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Same-Sex Peer Influence on Female Undergraduate Body Image Perception

Caitlyn Buchanan
Eastern Illinois University

This research is a product of the graduate program in College Student Affairs at Eastern Illinois University. Find out more about the program.

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Same-Sex Peer Influence on Female Undergraduate Body Image Perception

(TITLE)

BY

Caitlyn Buchanan

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2015

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

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Abstract

Regardless of age, race, or socioeconomic class, women throughout western cultures are well documented for having body image related insecurities. These insecurities can be the result of pressure to look and behave a certain way from a variety of sources including media and peers. This study explored the role that same-sex peers play in undergraduate women’s perception of body image. Four undergraduate women at a public, Midwestern university who lived within campus housing were interviewed. Results of the study showed that same-sex peers did not play a significant role in the women’s perception of body image. The results of this study suggest that as women develop and mature over time, the influence of peers on body image perception diminishes.
Dedication

To the strong women in my life who have taught me that your self-worth should not be determined by what you look like, but instead by what you accomplish, how you treat other people, and how you feel about yourself; this is a testament to you. Thank you for never judging me for having a cheeseburger instead of a salad and instead teaching me that I am more than my dress size. Your positive presence in my life has inspired this work.
Acknowledgements

Though my name is stated on the cover of this work as the author, this work would not have been possible without the support and effort of a multitude of individuals.

To my thesis committee chair, Dr. Dianne Timm, thank you for your constant support throughout this process. I know that I would not have been as successful throughout this process if you were not there to challenge me and support me week by week. Thank you for the hours you spent reading drafts and listening to me ramble about life. I will be forever thankful for your help.

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To my parents, I know you still are not entirely sure what this whole thesis process is. Though still unclear as to what my thesis is, you have always been supportive throughout the process. I would not have accomplished this work as well as I did without learning from you the importance of hard work and determination. Thank you for your constant support and encouragement.

To my classmates and friends, thank you for challenging me to think differently and work harder. Hours that we spent tirelessly working together on our respective works will be fond memories of my time in graduate school not because of the work we accomplished during that time, but because of the relationships we formed throughout the process.

Last, but certainly not least, to the women who participated in this study and shared their stories, thank you. Discussing your insecurities is never easy, but you were willing to share with
me your story because you knew that it was important. I hope that you know your stories have helped not only me have a better understanding of how peers influence our body image perception, but that your stories will help other women in the future.
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Regardless of age, skin color, socioeconomic status, or education, every woman has likely been exposed to messages about the value of beauty and outward appearances. These messages can have the powerful ability to convince a woman that because she is not the ideal vision of beauty or physically appealing, she is not as worthwhile as a woman who has these traits (Knapp, 2013). Women are constantly exposed to thin body and beauty cultural norms that are communicated through various social messages which can often lead to body image dissatisfaction (Hoyt & Kogan, 2002). Unlike their female counterparts, men do not receive these messages as frequently and are less likely to have body image dissatisfaction (Franzoi, 2012; Krcmar, Giles, & Helme, 2008). Women throughout western cultures are well-documented to have widespread body dissatisfaction (Englen-Maddox, 2005; Gordon, Catro, Strinkov, & Holm-Denoma, 2012; Shrick, Sharp, Zvonkovic, & Reifman, 2012). This body dissatisfaction is a result of unrealistic standards about their appearances which can lead to being at a higher risk for depression, eating disorders, and overall body dissatisfaction (Krcmar et al., 2008; Nelson, 2011; Side-Moore, 2011).

This widespread dissatisfaction is found in many different age groups, but traditional college-age women are of particular concern in regards to their perception of body image (Krcmar et al., 2008). As students transition from high school to college, they are forced to develop independent lifestyles, much different from what they previously knew (Simmons, Connell, Ulrich, Skinner, Balasaubramanian, & Groppel, 2011). Because of this, new habits such as food and exercise choices are now completely left to the individual to control. In addition to this transition, this time period also serves as a crucial identity development period which can be
affected by a variety of inputs including peers (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). The college campus is a unique environment where women are in constant contact with their peers both inside and outside of the classroom, and this environment often serves as a form of social interaction particularly for female undergraduate students (Spencer, Barerett, Stori, & Cole, 2012). These interactions have great influence on a woman’s identity formation in late adolescence with body image being of particular concern during this stage (Arnett, 2000; Lidner, Hughes, & Fahy, 2008).

As women experience consistent interaction with their peers while in college, studying their influence is of a particular interest as much more research has been completed on the influence of media on body image. Research conducted by Trottier, Polivy, and Herman (2007) showed that although women may often receive messages and make comparisons to women in media images, these images have little to no effect on a woman’s body image. It is believed that these comparisons do not have an effect because women recognize that the women they view in media images are dissimilar to them, and instead, turn to their peers to obtain information about their appearance (Franzoi & Klaiber, 2007). Knowing that women are looking to their peers, it is of particular concern that women often pressure one another to be thin which can in turn lead to increased levels of body dissatisfaction (Stice, Maxfield, & Wells, 2002). Recent research has also shown that women’s interpretations of media images are heavily influenced by the social norms and messages in regards to body image that their friends possess and enforce through conversations (Englen-Maddox, 2005; Krcmar et al., 2008; Salk & Englen-Maddox, 2011). Though there is substantial research that has been completed in regards to female body image perception and media, it is of particular interest to examine the role that same-sex peer groups play in how a woman views herself.
Purpose of the Study

As a recent female undergraduate, I understand the many feelings and struggles a collegiate woman may face in regard to her body. While there are many outlets that may influence how one feels about his or her body, throughout my undergraduate experience, I found that the women with whom I spent my time with were influencing how I felt about myself. I noticed that these women did not make me feel good about myself, and eventually chose to surround myself with women who did make me feel better about myself. When this study began, I wanted to see whether this influence was common among other undergraduate women or not.

For traditional-age undergraduate students, college serves as a crucial development period for both men and women (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). The purpose of this study was to investigate the role that same-sex peer groups play in how women perceive their body image. As a recent undergraduate female who has struggled with her weight and own body image perception, I am aware of the internal struggles women face throughout their undergraduate college careers when placed in social situations that confront how she views herself. Many women struggle with their weight, self-esteem, and overall body image, and it is important to understand how same-sex peers affect a woman’s overall perception (Jones & Buckingham, 2005). Whom the students choose to spend their time with can greatly influence their development positively or negatively. Through interviews with undergraduate females, the researcher sought to gain an understanding as to how important of a role and in what ways female peer groups influence in an undergraduate female’s body image perception.

Research Questions

The researcher was seeking to gain an understanding of what effect same-sex peers have on a collegiate woman’s body image perception. More specifically, the researcher sought to
understand the influence of same-sex peers’ role through studying the ways they impact how a woman views her own body. Through qualitative study, this has been addressed by answering the following questions:

1. In what ways do collegiate women’s same-sex peers influence their perception of body image?
2. How do collegiate women describe their conversations and interactions with peers related to their body image?

Significance of the Study

Woman of all ages unfortunately fall victim to unrealistic messages on their outward appearance by several outlets (Stice, Maxfield, & Wells, 2003). Often, studies examine how media outlets such as print images, television, music, and movies affect how a woman perceives herself (Ferguson, Winegard, & Winegard, 2011; Knapp, 2013). The media is often blamed for their insecurities in terms of body image, however females may not even consider the role that the women they choose to surround themselves with can play in how they see themselves. By completing a study on the effect of same-sex peer groups on a collegiate woman’s perception of body image, it is the researcher’s hope that the findings from this study have the potential to help women have a better understanding as to why they view themselves in the capacity that they do. By having an understanding of the relationship between same-sex peer groups and body image perception, women can take action to be a positive influence for their peers.

Having this knowledge has the potential to influence the development of on-campus efforts and programming by Student Affairs professionals. With this information, Student Affairs professionals can create a campus community supportive of positive female peer relationships within residence halls, classrooms, and through campus activities. In developing an intentional
campus community that promotes positive female peer relationships, Student Affairs professionals have the ability to help foster healthy development and a positive sense of self in female students across their campus.

Limitations of the Study

The proposed study had a number of factors that may have limited its progress and findings. Similar to many research studies, there is a bias presented by the researcher. As a recent undergraduate female who has experienced body image perception issues, the researcher has close ties to the subject being examined and may unintentionally alter the course of the study. This presents the potential for bias in many aspects of the study including recruitment of participants, completion of interviews, and data analysis. More specifically, when interviewing and analyzing data, the researcher may look specifically for experiences/data that closely tie to her own and disregard those that are not. Awareness of these potential biases is the first step toward countering this bias.

In regards to the participants of the study, there was potential for multiple limitations. Although there is a large population of undergraduate females at the institution at which the study is being conducted, the researcher selected a rather narrow population to draw from, which is addressed further in chapter three.

Definition of Terms

**Body Image** First introduced in 1935 by the Austrian psychiatrist Paul Ferdinand Schölder (1942), body image is the subjective mental images that individuals have of their own bodies.

**Fat Talk** When individuals speak positively or negatively with each other about the size and/or shape of their bodies and their appearances. These conversations often include discussions
of dieting techniques and the discussions of desire to lose weight (Salk & Englen-Maddox, 2011).

**Social Comparison Theory** Developed by social psychologist Leon Festinger (1954), social comparison theory is defined as how individuals evaluate their own opinions and abilities by comparing themselves to others in order to reduce uncertainty in these domains and learn how to define the self. For the purpose of this study, social comparison theory will be defined as the comparison a woman makes between herself and her same-sex peers in relation to her body-image.

**Summary**

College women are in a crucial identity development period in which peers can serve as a source of influence and authority. Peers have the ability to influence a collegiate woman’s perception of her body image which can be a significant part of a young woman’s identity. Through qualitative study, the researcher sought to gain a better understanding of same-sex peer influence on undergraduate women’s body image perception and influence program development by Student Affairs professionals on college campuses that promote healthy, positive peer relationships.
CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

Research conducted prior to this study has noted that peers can play a significant role in the way a woman views herself (Shomaker & Furman, 2007; Wasylkiw & Williamson, 2013). This literature review will examine college development theory as it relates to female identity formation to understand how women of this age group process information. Literature on the prevalence and impact of disordered eating among college women will also be examined. The formation of body image perception, theory of social comparison and its role in female body image perception, and the various social behaviors considered acceptable by women that relate to the way they view their bodies will also be reviewed to understand the research already completed on this topic.

Development of Collegiate Women

To understand the growth and development of college-age women, having knowledge about college student development theories is helpful. Though there are a plethora of student development theories, one must first look at those theories developed by studying collegiate women (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1978). These types of theories best explain and relate to how collegiate women’s same-sex peers have the potential to influence their development and specifically perception of body image. It is important to understand how women at this age are cognitively processing information as well as how their social environment can affect their psychological development.

Cognitive Development. Cognitive development theories are concerned with how students develop intellectually. This involves looking at how people think, reason, and make meaning of experiences (Evans et al., 2010).
Prior to Carol Gilligan’s (1982) book *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*, an overwhelming majority of student development theories had been based off of research with men (Evans et al., 2010). Gilligan identified that previous development theories, most notably Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, did not fit a woman’s experience. Over multiple decades, Gilligan has studied women, their relationships, and how they develop over time. In 1982, Gilligan published *In a Different Voice* based off of her research on women’s moral reasoning development. Gilligan’s theory of moral development explains that women go through three stages of moral development within which women battle balancing their needs and the needs of others.

In level one of Gilligan’s theory (1982), the individual is concerned with only their needs and fulfilling their individual desires for survival. With collegiate women, this could mean that they are focused solely on taking care of themselves. Thus, if they are hungry, they will eat without considering how this may impact their image of themselves. Women in the second level of this theory are dependent upon social acceptance for survival, and put others’ needs and wants before their own. This could mean that college women are taking care of themselves based on what they see from those around them. As an example, a woman who lives in a residence hall and is surrounded by other women who enjoy working out, may choose to work out with these women for the social interaction without considering what is best for her well-being. In the final level of Gilligan’s theory, a woman finds a balance between fulfilling her needs while also caring for those around her (Gilligan, 1982). A woman who is at this level may go out to eat with friends on a regular basis, and her friends may choose to eat poorly, but the woman does not let this affect her and chooses a healthier option because she knows it is the best decision for her. Overall, what Gilligan found was that women are more concerned with the relationships that
they have with others and take into consideration other people’s feelings and thoughts more than their male counterparts (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan’s research can help explain why women may rely on the feelings and thoughts that their peers have about their bodies. Knowing this, as collegiate women develop, can explain how interactions with peers can be influential in a woman’s perception of body image (Knapp, 2013).

_Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule._ Influenced by the work of Gilligan (1982), in 1986, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule published _Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind_. Beginning in the 1970s, Belenky et al., began their research with women of diverse backgrounds and ages, including traditional age collegiate women (18-24) wanting to understand “why so many women speak so frequently of problems and gaps in their learning and so often doubt their intellectual competence,” (as cited in Evans et al., 2010, p. 121 ). Through interviews with the women, they found that many women’s self-concept was grounded in what others told them about who they were (Belenky et al., 1986). This self-concept can include body image. If a woman’s self-concept is grounded in what others tell her about herself, a collegiate woman is likely looking to her peers for information about herself and her body image. When women begin a new phase in life such as beginning college, women have a tendency to make a break with their former relationships (Belenky et al, 1986). When making a break from her past, a woman finds herself in a state of flux in which she must seek out new experiences and relationships to help define her self-concept. For collegiate women, this will involve finding peers. These peers help define a woman’s self-concept of how she looks which includes a woman’s perception of herself, and this could be positive or negative.

_Baxter Magolda._ Noticing a gender gap in previous work, Marcia Baxter Magolda (1992) conducted a study involving both collegiate men and women to better understand learning
and intellectual development during college. Her study was conducted at Miami University of Ohio with 101 undergraduate students. The study was qualitative and was completed over a twenty year span. From the study, Baxter Magolda developed the concept of self-authorship. Self-authorship involves a shift from external to internal self-definition in which a person must be able to answer three questions: 1.) How do I know? 2.) Who am I? 3.) What kind of relationships do I want to construct with others? (Baxter Magola, 2001, xxviii). Throughout the process of becoming the author of one’s life, Baxter Magolda explained that students will come to crossroads where they no longer agree with an authority’s definition or beliefs and will either seek out a new authority or begin to define their own beliefs and definitions. These authorities shift throughout an individual’s journey and can include family members, teachers, friends, and other sources of authority. As peers and friends can become an authority during the college experience, collegiate women may turn to them to define their perception of body image. These authorities guide a person to defining who they are and what they think of themselves which can include who they think they are in terms of body image. The types of definitions and beliefs an authority has of her own self and body image can influence the definitions and beliefs a collegiate woman will have of herself. As Baxter Magolda notes in Making Their Own Way, for students to be successful in their work and personal lives post-graduation, they must have an environment with authority figures that encourage the development of self-authorship.

**Psychosocial Development.** Psychosocial development theories are concerned with understanding how social events and interactions affect an individual’s mental and emotional development over time (Evans et al., 2010).

**Josselson.** In response to James Marcia’s (1966) Ego Identity Statuses theory, Ruthellen Josselson (1987) was concerned with understanding identity formation in women and how
internal and developmental roots influence it. Using Marcia’s model, Josselson wanted to understand the differences in women as they attempted to resolve various identity crises. Beginning as college seniors, Josselson interviewed the same women at three different times throughout their twenties to see how well they established their identity through life events after completing college.

Josselson identified four different identity statuses: guardians, pathmakers, searchers and drifters (Josselson, 1987). Guardians commit to an identity without an identity crisis and adopt their parents’ beliefs as their own. An example of this is when a student who comes from a vegetarian lifestyle continues to eat vegetarian while in college. Drifters are considered to be women who are lost with no sense of direction in terms of their identity. A college woman who is in this category may be easily influenced by her peers to try new things, and this could include experimenting with eating, engaging in bad lifestyle choices, or changing their way often. Women who are considered to be Searchers are unsure of their identity and are often found in a state of continuous identity exploration. As time goes on, the same vegetarian woman may begin trying many different foods and engage in healthy and unhealthy eating patterns. Pathmakers are individuals who are capable of creating their own distinct identity separate from their childhood. They do this by considering who they were and who they want to become. The same student who comes to college from a vegetarian home may decide to begin eating meat because they are considering other options or their peers may make similar choices.

Within each status, Josselson identified how a woman’s identity was influenced by other people including family, friends, peers, and romantic partners. All of these various relationships could either help or hinder a successful identity formation within these women much like peers can in the formation of body image perception. These relationships and various experiences
influenced whether a woman would have a healthy identity formation. As Josselson explained, the way in which a woman established her identity would then influence a multitude of things within her life which could include her perception of body image.

**Body Image**

Originally defined by psychiatrist Paul Schilder (1942), body image is an individual’s mental image of one’s body. A person’s body image is established and developed throughout an individual’s life due to a variety of inputs and is mainly established unconsciously (Slade, 1994). Not only is body image a mental picture, but it is also a self-attitude toward one’s physical appearance and all that it entails including aesthetics, size, and shape (Cash, Ancis, & Strachan, 1997). As we know, college women come in all shapes and sizes; no two are exactly the same. Body image is, as defined by researchers Cash and Pruzinsky (1990), a multidimensional construct; this multidimensional construct involves biological, psychological, cultural, and social factors that influence how one views his or her body. College campuses are made up of diverse student populations with different social and cultural backgrounds that help make up their body image. Psychological factors include evaluation and investment (Cash & Fleming, 2002). Evaluation is also referred to as an individual’s overall body satisfaction and investment involves investing in one’s appearance and societally accepted appearance standards. While away at college, young women have to learn how to take care of themselves or invest in themselves solely on their own. Cultural and social factors can include societal norms, various media outlets, and the people with whom an individual spends his or her time with such as family, friends, classmates, and co-workers (Goswami, Sachdeva, & Sachdeva, 2013). On a college campus, the peers one chooses to surround his or herself with or student organizations he or she becomes involved in can be a factor that influences a collegiate woman’s body image.
It is commonly found that negative body image is prevalent among women (Cash & Fleming, 2002; Goswami et al., 2012). A common argument for this is because cultural norms and expectations can encourage women to be overly-invested and concerned with their body image (Cash et al., 1997). These norms and expectations can be communicated within social settings by family and peers. Whether positive or negative, the messages that are communicated to a woman by someone such as a peer can greatly influence her body image and then in turn influence her overall quality of life. An individual’s perception of body image can influence a multitude of aspects in his or her life including eating and exercise behaviors, self-esteem, and emotional stability (Cash & Fleming, 2002). A person’s well-being and overall quality of life can be greatly affected by his or her body image whether positive or negative (Cash et al., 1997). A collegiate woman’s body image perception may influence her collegiate experience both inside and outside of the classroom negatively or positively.

**Disordered Eating**

Commonly linked to issues with body dissatisfaction and perception of body image, disordered eating is a problem amongst collegiate women with as many as 22% reporting engaging in disordered eating habits (Krcmar, Giles, & Helme, 2008). This particular age group is of concern because of the added stressors that come with transitioning from high school into a college or university atmosphere (Vohs & Heatherton, 2001). Because of high levels of stress in addition to role and identity changes, collegiate women are at a higher risk of developing unhealthy eating habits (Krcmar, et al., 2008).

In a study completed by Vohs, Heatherton, and Herrin (2001), 342 women were surveyed at the end of their senior year of high school and freshman year of college over their body image perception and disordered eating habits. The researchers were concerned with understanding how
the transition to college would affect these body-related issues in young women. The results identified that 80% of women reported dieting and 50% reported binge eating during their first year on campus. It is of particular importance to understand what factors are contributing to the development of these unhealthy eating habits. Though there are many internal and external factors that can contribute to disordered eating, many researchers have noted the role that peers can play in eating pathology problems among collegiate women (Allison & Park, 2004; Basow, Foran, & Bookwala, 2007; Giles et al., 2007; Keel, Forney, Brown, & Heatherton, 2013). In 2002, Keel completed a study which examined the influence of college roommates’ dieting habits on the development of disordered eating habits in 566 women and 233 men. Keel et al. (2013) completed a ten-year follow-up of this study and explained that as women transitioned from high school to college, peers became an important source for influence which could significantly contribute to their eating behaviors and attitudes. Peer groups are important, and unknowingly collegiate women may pick a group that is not good for their well-being and development. If women believe their peers are accepting of and/or modeling disordered eating practices, they are more likely to engage in these behaviors (Keel et al., 2013; Giles et al., 2007). Women who are in the second stage of Gilligan’s theory of moral development may begin to mimic these unhealthy habits because they are so concerned with being socially accepted by their peers.

**Group Think.** One well-studied example of peer influence on disordered eating habits is sorority life (Allison & Park, 2003; Basow et al., 2007; Sayther, 2006). Being involved in a Greek letter organization is common among collegiate women as these organizations can serve as a positive influence as they promote leadership and involvement as well as create a supportive environment with encouragement in academics and community service. These groups also have
the potential to influence negative habits in women because of the culture that Greek Life communities may support (Basow et al., 2007). In a study completed by Basow et al. (2007), 86 undergraduate women, both participants who were involved in sorority life and women who were not, were surveyed about their disordered eating habits and perceptions of social pressure. Results of the study showed that the longer a sorority woman spent living in her sorority house and around her sorority sisters, the more likely she was to report disordered eating habits. Because this study surveyed a limited number of participants, the results of the study are not generalizable for all sorority women. Similar findings have been identified by other researchers as well noting that sororities may unconsciously condone a drive for thinness, disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction (Allison & Park, 2003).

What women in sororities promote and condone can have a great effect on the other women in the sorority as explained by the phenomenon groupthink. Defined, groupthink is a way of thinking that occurs when an individual is deeply involved in a cohesive in-group (Sayther, 2006; Janis, 1972). As explained by Sayther (2006), because of groupthink in sororities, women strive to operate as a cohesive group which involves having a unified identity and similar ideals (Sayther, 2006). As becoming a member of a sorority can provide an important piece of a woman’s identity and influence the way that she thinks, it is of particular concern that sorority sisters may be promoting unhealthy eating habits (Basow et al., 2007).

**Social Comparison**

In 1954, Leon Festinger published his theory on social comparison. In his publication, Festinger provided nine different hypotheses on human social behavior and how opinion influences social groups. He theorized that when individuals are uncertain of themselves, they make a social comparison with a peer (Ridolfi, Myers, Crowther, & Ciesla, 2011). Individuals do
this as a way to obtain information about the self. These social comparisons can be one of two types: upward and downward. Upward comparisons involve identifying someone considered to be superior to the individual making the comparison (Festinger, 1954). An example of this is when a collegiate woman considered to be overweight compares herself to her thinner roommate whom she believes is more physically appealing than herself. By evaluating oneself to someone superior, Festinger theorized that the comparison can serve as a form of motivation for self-improvement. Downward comparisons involve identifying someone considered inferior and are used as a method of self-assurance of oneself. Returning to the roommate scenario, the thinner roommate can compare herself to her overweight roommate to reassure herself of her physical attractiveness as a thin woman.

Social comparison theory application is one way many researchers have studied this issue of female body image perception. Many researchers note that social comparisons are used by women to obtain information about their body image and overall physical attractiveness (Jones & Buckingham, 2005; Ridolfi, Myers, Crowther, & Ciesla, 2011; Trottier, Polivy, & Herman, 2007). Comparisons are made towards others considered either more or less physically attractive than the individual making the comparison. In a study which surveyed 70 undergraduate women regarding their body image perceptions, depressive symptoms, and competitive habits, researchers found that social comparison was among the most significant predictors for body image disturbance and self-doubt in women in regards to their physical attractiveness (Sides-Moore & Tochkov, 2011).

As social comparisons play a significant role in a woman’s body image, researchers argue that these comparisons can affect a woman in numerous ways (Englen-Maddox, 2005). Englen-Maddox explained that the effects a woman experiences from engaging in social comparisons is
typically related to their body and is commonly negative because women have internalized idealized images of what the standard of beauty is for themselves. Because few women can meet the idealized standard beauty, dissatisfaction and other negative effects are a likely outcome from making social comparisons. College women are constantly engaged in social interactions with their peers and thus may be frequently making social comparisons. These negative effects would be associated with making upward comparisons (McKee et al., 2013). In a study completed by Ridolfi, Myers, Crowther, and Ciesla (2011) the researchers surveyed 93 undergraduate women from a large public Midwestern university on the nature, frequency, and consequences of social comparison related to physical appearance. They found that when appearance focused comparisons are made, body image disturbance is generally an outcome.

Several studies with undergraduate female participants have noted common feelings of guilt, sadness, anxiety, distress, and shame after making a social comparison to a peer, especially as it related to their body awareness (Cash & Green, 1986; McKee et al., 2013; Ridolfi et al., 2011; Schrick et al., 2012). In a study by McKee et al. (2013), the researchers examined the various social comparisons made by 87 undergraduate women to see which type of social comparison most commonly occurred. They found that the comparison noted most often by women as causing negative feelings was that of physical appearance. It was also found that participants with homogenous sets of friends were likely to experience more envy as a result of these comparisons. These homogenous sets of friends can be found in group membership similar to sororities, residence hall floors, and other social peer groups. In the study completed by Ridolfi et al. (2011), the researchers also found that when being placed in situations with peers of differing weight categories (underweight, average-weight, and overweight), women will experience different effects in regards to their body image perception including sadness, guilt,
and shame. If a collegiate woman spends time with women of different sizes, her body image may be negatively influenced. In addition the researchers found that when exposed to a peer considered to be thinner than the woman making the comparison, the women is likely to experience more body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem than when being exposed to peers considered of average-weight or overweight. On a college campus, women are exposed to peers of varying sizes both larger and smaller than themselves which could lead to body image dissatisfaction.

When exposed to a peer considered to be overweight, a woman commonly reports feeling thinner and having less concerns in terms of body dissatisfaction (Cash, Morrow, Perry, & Hrabosky, 2004). Cash noted that these comparisons can be affected by body image through distortions the women already has. As these thoughts become more distorted, she is less likely to have an accurate estimation of her own body which will in turn affect the way she estimates a same-sex peer’s weight/body when making a comparison. With a distorted self-image, a collegiate woman may influence her peers to do the same. If a woman has a distorted image of her own weight, overestimating how much she actually weighs, she may view her peers who are of similar weight to be overweight as well (Cash et al., 2004). This could then affect how that woman interacts and influences her peers’ own body image perceptions. In a study of the effects of the pressure to appear perfect and how the collegiate environment encourages women to be thin, researchers surveyed 149 undergraduate women and found that if women reject culturally accepted appearance norms, they will not feel the common negative feelings that occur when making social comparisons (Shrick et al., 2012). Knowing this, a collegiate woman may not be as negatively influenced by her peers in terms of her body image if she chooses to reject appearance related cultural norms.
Social Norms and Behaviors

When a group of friends go out together to grab a bite to eat, they may choose to indulge in an overabundance of unhealthy foods ordering appetizers, drinks, and dessert on top of their entrees. After doing so, they are likely to talk to one another about how they should not have eaten that much and how awful they feel about themselves for doing so. These conversations are social behaviors. A significant way same-sex peer groups influence a woman’s perception of body image is through the social behaviors they encourage and practice that relate to body image (Salk & Englen-Maddox, 2011). A commonly studied and accepted social behavior by undergraduate women is the social phenomenon known as fat talk (Arroyo & Harwood, 2012; Ousely, Cordero, & White, 2008; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2012; Stice, Maxfield, & Wells, 2003). In a landmark study by Nichter and Vuckoi (1994), the term fat talk was developed to describe conversations with peers that involved either positive or negative comments about one’s appearance, the desire to lose weight, and dieting techniques. Fat talk is used as a form of peer pressure to encourage thin body type ideals and is commonly viewed as complaints of feeling fat or overweight (“Fat Talk: Does it Depend on the Audience,” 2007).

As a studied phenomenon, there is evidence that women are participating in fat talk conversations (Arroyo & Harwood, 2012). Results of recent studies show that fat-talk is prevalent among undergraduate females though the prevalence varies throughout the population (Ousely, Cordero, & White, 2008; Salk & Englen-Maddox, 2011). Though many women engage in these conversations, fat talk conversations occur more often among women with some form of eating pathology (Ousely et al., 2008). Though these conversations may occur more often with women with some form of eating pathology, as explained earlier, many collegiate women have reported that they have engaged in disordered eating habits. This may mean that there are many
collegiate women who are engaging in these conversations. Salk and Engeln-Maddox (2011) were interested in the frequency, content, and impact of fat talk among collegiate women. In the study, when surveyed, the majority of undergraduate men and women believed that fat talk was a commonly accepted phenomenon among female undergraduates. This may mean that collegiate women commonly are socialized to engage in these types of conversations unknowingly. These conversations though are not only prevalent among undergraduate women with some reports showing that women may engage in fat talk throughout early adolescence and into adulthood (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). Dependent upon the environment a woman was exposed to prior to going away to college, she likely may come to campus already socialized to engage in fat talk conversations.

With undergraduate women reporting participation in fat talk conversations, an explanation for why undergraduates are engaging in these discussions with their peers has been studied to gain further insight (Arroyo & Harwood, 2012; Ousely, Cordero, & White, 2008; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). One common factor identified as to why undergraduate women engage in fat talk conversations is a perception of social pressure to do so. As in the eating out scenario described above, because of this social pressure, women may make negative comments about their bodies because of perceived social norms (Ousely et al., 2008; Salk & Englen-Maddox, 2011). When participating in these conversations, women report that they feel pressured to engage in body talk, whether positive or negative, similar to their social group (Salk & Englen-Maddox, 2011). Collegiate women may feel pressured by their same-sex peers to engage in fat talk conversations which could contribute to their overall body satisfaction. While women report that they would prefer to associate with women who do not engage in fat talk conversations, it is understood that there is a social pressure to engage in these conversations.
Fat talk conversations originate from the desire of women to cope with their dissatisfaction with their bodies (Ousely et al., 2008; Salk & Englen-Maddox, 2011). Women look to one another for empathetic responses and encouragement that they are not alone in their dissatisfaction. Much like Gilligan (1984) identified, women rely on one another for social approval which may mean social approval of dissatisfaction with their body. Interactions among college women take place informally on a daily basis in the residence halls, sorority, houses, and classrooms which provide many opportunities for conversations that encourage these types of conversations. These conversations though are not always a way of expressing discontent with outer appearances, and instead can be a way of expressing a wide range of feelings (Salk & Englen-Maddox, 2011). Like with social comparisons, fat talk is often associated with negative feelings and effects within women. In a study completed by Salk and Englen-Maddox (2011), 87 undergraduate women were experimentally exposed to fat talk to determine the likelihood of a woman to engage in fat talk. The results showed that hearing fat talk was likely to cause higher levels of body dissatisfaction. When women overheard fat talk conversations, they were likely to engage in the conversation as well which then in turn could lead to a higher overall body dissatisfaction. Other negative feelings such as guilt are commonly found in women after participating in fat talk conversations.

Another commonly accepted and encouraged form of social behavior among undergraduate females is that of weight management. Women are known to encourage thinness and weight loss by criticizing their peers when gaining weight and praising when they lose weight; this commonly leads to a form of body dissatisfaction (Krcmar, Giles, & Helme, 2008). One common weight-related phenomenon among freshmen undergraduate women is the
*freshman 15* which is the belief that a first-year college student will gain 15 or more pounds in an academic year. In a study by Smith-Jackson (2012), the researchers wanted to better understand the impact and explanations for the *freshman 15*. Among the 235 freshmen women surveyed, they found that over 90% of the women surveyed knew about the *freshman 15*. They also found a large number of the women surveyed had grave concerns over gaining this weight as it would lead to poor body image.

Freshmen women were not the only ones feeling pressure to maintain their weight. Researchers Wharton, Adams, and Hampl (2008), sought to understand what associations there were between body weight perception and the weight loss strategies undergraduate college students used. They found nearly half of the female undergraduates (*n* = 24,832) that responded reported they were attempting to lose weight although less than a third of the respondents were considered to be overweight and/or obese. Men were also surveyed in the study, however significantly more women reported engaging in exercising and/or dieting practices to lose weight regardless of whether they needed to or not (Wharton, Adams, & Hampl, 2008). They also identified that these weight loss behaviors were often associated with self-esteem issues, depression, anxiety, and a distorted weight perception.

Undergraduate females have also used their clothing choices to express their body image perception (Trautmann, Worthy, & Lokken, 2007). Depending on how the individual feels about their outer appearance can affect the clothing choices that they make. Dissatisfaction can lead to negative choice selection in regards to clothing. To reduce anxiety about their perceived body image, women are often encouraged by one another to avoid clothing that would display their insecurities or allow opportunity for scrutiny (Trautmann et. al, 2007).
Peer Pressure & Influence

Throughout adolescent and early adulthood, the role of peers becomes increasingly important for both men and women. As researchers Steinberg and Monahan (2007) explain, there is little doubt of the significance of peer influence throughout this developmental period. Often individuals will feel pressured at this age to fit in and behave in socially desirable ways which can lead to altering of their behavior (Brown, Clasen, & Eicher, 1986). The source of this pressure is because of the shift in importance from parents to peers as a source of approval.

Throughout this developmental period, adolescents and young adults are attempting to become emotionally autonomous from their parents, and if they do so prior to being emotionally ready, peers can serve as a source to fill the void of parents (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986).

When an undergraduate woman first comes to campus and begins to make friends, she is likely to find women that she has something in common with. The peers that individuals of this age group choose to surround themselves with have a tendency to be homogenous groups or resemble one another in a variety of facets (Tolson & Urberg, 1993). Peer groups can resemble one another in a variety of ways including physical and social attributes as well as attitudes and behaviors (Kandel, 1978). This is most clearly evident in looking at special population groups such as Black Student Union, Latino Club, or special interest groups like a Chemistry Student Society. As suggested by researchers Tesser, Campbell, and Smith (1984), the reason for this similarity is because peer groups are likely to be similar in qualities and behaviors that are important to members of the group. To fit into the peer group, individuals may feel pressured to adopt the behaviors and qualities that are communicated as important in their group.

Similar behaviors and qualities can include body image perceptions and concerns among adolescent and early adulthood-age women. As women are more likely to be concerned than men
about their relationships with others, they are likely to feel pressured by the feelings and thoughts of others about body image related issues (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). In a study of late high-school age female students, researchers surveyed 523 participants on their body image concerns, eating habits, and peer group relations (Paxton & Schutz, 1999). The researchers found that body image attitudes were strongly communicated within peer groups through a variety of behaviors including talk, clothing choice, dieting, and exercise patterns. They also identified that peer pressure communicated by their peers would predict the behavior of the participant (Paxton & Schutz, 1999). Knowing that this age group is strongly drawn to the influence of their peers and often feel pressured to adhere to socially communicated norms, women may adopt healthy or unhealthy body image perceptions and behaviors similar to their peers.

**Summary of Literature**

The review of literature examines the importance of college student development theories in understanding the development of collegiate age women and also looks at the formation and development of an individual’s body image. A common issue linked to body dissatisfaction and perception of body image is that of disordered eating and eating pathology is common among collegiate women peer groups. The literature also examined the role social comparison and social behaviors play in the way a woman views herself. Social comparison theory is often applied to women and their outward appearances. More often than not, these comparisons result in negative feelings and higher levels of body dissatisfaction in undergraduate females. These feelings of negativity towards one’s body are often reinforced by commonly acceptable social behaviors including fat talk, weight loss management, and clothing avoidance choices. Though the levels of apparent influence vary among undergraduate females, it is commonly found that women engage in social comparison and the social behaviors discussed. To understand why women feel the
need to engage in social comparisons and social behaviors, an understanding of peer pressure and influence is also necessary.
CHAPTER III

Methods

To obtain information on female body image perception and the influence of same-sex peers, this study utilized a qualitative design in terms of data collection and analysis. Data were collected to help understand what ways collegiate women’s same-sex peers influence their perception of body image as well as to understand the conversations and interactions women are having with their peers that influence their body image perception.

Design of the Study

The study was conducted using a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach was selected because this research approach best allowed the researcher to understand women’s behavior and experiences (Bogdan & Knopp-Biklen, 2003). This is appropriate as the researcher sought to understand what influence other women have on a woman’s body image perception. Much of the research that has already been conducted on this topic has been quantitative in nature. The goal of this research was to further understand individuals’ stories to help explain how women influence one another’s perception of body image. To collect data, the researcher conducted interviews which allowed for further depth in understanding the women’s stories. As body image is a sensitive topic, participants may have been less likely to disclose information by completing a quantitative survey. By conducting interviews, the researcher established rapport with the participant and was able to draw out further information through follow up questions dependent upon the participant’s initial response (Bogdan & Knopp-Biklen, 2003, p. 90).

Participants

The target population for this study was traditional-age undergraduate women that live in an all-female on-campus community. Undergraduate women in their third year at the institution
were invited to participate in the study. Women of third-year status were the target population because they have had time to establish themselves on campus in terms of their friend groups and lifestyle choices. To specifically target women who are of full-time, undergraduate student status and that have consistent exposure to their female peers, undergraduate women who live within residence halls or on-campus Greek housing were recruited. The goal was to recruit four women to participate in the interviews, two of the participants living in an all-female on-campus housing residence and two living in a co-ed on-campus residence to get varying perspectives that may be present.

To recruit participants, the researcher was intentional in selecting individuals who met the specified criteria. As Bogdan and Knopp-Biklen (2003) explain, this is done to help facilitate the development of the researcher’s theory. The researcher asked colleagues within the institution to identify women that they believed would be ideal participants. Colleagues helped identify women who they knew to be social and engaged with female socialization and therefore likely to have solidified female friend groups. After obtaining suggested participants from colleagues, the researcher contacted potential participants through email (Appendix A) inviting them to participate in the study.

Four women with similarities, but individually unique stories served as participants in this study. Two of the women are currently resident assistants in an all-female residence hall at the institution (to be referred to as Grand State University). Two of the women are members of a sorority on campus as well as student senators for Grand State University’s student government. Each participant’s story is explained in greater depth in Chapter IV. To protect their identities, each woman has been given a pseudonym.

**Grace.** Growing up in a small Midwestern town, Grace was ready to break away from
the pessimistic people she had grown up around and spent her time with as a kid. Since attending Grand State University, she has become actively involved on campus within a sorority as well as in the university’s student government. She explains that through this campus involvement, she has developed a more confident sense of self thanks to people she now chooses to surround herself with. This campus involvement has also helped change her mind on what major to pursue. Currently Grace is a psychology major who plans on attending graduate school to pursue a career in Student Affairs.

**Diana.** Diana is an elementary education major and serves as a resident assistant in an all-female residence hall on campus at Grand State University that houses mainly student athletes. Much of Diana’s life is centered around her job as the majority of her friends are also resident assistants on campus. As she describes herself, Diana is not what she considers being a traditional college student and has been classified as being odd by her peers since coming to Grand State University for not engaging in stereotypical alcohol-related activities. She enjoys running, watching Disney movies, and finding adventures to go on with her friends near Grand State University. Though optimistic and willing to share her story, Diana admitted that she suffers from anxiety.

**Kelli.** Growing up in a small Midwestern town, Kelli attended a Christian school for the majority of her childhood. As she explains, she felt she lived a very sheltered life prior to coming to Grand State University. Kelli stated that she feels fortunate to have had a childhood with a supportive family and friends who were drama free. Kelli is involved on campus as a resident assistant in her second year and enjoys spending her time outside of the classroom and work staying active in a variety of ways. Kelli enjoys spending time with other women, but is careful to select what type women with whom she likes to spend her time.
Joanna. When Joanna came to Grand State University, she wanted to get involved on campus as much as possible. In her junior year, Joanna has accomplished her goal as she currently serves as a student senator, is an active member in a sorority on campus, and is a member of Grand State University’s Habitat for Humanity. Through these organizations, Joanna has met a diverse group of individuals that she calls friends. Joanna prides herself on being very independent from her friends. Though she cares greatly for her close friends, she stated that she is not concerned with what others think of her.

Research Site

The research was conducted at a rural, midsized, state university in the Midwest (Grand State University) with a reported total student population of approximately 10,000 in the fall of 2014. Women compromise 60% of the total student population. Data was obtained through on-campus interviews with participants. These interviews were conducted in a non-threatening environment which was a private office located in a residence hall office on Grand State University campus during the fall semester of 2014.

Interview Protocol

For the purpose of this study, instrumentation included a set of pre-determined interview questions (Appendix B) to be asked by the researcher/interviewer. This set of questions was used in each interview with participants and covered questions related to the participant’s body image and the same-sex friends/peers with which they spend their time. The questions were pre-determined by the researcher to maintain consistency throughout the interview and were designed to allow the participants to share information on their body image perception as it relates to their same-sex peers (Bogdan & Knopp-Biklen, pg. 95). The researcher was intentional in making the questions open-ended as to allow the participant to respond freely. The questions
were also intentionally designed to help build rapport throughout the interview with the participant. Because of the sensitive topic, it was important that the researcher build rapport, asking questions that do not require the participant to step out of her comfort zone prior to asking her to disclose information about her body image (Bogdan & Knopp-Biklen, 2003, p. 95).

**Data Collection**

Data was collected through one-on-one interviews with research participants that lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. Students were contacted by invitation to participate in the study with an email at the beginning of the fall semester of 2014. This email included an invitation to participate, a description of the study, and informed consent (Appendix C). After obtaining four participants, interviews were conducted at the researcher and participant’s convenience during the fall semester. Each interview was audio recorded by the researcher as to ensure participant’s comfort. As the topic focuses on how one feels about their outward appearance, video recording may have made the participant more aware and self-conscious of their outward appearance and this could have influenced student responses during the interview.

**Treatment of Data**

To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, the researcher took steps to protect their identities. By taking steps to reassure the participant that the information they shared would remain confidential, the participant was more likely to share information more freely (Bogdan & Knopp-Bilken, 2003). The researcher assigned different names to each participant as well as a different name to the institution. This prevents the identification of the participants through their stories. To protect the data collected in interviews, the researcher will keep the transcripts and audio recordings secured on a password protected computer. The data will be stored for three years after the completion of the study and will be destroyed/deleted at that point in accordance with the institution’s IRB protocol.
Data Analysis

After completing the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher. Once completed, the transcripts were coded for themes by the researcher as well as one other researcher. The researcher recruited one qualified individual to read the transcripts to assure validity of the findings. As the researcher is closely aligned to the study, the researcher may present a bias when looking for themes, and by having individuals outside of the study read and code the transcripts, there is a smaller chance for researcher bias (Bogdan & Knopp-Bilken, 2003). A Microsoft Excel file was created to organize the various codes and themes found by the researcher and colleagues in the interviews.

Summary

The proposed qualitative study involved completing interviews with undergraduate women at a public, mid-sized Midwestern university during the fall semester of 2014. To ensure the confidentiality of participants, measures were taken to ensure their privacy. Once the data had been obtained, the researcher transcribed and coded data to determine themes and meaning.
Chapter IV

Results

The primary purpose of the current qualitative study was to understand the ways in which undergraduate women influence one another’s body image perception at a mid-sized Midwestern university. Participants answered questions in regards to their body image and peers in relation to clothing choices, eating habits, physical activity, and other general time spent with one another. Throughout this chapter, the main themes that were identified from participant responses are discussed and help provide answers to the research questions:

1. In what ways do collegiate women’s same-sex peers influence their perception of body image?

2. How do collegiate women describe their conversations and interactions with peers related to their body image?

The influence of collegiate women’s same sex peers on their perception of body image

There were multiple themes that emerged as the participants responded to questions about how they spend time with their peers and the ways in which their peers influence how they perceive their own bodies. Participants were asked to talk about their interactions with their peers related to working out, shopping together, getting ready to go out, eating, and general time spent together. The four themes most prevalent for the four participants include: weight loss, clothing choices, attitude, and working-out/staying active.

Weight Loss. None of the participants stated that their same-sex peers directly told them to lose weight; however they spoke about how their conversations sometimes are about the need to lose weight or maintain a healthy weight. The participants reported that the women they choose to surround themselves with or the women they interact with sometimes discuss the desire or need to lose weight. Other participants did report it being a topic of conversation when
interacting with their peers. Kelli talked about participating in weight loss practices to support her friends:

I wouldn’t be upset if I lost five or ten pounds, but it’s not going to kill me to stay the way I am. We don’t necessarily talk about it [weight loss] a lot because I tend to be fairly confident and I think a lot of them are too. If we have conversations (about it), it’s because they bring something up and I try to be very supportive. If they say something about wanting to lose weight, I’ll tell them I’ll do it with them.

None of the women reported sharing a desire to lose weight with their friends or because of conversations with their friends. As Grace, explained, it is more of a private matter:

I think it’s nice for the people who kind of need that extra support. Personally, if I were having issues with that, I wouldn’t want to branch out to other people like that. I wouldn’t tell people, “Oh, I’m feeling really bad about myself,” because I like to deal with it on my own.

Grace, who is a member of a sorority but resides in a residence hall, reported her sorority identified that some of the women needed to make better choices about their health. Grace’s sorority placed an emphasis on losing weight:

We have a health and wellness committee that’s a part of my sorority. We did a “Biggest Loser” contest over the summer and it helped to jumpstart that. When people were losing weight over the summer, they could tell her if they wanted other people to know. For example, if someone lost fifteen pounds over the summer, she would ask if that was okay to share with everyone, and if they said okay, everyone would say congratulations. It would be a confidence booster because the [sorority] house would be behind you and there to support you like you support yourself.
Not all of the women who participated in the study consistently interacted as closely with such a large group of women as Grace did.

**Clothing Choices.** Participants were asked questions about their shopping habits with their peers and what sorts of conversations they have when they are shopping. They were also asked about how long it takes to get ready and what they are doing with their peers when getting ready to go out. Not all participants reported that their friends or peers had influence on what clothing choices they made. Two participants reported that they took into consideration the opinions or were aware of the opinions of their peers and the normalization of this behavior.

Diana noted that when shopping, she often asks for opinions:

“Does this look good on me?” “Do I look fat in this?” Fun stuff like that, everything a girl would ask. I’m happy to have an honest opinion. I would rather have an honest opinion like, “Diana that doesn’t really look the best, maybe you should try something else on.”

As Diana reported, this is what she considers normal behavior for her peers. On the other hand Grace is aware of trends and how others dress, but talks about having her own style and way of dressing:

I usually try to present myself well. I try to dress mostly modestly compared to what college standards would be. I feel like sometimes people go to class and they’ll be in sweatpants and tank tops or in crop tops which are a big thing right now. Maybe it’s because I’ve come from a stage where I used to want to hide my body because I had body issues, but now it’s more than I would rather cover myself because some things need to be for me and other things can be for other people.

As previously stated, not all of the women expressed taking into consideration the opinions of
their friends or peers. Two of the women were explicit in their reports that they do not concern
themselves with their friends' opinions when deciding on what clothing to wear. Joanna provided
her perspective on her peers' influence when it comes to how she dresses:

I don't care what they have to say. If I want to wear something, I'm going to wear it. It's
still nice to hear what they have to say about it even if it's completely opposite of what I
think. People have different opinions of clothes.

None of the women reported having regular conversations with their friends about clothing. One
specific example, Kelli reported that it is usually not a concern of her or her close friends: “If it's
somewhere where it doesn’t matter how we dress, we are more concerned about figuring out
what we’re doing and when we’re going.”

**Attitude.** The women were asked to describe the conversations that they had with their
friends in regards to their feelings about one another’s appearance and also how they viewed
themselves. Participants' attitudes about their body image appeared to have evolved over time
through experience and maturity. One participant, Grace, reflected on how her friends had
influenced her attitude towards her body in the past:

I guess I had been bullied so I didn’t like to bully other people because it's a really
painful thing. Those kind of people I slowly started to move away from, and towards
people who would rather sit around and talk about the positive. I guess the people I was
friends with in high school weren’t really positive thinkers. I mean, in high school I
wasn’t really self-confident. I kind of stuck to my own and didn’t really talk to people
unless I was with my friends. It was definitely different coming to college because I
wasn’t that self-confident person. I think it was good I got away from the negative
thinking because it wasn’t a positive portion of my life.
Grace continued to explain that as time has gone on, she has chosen to surround herself with new women:

I’ve found girls that are interested in the same things as me and just want to better themselves and other people rather than tear people down, are the type of people I want to be around. I would say that’s the most important reason I am friends with the people I am today.

Unlike Grace, Joanna had an opposite experience. When asked how she felt about herself when with her friends, Joanna responded by saying, “I feel great about myself, but that’s probably because no one has ever made me feel otherwise. I’ve never been bullied or told I don’t look good. I’ve always heard positive feedback.”

Though some women spoke more generally about the attitude-related interactions they had that influenced their own perception of body image, one participant was much more explicit in explaining how her friends described their own bodies and how this influenced her. Diana shared:

One of my friends is super negative about herself and she’s gorgeous. She has no reason because she’s really funny and she’s really outgoing. I have another friend like that. I have a lot of friends who are pretty insecure with themselves. I always try to tell them that there’s no reason to be, they’re wonderful inside and out. There’s no reason to talk about yourself that way. I’m pretty insecure myself and I try not to be. I try not to have those negative thoughts because I feel like everybody has those thoughts about themselves.

Diana continued to explain that this is a common interaction among her friends. She recognized that it was not a habit she enjoys and attempts to combat it, but it still occurs, “I try not to (talk
negatively about myself when with my friends) because then that turns into this whole session of us talking negatively about ourselves and that never gets us anywhere so that’s not good.”

**Working Out & Staying Active.** The participants were asked to describe their personal fitness habits and their fitness habits with their friends. The participants did not describe that they felt influenced by their friends to improve their bodies through physical activity. While all of the women’s exercise habits differed, all of the participants were aware of their friends’ habits in relation to staying active. Three of the women stated that their friends either worked out with them or had asked them to participate in working out with them. Two of the women did not talk about working out or staying active on their own or in conjunction with their peers. For Kelli, this is a natural activity for her friends to engage in:

Some of my friends are more (active) than others. Certain friends will go run or play basketball with me. It kind of depends on the people. Some of them are active whereas some of them are not. I think some of them are becoming more concerned as college goes on and are trying to become more active.

Unlike Kelli, Joanna does not find staying active to be a priority or a natural activity for herself to engage in. While her friends have asked her to join them when working out, Joanna shared that she never feels pressured to join in:

My roommate works out occasionally. She’ll go sometimes. She invites me and I would rather watch Netflix. If I have some down time, I’m not going to the gym. (My friends) all know that I’m lazy. They usually ask me, and say, “Okay we’ll be there if you want to join us.”

Though both Kelli and Joanna acknowledged that they were aware of their friends’ exercising habits, neither of the women expressed any concern over being pressured to join in or that it
influenced their perception of their body image.

Like Kelli and Joanna, Diana also recognized her friends’ exercising habits. Unlike the other participants though, Diana felt pressured to keep up with her friends as she described, “They don’t pressure me, but it’s within me thinking, ‘I should be working out more with them. I need to keep up with them.’” Though Diana acknowledged that her friends do not directly pressure her, she takes into consideration the habits of her friends and pressures herself to match theirs.

**Peer conversations and interactions related to body image**

Several themes were identified related to participants’ conversations and interactions with peers. These questions allowed participants to share information about the conversations and interactions they had with their friends related to body image perception. Though the participants described many different common conversations and interactions that they had with their same-sex peers, three commons themes emerged as the most prevalent among all four participants which included clothing choices, eating habits, and working out and staying active.

**Clothing Choices.** Each of the women described various interactions that they had with their friends that involved making clothing choices, but most commonly the women described conversations and interactions they had when shopping with their peers. The participants discussed asking their peers for opinions on their clothing choices when out shopping. The majority of the women expressed that they were looking for honest opinions on their clothing choices, but how they described the honesty their friends shared differed from positive to negative. Joanna described how her friends talk with one another about clothing:

We’re all very honest on how we think things look on each other. We’re also very aware that each of us has a different style. We have to think, “well, I don’t like it, but it
definitely looks good on you. It’s something you would wear.”

Kelli described her conversations, but contradicted herself when describing the attitude and opinions of these conversations. She shared, “More often than not, we’ll be saying, ‘oh it doesn’t necessarily flatter you,’ or, ‘you could find something better.’ We tend to build each other up in that sense.” Diana also shared information on the conversations she and her friends had while shopping for clothes. “(I’m asking) ‘does this look good on me? Do I look fat in this?’ Fun stuff that every girl would ask.” Though multiple participants described asking for honest feedback, Diana was the only one to describe conversations like these which she assumed was common among women.

When describing their shopping conversations, the women shared that they focus more on the clothes and less on how the person’s body looks. As Kelli described:

More often than not, we’re saying things like, “I would never wear that,” or, “that’s really cute,” or, “that’s too expensive.” Typically it’s focused on the clothes. When we try on clothes, we’re not typically in the same dressing room. We’ll ask each other to help zip something up. If something doesn’t fit, we’ll go put it back and not really talk about it.

Grace also shared that her friends focus on clothing choices, but not body image:

I think a lot of my friends think I have really good style. They always say that they wish they could wear my clothes and that I’m a good person. The way they react to the things that I say or do makes me feel like they’re not judging me in a negative way.

**Eating.** When asked to describe where they eat and what they eat, all four women shared that they most often are eating at the dining hall on campus. All four women live on campus, and a stipulation of living on campus at Grand State University is having a meal plan. The four women had differing meal plans, but all frequent the various dining halls at Grand State often.
When asked to describe what was occurring when the women were eating with their friends, some described what their eating habits were like. Diana shared, “I mean, I don’t eat super bad. I always have fruits and vegetables and stuff like that, but I feel like I could eat a little bit healthier like them.” Kelli was especially willing to share when discussing food and describing what she enjoys eating:

We eat whatever we’re hungry for. I love Panda Express, and every time I go home, I get it. My friends will go with me because we love it. I love to bake brownies. We will eat a ton of brownies. I can be picky, but if it’s food that I like, I’ll eat it. I don’t really care who I’m with.

Like Diana, Joanna was aware of her eating habits in comparison to her friends. She explained, “My roommate and I will literally eat just about anything. I try to eat healthy. My friends don’t so much. There’s a lot of McDonalds and fast food going on when they’re eating.”

As the women were elaborating on what they eat, they were also asked to describe what was occurring when they ate. All four women included their friends in their description, sharing that they often ate with their friends. Diana explained, “I usually eat with the same group of people for lunch on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and for dinner, it’s whoever is around.” Kelli also shared that she ate with people often:

I love to eat. I’m not really picky. I’ll eat in front of anyone. If I’ve never met you, I’ll still eat in front of you and probably look like a slob and not care. I have no issues eating in front of my friends. It’s natural for me to be eating with other people.

When asked to describe what was being discussed, none of the women shared that their conversations were centered on food, but instead the women used it as an opportunity to check-in with their peers. As Grace explained:
We’ll talk about classwork or sometimes we talk about the upcoming week of meetings or different things we have going on within the (sorority) house or student senate. We will be feeling out each other’s schedules so we can see when we can meet up. It’s usually talking about scheduling.

Joanna shared a similar description saying, “We’ll just sit around and catch up a little bit.”

Most women did not express any concern over what others thought of them while eating with others. Joanna shared, “I eat what I want. (I feel) good. Wonderful.” Kellie also expressed little concern saying, “I don’t really care who I’m with. Food takes precedence; that’s how my mind works. It’s natural for me to be eating with other people.” As Grace explained, “I don’t feel intimidated or feel like I’m being judged or anything. I just feel like I’m eating.” Unlike the other participants, Diana acknowledged concern over her friends’ eating habits in comparison to hers: “A lot of my friends eat super duper healthy, and I try to, but usually I’ll get something bad for me.”

**Working Out & Staying Active.** The women were asked to describe their fitness habits as well as their friends’ habits. As previously shared, all of the women were aware of their friends’ habits in relation to staying active, but not all participants expressed that working out was a priority or topic of conversation for their friends or themselves. Participants were asked whether or not they worked out with their friends. As Kelli shared, it was a common thing her friends and her enjoyed doing:

Typically, it’s not uncommon to be working out when we’re together or doing something active, but I don’t think that there’s necessarily pressure. We’re not saying, “Oh, I think we’re getting fat!” We just turn to sports when we’re looking for something to do because we played sports growing up.
Not all of the women enjoyed working out or being active with their peers. When asked whether or not she worked out with her friends, Grace explained, “I have one friend (who is active), but we don’t work out together. Most of my friends don’t go work out with me. I kind of like doing it alone because it’s a stress relieving time.” Diana had a similar response sharing:

No (I don’t work out with my friends) because I usually like to do my own set thing. For example, if I’m running, I like to run by myself, or if I’m doing something else, I like to do it by myself. It’s easier and I feel like I can just do my own thing without having to worry about someone else.

One participant chooses not to engage in physical activity regardless of whether or not her friends ask her to join them. As Joanna described, her friends will invite her to the gym, but she chooses not to join with them: “They all know that I’m lazy. They usually ask me, and say, “Okay, we’ll be there if you want to join.”

Summary

Themes found during interviews with participants related to body image and same-sex peer relations were explored in Chapter IV. Different themes emerged in relation to the two research questions. In regards to the influence of collegiate women’s same-sex peers on their perception of body image, weight loss, clothing choices, attitude, and working out and staying active emerged as primary themes. Clothing choices, eating, and working out and staying active were the most prevalent themes related to peer conversations and interactions related to body image. Chapter V will provide a summary of the previous chapters in addition to providing recommendations for Student Affairs professionals and suggestions for future research on the topic of same-sex peer influence in relation to body image perception for undergraduate women.
Chapter V

Discussion, Recommendations, & Conclusion

The current study used a qualitative approach to gain information regarding the influence of same-sex peers on female undergraduates' body image perception. The primary purpose of this study was to understand what impact peers have on undergraduate women's body image perception through the conversations and interactions they have with one another. A secondary purpose of this study was to provide different recommendations for creating a campus environment supportive of positive peer relations among undergraduate women that promote positive body image. As body image can serve as an important part of a woman’s identity, it is important to understand how peers can potentially influence her body image. The following research questions were developed to better understand this: (1) In what ways do collegiate women’s same-sex peers influence their perception of body image? (2) How do collegiate women describe their conversations and interactions with peers related to their body image? Throughout Chapter V, the results found in the current study are discussed and recommendations are provided for Student Affairs professionals in addition to recommendations for future research.

Discussion

Results of the present study were shared in Chapter IV. Themes were explored through each research question as the result of a comparison of the four participants’ interviews that were conducted by the researcher. These themes included weight loss, clothing choices, attitude, working out and staying active, and eating. Previous literature has discussed the significant role that peers can play in an undergraduate woman’s body image perception (Shomaker & Furman, 2007; Wasylkiw & Williamson, 2013). The four women who shared their stories did not identify
that their peers had a significant impact on their individual body image perception. Discussion of these results will be explored through four categories: maturity of participants, peer pressure and social comparison, social norms and behaviors, and social eating and on-campus living.

**Maturity of Participants.** As undergraduate women progress throughout their collegiate career, they mature and develop over time. While women develop over time, how they are influenced by their peers will change. Each of the participants of this study was in their third year at the institution and between the ages 20-21. None of the participants shared that their same-sex peers played a significant role in how they viewed themselves in terms of body image perception. This could be explained through student developmental theory. Carol Gilligan (1982) explained that, as a woman matures, her moral reasoning reaches a point where she takes into consideration the needs of others while balancing her own needs. Knowing that the participants are in their third year at Grand State University, the lack of peer influence on their individual body image perception could be explained by this. The women’s maturity level may lead them to be better able to balance the input of their peers in comparison to their own individual needs when it comes to their body image perception. Theorist Marcia Baxter Magolda (1992) also helps provide an explanation toward understanding the women’s maturity level and the influence of their peers. Baxter Magolda explains that throughout a student’s development, students seek out different sources of authority which can include peers. If viewed as a source of authority, a woman may seek out that authority to help define their body image perception. If the participants’ peers viewed themselves in regards to their body image perception in a negative manner, the women may have overtime rejected them as a source of authority and define their own beliefs and definitions in regards to their perception of body image.

**Peer Pressure.** Throughout each of the interviews, the women were asked in various
capacities if at any time they felt pressured by their peers to engage in certain behaviors. None of
the women shared that their same-sex friends ever intentionally pressured them into a certain
behavior that impacted their body image perception. As the women described their friends, each
shared what characteristics they had in common. Whether they were members of the same
sorority, held the same job as a resident assistant, or enjoyed running half marathons together, all
of the women described their friends in a way that made them seem like homogenous peer
groups. As Tolson and Urberg (1993) explain, people have a tendency to choose to surround
themselves with others that resemble them in a variety of ways whether by physical makeup or
interests. It is when their peers are dissimilar to them, whether in their eating habits or clothing
choices, that women may likely feel more pressured to adopt the behaviors and interests different
from their typical behavior (Tolson & Urberg, 1993). This was not the case with the participants
of this study. A couple of the women shared a dissonance between their friends’ choices whether
in the food choices they make or how often they find themselves engaging in physical activity.
Though these differences were present, only one participant shared that perceived pressure to
change her habits to match those of her friends. As she explained though, this was an internalized
pressure and was not coming directly from her peers. This lack of peer influence could be due to
the fact that these women are at a point in their development where peers no longer serve as a
significant source of influence.

**Social Norms and Behaviors.** Same-sex peers can significantly influence a woman’s
body image perception through the social behaviors they encourage and practice (Salk &
Englen-Maddox, 2011). The participants were asked a variety of questions that covered the
various ways that their same-sex peers could potentially influence their body image including
conversational, eating, and exercising habits in addition to clothing choices. Each of the women
was aware of her friends’ behaviors whether they differed from her own or not. Often these social behaviors included things such as fat talk where women engage in conversations that involve either positive or negative comments about their appearance, desire to lose weight, or dieting techniques (Nichter & Vuckoi, 1994). Often women may feel pressured into participating in these types of conversations with their friends regardless of whether or not they wish to, but none of the women shared that they engaged in these types of conversations. Diana was the only participant to describe times when her friends engaged in fat talk conversations, but she recognized that these conversations were not healthy and she always tried to deter her peers from engaging in such conversations. Other participants brought up how their friends may discuss wanting to engage in dieting/weight loss habits, but none of the women believed that their friends expected them to engage in the same type of behaviors. Interestingly, when describing the conversations about clothing choices whether while shopping or preparing for an evening out, the women shared that all of the conversations were focused on the clothing instead of the women’s physical make-up. Because of this, shopping and getting ready together were seen as fun opportunities to socialize with friends instead of a negative experience that made the women question how they perceived their body image. These participants did not describe any social behaviors with their friends that made them feel negatively towards their bodies. The participants also did not share information regarding feeling pressured to engage in these social behaviors with their peers. Part of this could be explained by the fact that all of the women overall had a positive sense of self in regards to their body image and many of their peer groups did as well. With less harbored negativity towards themselves, the participants may be less likely to be influenced by these social behaviors in comparison to those women who do have a negative perception of body image.
**Social Eating and On-Campus Living.** All of the women who participated in this study live in a residence hall at Grand State University. As a stipulation of living on-campus at Grand State, all residents must have a dining meal plan, and all of the women shared that they regularly ate in the dining halls on campus. For some college women, going to dinner or staying in to eat dinner with friends may not be a regular activity, especially if they live off campus; however, the women in this study indicated that it was seen as a fun social opportunity. For the women who participated in this study, eating was a normalized behavior with their friends because most meals were eaten with their peers in the dining hall. When asked to describe the conversations that the women had with their peers over a meal, many of the women viewed this as a social time to catch up with their friends, see what they had been up to, and make plans to spend time together later. None of the participants shared that their conversations were centered around their food choices with the exception of expressing that they were hungry. The women did not express any discomfort with eating around their friends as well. Much of this could be because on-campus living creates an environment where students eating together is a normalized activity free of anxiety and judgment related to body image.

In addition to describing their eating habits, the women were also asked to describe what life was like in their residence halls. Participants who lived in all-female communities were strategically selected because these communities offer a known consistent interaction between a woman and her same-sex peers. Dependent upon the community, the women may be forced to interact with other women in their communities in a way that may impact their body image such as walking to the bathroom in a towel or trading clothes with her neighbor. When the women were asked to describe their residence hall community, all described it as a positive living experience. While some admitted they did not know all of the women in their community, all
shared that they were comfortable in their communities and did not feel like their perception of body image was impacted by their living situation. Similarly to eating, living on-campus may encourage women to be less inclined to compare themselves to their peers in relation to their body image than women who live off campus because they are consistently interacting with their peers through behaviors that could impact their body image.

**Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals**

Women of a variety of ages can fall victim to unrealistic messages about their outward appearance from a variety of outlets which can include their peers (Stice, Maxfield, & Wells, 2003). Many of these messages can and often do influence a woman’s perception of body image in a negative manner. Traditional-aged college women may be negatively influenced by their peers as they are in a time of crucial identity formation. The women in this study did not provide any indication of being negatively or positively influenced by their same-sex peers. This may be partially understood by looking at the participants’ ages, and their maturity may play a part in how they are influenced by their same-sex peers. Knowing this, it is important that Student Affairs professionals take into consideration efforts that can be made to foster positive peer relations among women on their campuses as well as promote positive body image. This begins by promoting health and wellness; for example, student affairs professionals can provide healthy food options in the dining hall, improve recreational facilities and activities, and have resident assistants create wellness initiatives within their living communities.

Student Affairs professionals can encourage healthy physical habits in their student populations. A key to feeling better about oneself in regards to body image is taking care of oneself physically. By providing more health and wellness opportunities and encouraging students to take advantage of these, Student Affairs professionals assist women to develop a
healthier body image. Student Affairs professionals can help indirectly promote positive peer relations and body image among women which allow students opportunities to more easily incorporate health and wellness into their daily routines and social activities on campus.

Student Affairs professionals have the opportunity to directly influence positive peer relations and body image among their undergraduate women as well. Through programming efforts by various offices, including residence life, fraternity and sorority programs, campus recreation, and student activities, women can be encouraged to serve as a positive influence for their same-sex peers. These programming efforts can cover a wide variety of topics that do not have to directly relate to body image, but can still be impactful in promoting positive relations. For example, an all-female residence hall can promote women’s empowerment through passive and active programs which can encourage pride in the female gender in addition to supporting other women. A sorority on campus could also serve as a positive influence and educator through a body acceptance campaign where women encourage one another to accept themselves and appreciate diversity amongst members of the group based on healthy realistic perspectives. By encouraging students to create simple, but meaningful programs such as these, Student Affairs professionals can encourage a healthier sense of self regarding body image perception and help foster a campus community that encourages positive peer relationships.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The following recommendations are made for future study of undergraduate female body image perception and the influence of same-sex peers.

**Participants.** The participants of this study were a fairly homogenous peer group. All women were in their third year at the institution, lived on campus, and were involved in some capacity on campus. This could help explain why there was not a significant difference in the
stories that each of the women shared. As explained previously, maturity may have played a factor in the women’s lack of influence by their peers. Future research could involve interviewing participants who are of varying ages. By comparing underclassmen to upperclassmen, it could be better understood if maturity is a significant factor in peer influence. Future researchers could also take into consideration the differences between living off-campus and on-campus. The lifestyles of women who live off campus compared to on campus could vary greatly and have a potential impact on peer influence in relation to body image perception.

**Institution Type.** Grand State University is a not residential campus. There is a one-year live-on requirement for traditional-age students. All of the participants in this study had chosen to live on campus past this requirement, which may have positively influenced their body image perception. Future researchers could compare women from non-residential campuses to those at residential campuses with some sort of live-on requirement. As residential life departments provide added programming efforts to aid in the student development process, exposure to such efforts may have an influence on an undergraduate woman’s perception of body image.

**Negative Body Image.** All of the women who participated in this study expressed generally positive outlooks on their peer relations and their body image perception. It should be noted that this is not applicable to all undergraduate women and that negative body image is prevalent among women (Cash & Fleming, 2002; Goswami et al., 2012). In future research, participants with known body image issues could be intentionally sought out to participate in a study. By studying both women with positive body image and negative body image, it could be better understood what role peers can play in a woman’s perception of body image.

**Longitudinal Study.** Discussed previously, all of the women were in their third year at Grand State University. As some women had shared, their friends and body image had changed
throughout the past few years. Their maturity level may have played a factor in their body image perception. By studying the same women over a period of time, it could be better understood how women’s body image perception can change over time.

**Conclusion**

Prior to this study, research has noted that peers can play a significant role in the way a woman views herself (Shomaker & Furman 2007; Wasylkiw & Williamson, 2013). The purpose of this study was to explore how collegiate women’s peers influence their perception of body image through the interactions and conversations they have with one another. The researcher sought to understand this in hopes to influence women to take action to be a positive influence for their same-sex peers in addition to influencing the development of on-campus efforts by Student Affairs professionals that support a campus climate that encourages positive body image amongst its female population. Much research prior to this study has found that peers can play a significant role in a woman’s perception of body image and that women have widespread body dissatisfaction. The participants in this study did not share that their peers had a significant influence on their body image, and generally had positive senses of self. Though this particular study did not find results consistent with previous research, it gives insight into the potential influence peers can have on a woman’s body image. Each of the women who participated in this study shared their stories, and fortunately all of them shared positive stories. This is not the case for all women though, and it is important to understand that body image can significantly impact the quality of a woman’s life. Because college students spend a significant amount of time with their peers in comparison to other time periods in their life, it is important to understand what impact they can have. Student Affairs professionals have the opportunity to create a campus community that supports and encourages positive peer relations and body image among
undergraduate women. College is a crucial identity formation period for young adults, and it is important that this identity formation be done in an environment that fosters a positive sense of self among all its students regardless of their physical make up.
References


Appendix A

• Tell me a little about yourself.
  o Where are you from?
  o What was your life like growing up?
  o Tell me about your friends when you were growing up.
  o What did you and your friends do together?
  o What is your major?
  o What are your interests? What do you enjoy doing?
  o What are you involved in on campus? Why did you choose to be involved with that?

• Can you tell me about where you live on campus?
  o Where do you live on campus?
  o Can you describe what life is like in your living community (floor)?
  o Do you have a roommate?
  o What is your relationship like with her?
  o What kinds of things do you talk about and do together?

• Describe your friend groups to me.
  o Do you have more than one friend group?
    • Which group do you spend the most time with? Why that group?
  o What drew you to your group of friends? What do you all have in common and enjoy doing together?
  o Why are you friends with these women?
  o What do you think your group looks like to others? What do you think others would say about your group?

• Describe to me the things you do with your friends.
  o **Eating.** Do you eat with your friends often? Where do you eat together? What types of food do you all eat when you’re together? When you eat together, what do you talk about? How do you feel about yourself when you’re eating with your friends?
  o **Working out.** Do you exercise/workout regularly? Do your friends? Do you work out with other people? Why or why not? Is there any pressure from your friends to work out?
  o **Shopping.** Where do you like to shop? Are these similar places to places your friends shop at? What is being talked about when you’re shopping and trying on clothes together? What do you feel like when you shop with your friends?
  o **Going out.** When you’re getting ready with your friends for a night out, what are you all talking about? What are you doing? How long does it take you all to get ready? Do you enjoy getting ready with your friends?

• Can you describe a typical day for you?
• What do you do? Who do you see?
• Describe yourself to me. What do you think of yourself?
  • How would you describe the way you look?
  • How would you describe your friends and the way they look?
  • How do you think your friends would describe you?
  • What makes you feel that way?
  • What makes you feel good about yourself? Why?
  • What makes you feel bad about yourself? Why?
• Tell me about your level of satisfaction with the way you look. What influences this level of satisfaction?
• Is there anything else you would want to share with me at this time?
Appendix B

Invitation of Participation to Students

Hello,

My name is Caitlyn Buchanan and I am a graduate student in the Department of Counseling and Student Development at Eastern Illinois University. Currently I am completing a study on undergraduate women’s body image perception under the direction of my thesis chair, Dr. Dianne Timm. The purpose of the study is to identify ways in which same-sex peers influence a woman’s perception of body image. I am interested in interviewing undergraduate women who live on campus and are currently in their junior year at Eastern. The interviews will take no more than an hour and involve answering a set of pre-determined questions, and all responses will be kept confidential.

If you wish to participate in this study or have any questions/concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone at 630.631.7497 or by e-mail cmbuchanan@eiu.edu. Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Thank you,

Caitlyn Buchanan
Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Statement of Informed Consent

This research project, *Same-sex Peer Influence on Undergraduate Body Image Perception*, is intended to explore the role that same-sex peers play in a college woman’s perception of body image. It is important that as a participant that you understand that you are being asked to participate in an interview with the researcher in a private office within a residence hall on Eastern Illinois University’s campus. This private interview will not exceed one hour in length. There are no physical risks to your health involved, but the nature of this study may bring up feelings or topics that make you uncomfortable or upset. The Counseling Center on Eastern Illinois University’s campus is free to all students.

It is the researcher’s hope that the findings from this study may help collegiate women have a better understanding as to why they view themselves in the capacity that they do. By having an understanding of the relationship between same-sex peer groups and body image perception, women can take action to be a positive influence for their peers. It is also the hope of the researcher that the findings from this student will influence the work of Student Affairs professionals and that these professionals can help create a campus community supportive of positive female peer relationships.

The interviews will be audio recorded. Only the researcher and participant will be present and participate in the interview. The recording and interview transcripts will be kept on a password protected computer of which only the researcher knows. The transcriptions will be shared with other researchers that the researcher has chosen. This will include the project thesis chair, two peers in the researcher’s graduate program, and yourself, the participant. Hard copies will be shared of the transcripts and will be returned directly to the researcher. All documents and recordings will be stored for two years after the completion of the study and will be destroyed/deleted at that point. To ensure your confidentiality, your name as a participant will be changed.

It is important that you be informed of your rights as a participant.

1. The identity of all participants will remain confidential and will not be released.
2. All data will be reported in the aggregate, without attribute to any single participant by name or other identifying information.
3. It is understood that your participation in this research project is voluntary and you will receive no compensation.
4. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

If you have any questions regarding your participation in this project, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher by email at cmbuchanan@eiu.edu or by phone at 630.631.7497. Questions regarding the administration of this project can be addressed to Dr. Dianne Timm at dtimm@eiu.edu. Any questions regarding counseling can be directed to Eastern Illinois
University's Counseling Center in the Human Services Building by phone at 217.581.3413. There office hours are Monday through Friday 8:30am-4:40 pm. For after-hours emergencies, please use their emergency phone number 217.549.6483.

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write: Institutional Review Board, Eastern Illinois University, 600 Lincoln Ave., Charleston, IL 61920. Telephone: 217.581.8576, E-mail: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu. By affixing my name to this consent form, I agree to (initial all that apply):

_______ (a) Participate in this study voluntarily;
_______ (b) Allow quotations without attribution;
_______ (c) Reserve the right to withdraw at any time;
_______ (d) Give the researcher permission to audio record my interview;
_______ (e) Decline to participate in the study.

Participant’s Signature ___________________________ Date __________

Researcher’s Signature ___________________________ Date __________