sizes. They used terms such as "fat" and "chubby" to describe a larger male character, which is consistent with another study where males appeared to be more interested in shape than weight (Anderson & Di Domenico, 1992). The participants described female characters as "not as skinny", rather than "fat" or "chubby". Overall, the participants described characters with larger body shapes as "different" yet not necessarily negative. Although these young boys demonstrated an awareness of extreme body types, they did not appear to develop a clear association between body size and negative body image. According to a viewpoint of Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), this suggests that although the boys were able to distinguish between body size and type, their cognition may not yet be developed to allow for a complete awareness of the association between body size and negative body image.

In addition, the Social Learning Theory also suggests that personal characteristics, such as ethnicity, as well as the environment, such as family and social interactions can impact behavior. The participants in this study were African-Canadian therefore, their ethnicity and cultural environment may have impacted their perspective of negative body image. Past research has revealed that adolescent black males often select a larger body

size ideal, diet less often, and report being overweight less often than white adolescents (Thompson, 1996; Thompson et al., 1999). Further, black females viewed weight as part of a culture and stated that an ideal body weight was viewed from an individual perspective, rather than from a thin-ideal portrayed in the media, suggesting more flexibility in their concepts of beauty and body image than their White counter-parts (Bissell, 2002; Gore, 1999). Thus, the young African-Canadian boys in this study may have already adopted a more positive view of larger body types resulting in a more positive concept of body image and/or may be influenced by family, peers, and their African-Canadian culture.

The participants defined popularity as having a large number of friends and identified kindness, generosity, friendliness, and intelligence as important qualities of popularity and acceptance. Characters of *Zoom* were considered equally popular due to group unity displayed during the segment. In comparison, the main female character of *That's So Raven* was considered most popular, due to intelligence and personal talent, and not physical attributes or attractiveness. This is in agreement with another study where grade 11 girls demonstrated a clear understanding that other characteristics such as personality were more important than physical attractiveness (Tiggemann et al., 2000). While these mature young women demonstrated an understanding of the importance of "what is on the inside", the young participants in the present study may have responded this way to provide answers perceived to be more socially desirable (Cugmas, 2001).

One participant commented on his desire to be like a certain character due to good looks and attractiveness, however; he was unable to explain the reason for this desire. According to the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), cognition plays an important

part in learning. This young boy may have *learned* to desire and perhaps model an attractive character; however, his undeveloped cognitive level may be impeding his awareness and perceptions of the rewards and incentives that are presented, thus limiting behavior change. A behavior change to achieve this attractive ideal may not occur until adolescence when other socio-cultural factors (e.g., peers) become of greater importance and provide more incentive for a change in behavior.

Another participant suggested a relationship between attractiveness and enhanced abilities, however, no associations were made between attractiveness and the thin-ideal, contrary to other studies (Harrison, 2000; Hofschire & Greenberg, 2002; Tiggemann et al., 2000). Despite these various observations, there was a general consensus amongst the participants that "good looks" or attractiveness is not associated with popularity. Although the participants used terms such as "fat" and "chubby" to describe physical features of certain characters, they maintained the insignificance of body size in relation to popularity. It is unclear whether the participants were responding with socially acceptable answers (Cugmas, 2001), or if their cognitive development is not yet matured to allow for a complete awareness of the media's portrayal of the association between attractiveness and popularity.

Despite the above impressions, one participant did suggest a sense of fear or anxiety regarding obesity and described a clear connection between weight and athletic limitations, suggesting an understanding of certain limitations put on the body when a person is overweight. This finding is similar to previous studies which indicated that young children express some body image anxiety and are concerned about body shape and weight (Gustafson-Larson & Terry, 1992; Harrison, 2000). However, the

participant's concern regarding obesity did not appear to be related to negative body image. Instead, his concern was the physical limitations that could be set for him as an athlete. This may be in part due to the fact that boys are typically more action or sports-oriented and often reveal that there is more pressure from their friends and parents for them to be physically strong and excel at sports (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998).

Several younger participants believed that certain circumstances portrayed on television represented real life situations. This view is possibly due to their age and developmental level. In comparison, the older participants appeared to possess more insight into this unrealistic and manipulated representation of reality and commented that the characters got along because they were actors. The participants appeared to demonstrate an understanding of the rehearsed fantasy of television, which suggests that the majority of the participants are not naive consumers of the media. Tiggemann, Gardiner, & Slater (2000) found similar results among older girls who demonstrated a clear understanding that the images of women portrayed in the media were unrealistic and manipulated. It appears that for these participants, much cognitive development occurs between the ages of seven and nine in regards to their understanding of the rehearsed components of television. The younger participants clearly demonstrated their lack of understanding of "acting" portrayed on television, while the older participants exhibited some awareness of the manipulated representation of life and relationships that the actors portrayed throughout the clips.

The present research has shown that young boys have the ability to differentiate between major themes presented within television programming. However, it is unclear as to what factors of negative body image children consider influential. The participants

in this study did not identify, associate, or express a desire to adopt the thin-ideal and described characters with larger body shapes as "different" yet not necessarily negative. They discussed the insignificance of differing body types in relation to popularity and the greater importance of friendship, group equality, and personality traits. They did not appear to develop a clear association between body size and *negative* body image. This may be explained by a viewpoint of Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977).

The Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), identifies human behavior as an interaction of personal factors, behavior, and the environment. It predicts that viewers will be more likely to assimilate and perhaps imitate behaviors they see frequently depicted by attractive models that are rewarded, in order to achieve the thin-ideal. It also states that learning can occur without a change in behavior, and that cognition plays a crucial role in learning, meaning the awareness and expectations of incentives as well as reinforcements/punishments can affect the behaviors that people exhibit. Although the participants in this study identified differences in body size, personality traits and qualities of popularity and acceptance, it appears their youth and innocence, in addition to their lack of experience and judgement from other personal sources, impeded their ability to completely evaluate what they see and develop a clear understanding of the factors associated with negative body image. It may be that, although children are subjected to images of the thin-ideal at a young age and may *learn* these behaviors, their underdeveloped language and thought processes inhibit their ability to demystify and express a deeper meaning of the images, thus limiting behavior change. This suggests that the framework of unrealistic body shape expectations may unknowingly be set in childhood, but it is not until later in adolescence (which includes physical growth, onset

of puberty, and increased importance of peer relationships and peer pressure), that the incentives for a change in behavior becomes great enough and the full impact of negative body image occurs.

Based on the current research, there are a number of positive implications for education and prevention. While it seems unlikely that we can ever hope to undo the influence of the media, it may be possible to intervene in the learning process to prevent the internalization of negative body image, through peer interventions. The participants appeared to become more comfortable as the group dynamics unfolded and revealed that they enjoyed being a part of the group. This is consistent with recent studies and recommendations (e.g., Dwivedi, 1993; Heary & Hennessy, 2002; Paxton, 1996; Tiggemann et al., 2000). Many of the behaviors of children are enacted within the context of groups; as such, the group setting represents a familiar and reassuring environment for children. Additionally, peer-group discussions provide reassurance and acceptance, and may prove much more effective in generating commitment to attitudinal and behavioural change than to be told the same information from a non-peer. Moderators of peer-group discussions should model appropriate behaviors and provide strategies to build self-confidence. Exposing children to a variety of other models to break down traditional stereotypes (e.g., thin-ideal), and teaching them realistic expectations may increase their ability to evaluate what they see on television, and hopefully reduce negative body image. Peer-group interventions may also provide children, particularly males, not only with opportunities for discussion of sensitive issues such as body image but also for socialization.

The current research may also help provide professionals, including school

psychologists, with a better understanding of young children's awareness of media which in turn may offer opportunities for collaboration and consultation regarding body image issues among young students, parents, and outside agencies. The current research along with such consultations may help promote the development of practical resources regarding body image, especially for males. Providing a variation of resources that are accessible and suitable for young children may encourage discussions and promote positive body image.

Also, only some participants demonstrated an awareness of the rehearsed manipulation of television. Therefore, in-depth education regarding the process of "special effects" and computerized alterations (e.g., digital enhancements such as air brushing), may teach young people how to evaluate program and advertising content more critically. This, in turn, may provide young children with an even clearer understanding so they can further understand the role of the media at an earlier age and hopefully prevent the need to change themselves and their behavior.

Limitations

As with all research there are limitations and suggestions for future studies.

1. Although the targeted sample for the present study were children ages seven to nine, their young age may have served as a possible limitation. Trying to conduct a focus group with young children was somewhat problematic, for it emphasized the power imbalances between the researcher and participants, which may have been evident in their brief responses and desire to give the "right" answer.

2. The present study is based on self-report measures and therefore the results may be biased due to the tendency for a social desirability effect on these types of measures. That is, participants, especially young children, more frequently endorse answers that are perceived to be socially desirable than ones that are not. Therefore, the participants may have not revealed their honest perceptions in response to all questions. Screening of participants and conducting more than one focus group could address this problem in future research.

3. This study only utilized males from one youth organization in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, who were African-Canadian. A more diverse group of participants would have been preferable. For example, variables such as gender, race, class and culture were not considered within this study. More diversity overall would have allowed for wider application of the findings.

4. The number of participants was lower than originally anticipated. This restriction in sample size was due to the difficulty obtaining consent for participation of young children. A larger number of participants would have allowed for larger male and female focus groups.

Recommendations

1. Future research should include a larger sample size and strive to obtain the perceptions of female children as well for the purpose of comparison. Only through increased understanding of how children of varying ages and both sexes may develop damaging body standards through early life media exposure can we increase our understanding of how interventions especially media based interventions may be adapted to a child audience to minimize their risk of developing eating disorders in adolescence and beyond.

2. Future research investigating television and its impact on children's perception of body image should strive to include more diverse groups of participants with respect to not only gender but also ethnicity. For example, the First Nations population in particular is represented within Nova Scotia and should be targeted.

3. The current research may help health care providers, parents, teachers, school psychologists, and other professionals with the development of educational programs and practical resources to encourage discussions and promote positive body image. In addition, the development of school-based programs that demonstrate how television programs are produced, how special effects are accomplished, and how television differs from real-life can play a role in creating media-literate children.

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Appendix A

Letter to the Executive Director of Dartmouth Boys and Girls Club

Letter to Director of Dartmouth Boys & Girls Club

Dear Director,

My name is Janine Lewis, and I am a graduate student in the Masters of Arts in School Psychology Program at Mount Saint Vincent University. I am currently undertaking supervised research entitled "Television and its Impact on Children's Perception of Body Image: Exploring the Impact through Focus Group Research."

The purpose of my study is to determine the impact of television content on young children and their body image. The proposed study will employ focus groups, or discussion groups, to obtain personal views and opinions of children regarding two popular television shows. Children will be asked to attend a single focus group meeting approximately one hour in length. In order for them to participate, their parents must first sign a consent form. The children and their parents will be notified of the time and place of this discussion at a later date. Participation is completely voluntary and I will inform the children of the purpose of the research and that they may withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. The identities of the children will be kept confidential and the audiotapes, transcription, and any other research notes that could possibly identify the children will be kept secure in a locked cabinet to which only myself, my supervisor and assistant will have access to.

I would appreciate the opportunity to work with you and your clientele. If you agree, I will provide information sheets and consent forms for you to distribute to children, ages 7-9 and their parents/guardians. In order for a child to participate, their parent or guardian must sign the consent form and return it in the sealed return envelope provided (return date TBA). Please note that not all children who give consent will be asked to participate since the size of the discussion groups is restricted.

This research activity has met the ethical standards of both the Department of Graduate Education and the University Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University.

If you have any questions or require any additional information, please contact me at [redacted] or my thesis advisor, Dr. Theresa Glanville at 457-6248. If you wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved in the study, you may contact the Chair of the University Ethics Review Board at 457-6350.

Thank you for your consideration,

_____

Janine Lewis
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Appendix B

Letter to Parents/Guardians/Participants

Letter to Parents/Guardians/Participants

Dear Parent/Guardian/Children,

My name is Janine Lewis, and I am a Graduate student in School Psychology at Mount Saint Vincent University. I am currently completing supervised research titled "Television and its Impact on Children's Perception of Body Image: Exploring the Impact through Focus Group Research".

The purpose of my study is to determine the impact of television content on young children and their body image. The proposed study will use focus groups, or discussion groups, to get personal views and opinions from the children regarding two popular television shows.

I am writing to request permission to work with your child at a single group meeting about one hour in length. During this hour your child will watch a 10 minute clip from each of the following television shows: *Zoom*, and *That's So Raven*. I will then ask your child to participate in a discussion of the television shows (i.e., content, characters, and relationships). The discussion group will be audio-taped.

If you agree to have your child participate, I will notify you of the time and place of this group meeting. Participation is completely voluntary and I will discuss the purpose of the research with your child. Your child may withdraw from the group at any time without penalty and return to their regular scheduled activities. Your child's name or anything that would identify your child will not be used in the thesis or in any publications. The audiotapes, transcription, and any other research notes that could possibly identify your child will be kept secure in a locked cabinet to which only myself, my advisor, and the research assistant will have access. All tapes will be destroyed once they have been transcribed.

If you would like your child to participate, please complete and sign the attached consent form and place it in the sealed return envelope and return it to the director of the Dartmouth Boys and Girls Club (return date TBA). Please note that not all children who give consent will be asked to participate since the size of the discussion group is restricted. I would appreciate the opportunity to work with your child.

This research activity has met the ethical standards of both the Department of Graduate Education and the University Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University.

If you have any questions or require any other information, please contact me at [redacted] or my thesis advisor, Dr. Theresa Glanville at 457-6248. If you wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved in the study, you may contact the Chair of the University Ethics Review Board at 457-6350.

Thank you for your consideration,

_____

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_____

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Appendix C

Parental/Guardian Consent Form

Parental/Guardian Consent Form

Child's Name (Please print):_____

I, _____, give permission for my son/daughter to participate

in this study. I understand the following:

1 - that the study is voluntary and my child can withdraw from the process at any time and return to their regular scheduled activities without any negative consequences;

2 - that my child's name will not appear in the thesis or in any publications and any information that could possibly identify my child will be kept secure and will only be seen by the researcher, her advisor, and the research assistant;

3 - that the group discussion will be audiotaped, and that all tapes will be destroyed after transcription;

4 - I will receive a summary of the project, upon request, when the project is finished.

Parent's Signature:_____

Date:_____

Appendix D

Focus Group Questions

Main Focus Group Questions

1. Do you think the show is saying something about differences between things?

2. Do you think the show is saying something about differences between people?

3. Tell me how the things and the people in the show are different?

4. Is there a difference between people's body size? Shape? Color? Clothing?

5. How do you think the characters in the show feel?

6. Do you feel that any of the people in the show were more 'popular' or liked more by others?

7. If so, tell me why you think certain people in the show are considered more popular?

8. Do you feel like you are the same as any of the people shown in the show? If so, which ones?

9. Tell me why you feel like you are the same?

10. If you could be one of the people in the show, who would you like to be? Why?

11. What things do you consider to be important for a person to be liked by his or her friends?

12. Does the show remind you of what happens in real life, or do some things only happen on television?

Appendix E

Selected Sample of Coding

Selected Sample of Coding

1st Level	2nd Level	Theme
• Amount of friends seen as important • Character quality & unity in reaction to popularity • Fear as negative aspect of popularity • Intelligence seen as important quality • Non-importance of physical appearance (body shape/size)	Defining Popularity	Elements of Popularity & Social Acceptance
• Honesty • Generosity • Good friend • Give monetary gifts • Non-importance of body size/shape	Qualities of Acceptance & Popularity	
• Relationship between attractiveness & abilities • Attractiveness not related to popularity • Body size/shape not important to popularity • Body size (obesity) important to physical limitations	Physical Appearance & Popularity	