

**Amount of Influence Selected Groups
Have on the Perceived Body Image of Fifth Graders**

By

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ABSTRACT

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Although numerous studies have examined the influentialness of parents, teachers, peers, and the media regarding children and adolescents' perception of their body image, little research has been done on the influence those selected groups have on children's body-esteem. The researcher surveyed 67 fifth grade students at four different area elementary schools in and around Menomonie, Wisconsin. The researcher hypothesized that all of the selected groups would be influential to some degree with regards to how fifth graders view their body, with the media being the most influential. A Pearson r analyzed the data and indicated that there was no significant relationship between total body-esteem scores and the influence parents, teachers, same-sex peers, opposite-sex peers, and the media have on fifth graders view of their body. A Spearman rho also analyzed the data and indicated that there was no significant relationship between fifth grade males' average rankings of selected groups versus fifth grade females' average rankings of selected groups. A number of implications for this study are made as well as recommendations for further research.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page.	i
Abstract.	ii
Table of Contents.	iii
Chapter I Introduction.	1
Statement of the Problem.	5
Null Hypotheses.	6
Definition of Terms.	6
Chapter II Review of Literature.	8
Family Influences.	11
Peers.	13
The Media.	14
Teachers.	17
Conclusion.	18
Chapter III Methodology.	19
Participants.	19
Instruments.	19
Procedure.	20
Data Analysis.	21
Limitations.	21
Chapter IV Results.	23
Chapter V Summary, Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations.	27
References.	33
Appendix A.	39

CHAPTER I

Introduction

We live in a culture that is obsessed with appearance. One can look anywhere and see messages regarding thinness and body image. These messages affect children, adolescents, and adults. In our culture the “ideal” female is tall, thin, young, and has a well-proportioned body with flawless skin and beautiful white teeth. The “ideal” male is also tall, with an athletic-looking body, well-defined muscles, and no evident fat.

Research has shown that over the last several decades the weight of the ideal body image for women portrayed in the media has decreased (Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992; Morris, Cooper, & Cooper, 1989; Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, & Kelly, 1986; Turner & Hamilton, 1997). Over the last 30 years fashion models have changed to become even taller and thinner. Today the average model in the United States is 5 feet 10 inches and weighs 107 pounds; whereas, the average U.S. woman is 5 feet 3 inches and weighs 143 pounds (Levine & Hill, 1991). Many children and adolescents measure themselves against this media image of the ideal or perfect woman. It is interesting to note that fashion models weigh 23% less than the average female (Kilbourne, 1994). In fact, the “ideal body type today is unattainable by most women, even if they starve themselves. Only the thinnest 5% of women in a normal weight distribution approximate this ideal, which thus excludes 95% of the general population” (Kilbourne, 1994, p. 396).

Definitions of the ideal body size and shape vary from culture to culture. While slenderness has become a major obsession for many Americans, obesity is very much idealized in cultures such as the Polynesian and Samoan. Culture shapes our perceptions of ideal body weight and shape. Children as young as five or six are beginning to acquire

the cultural criterion used by adults for judging physical attractiveness. From early childhood our society teaches individuals that appearance is important. Children quickly learn that others will judge them by how they look. Adolescents and children are at a stage in their lives where they look to others for direction and approval. These individuals are very vulnerable to the influence of others, especially those to whom they look up to or admire.

Giarratano (1997) examined the attitudes among third through sixth graders from middle-income families. Findings showed that a large percentage of 8- to 13-year-old boys and girls wanted to be thinner and had already tried to lose weight. It is known that the way people view their body impacts their entire life. Developing a positive body image helps people see themselves as attractive and is necessary for developing a mature personal identity. People who like themselves and think about themselves in a positive way also tend to be healthier people (Giarratano, 1997).

A negative body image can have a substantial impact on one's life in a number of different ways. People with negative body images tend to have low self-esteem, try to hide their bodies by wearing baggy and drab clothing, and are vulnerable to unsafe and dramatic methods of weight loss. Individuals who view their bodies negatively are likely, in their own minds, to minimize their good qualities and maximize what they see as huge flaws in their body. These individuals also waste their time and energy weighing themselves, looking in the mirror, and ruminating about certain body parts.

Children and adolescents are very easily influenced at this stage of their life. Parents, peers, teachers, and the media all play a big part in the lives of many young children and adolescents. Children and adolescents spend a great deal of time watching

television. The average child, aged 2 to 11 years, spends almost 28 hours per week watching television, while the average teenager spends 23½ hours watching television per week (Comstock & Paik, 1991). They also look at or read magazines, listen to the radio, and look at billboard signs and other advertisements. One only has to watch five minutes of television to “understand” that people who are thin and beautiful lead successful lives, and people who are overweight are made fun of and lead unhappy lives. Kurma (as cited in Levine, 1987) found that two percent of the actresses on primetime were plump or overweight, and that thinness in actresses was positively correlated with a likable personality. The same is true for magazines or any other form of advertisement. The models portrayed are young, beautiful, and extremely thin, or tall, athletic-looking and muscular. The worship of thinness can be seen in attitudes toward overweight individuals and in the extent of people’s involvement in weight control. Everywhere one looks, there are ways “to lose the fat”.

Childhood and adolescence is a time when peer groups are very important. Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, and Muir (1999) found that children and adolescents are more likely to choose as friends those individuals who are thin or medium size. An obese child is least preferred as a playmate (King, 1997). Adolescent females are likely to be part of a clique that resembles one another with respect to body mass index, depression, and self-esteem (Paxton et al., 1999). With regards to peers of the opposite sex, little research has been done to determine the influence they have on the body image of their peers. Levine (1987) reports that studies conducted since 1970 confirm that females perceive slenderness to be the most important aspect of physical attractiveness. He states that most teenage girls, when asked about this issue, will state that “guys like thin girls.”

Parents also play a huge role in the development and influence of their child's perception of his or her body image. Many children and adolescents receive overt and covert messages from parents or other caregivers to be thin. Children learn that it is good to be thin and bad to be fat. They internalize these messages from their parents who, for most children, are their role models while growing up. Parent's evaluation of their child's body leaves a long-standing impression on that individual's self-esteem. A study conducted by Pierce and Wardle (1993) showed that parents were more willing to describe boys as too thin and girls as too fat. It is likely that these messages from parents or other caretakers are being conveyed to children and adolescents. To date, it is unknown what kind of impact this is having on children and adolescent's own perceptions of their body image.

Teachers also play a very instrumental role in the lives of young children and adolescents. The average American youth spends 900 hours a year in school. Over half of their day is spent in school. Studies show that student's perception of their teachers' appraisal of them is an important factor in their academic achievement (Parsons, Adler, & Kaczala, 1982; Phillips, 1984, 1987; Harter, 1983). Therefore, it makes sense that teachers would also be influential in terms of how children and adolescents perceive their body.

The issue of body image among children and adolescents is very important. A negative body image can lead to depression, low self-esteem, and possibly an eating disorder. Stice (1994) has found numerous studies (Costanzo & Woody, 1984; Crandall, 1988; Gordon, 1988; Irving, 1990) that suggest individuals with an eating disorder are more likely to internalize messages from parents, teachers, peers, and the media

regarding the thin-ideal body image. A number of factors have been shown that influence and impact children's perception of their body. Parents, teachers, peers, and the media have all had an influence in how one perceives his or her body. Knowing which of the selected groups has the most influence can lead to awareness prevention and education and possibly a decreased emphasis on the thin-ideal body image.

The adolescent and childhood years are critical in forming lifetime habits and beliefs. The results of this study will help determine which group or groups are influential in how young people perceive their body. The group perceived to be most influential could educate children and adolescents about a more accurate perception of body weight and size, eliminate negative statements about overweight people, and stress the fact that being thin is not necessarily ideal, nor should it be seen as a goal to be attained. And most importantly, this identified group, whether it be parents, teachers, peers, or the media, could conduct themselves in a manner that communicates self-acceptance and the irrelevance of body weight or shape.

Overall, research has shown a link between the influence of parents, teachers, peers, and the media on children's perception of their body. Therefore, the research hypothesis for this study is that all of the selected groups will be influential, with the media being the most influential for both male and female fifth graders.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of the present study is to assess the relative amount of influence that selected groups have on male and female fifth graders' perception of their body. The study will also determine the degree of correlation between fifth graders' body-esteem score as measured by The Body-Esteem Scale and their ranking of influence given to

parents, teachers, same-sex peers, opposite-sex peers, and the media. This study will focus on the following null hypotheses:

H₀₁: There is no relationship between total body-esteem scores and the ranked influentialness of parents with regards to how fifth graders view their body.

H₀₂: There is no relationship between total body-esteem scores and the ranked influentialness of teachers with regards to how fifth graders view their body.

H₀₃: There is no relationship between total body-esteem scores and the ranked influentialness of same-sex peers with regards to how fifth graders view their body.

H₀₄: There is no relationship between total body-esteem scores and the ranked influentialness of opposite-sex peers with regards to how fifth graders view their body.

H₀₅: There is no relationship between total body-esteem scores and the ranked influentialness of the media with regards to how fifth graders view their body.

H₀₆: There is no statistically significant relationship between fifth grade males' and females' average rankings of selected groups.

Definition of Terms

Anorexia Nervosa – extreme weight loss due to extremely restrictive eating and, in most cases, excessive exercise and/or purgative behavior (self-induced vomiting or laxative abuse) caused by extreme fear of weight gain and an obsession for thinness.

Body Image – the view people have of their physical selves.

Bulimia Nervosa – repeated episodes of binge eating with the frequent use of purgative behaviors (self-induced vomiting, laxative or diuretic abuse, restrictive dieting or fasting, or excessive exercise) to prevent weight gain.

Ectomorph – body types that are thin and linear.

Endomorph – body types that are fat or chubby.

Mesomorph – body types that are muscular or average.

Self-Concept – a person's perception of his or her own personality and ability.

Self-Esteem – a subjective evaluative attitude toward the self that influences moods and behavior.

Self-Worth – the value people place on themselves as contributing members of society.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

A review of the literature will include examining the different ways that family, peers, the media, and teachers influence children and adolescents' perceptions of their body. It will also include research that demonstrates how much of an impact family, peers, and the media have on children and adolescents. Finally, a review of the literature will explore the relationship between perceived body image and the positive or negative effects it has on American youth.

The body is a source of identity and self-concept for most adolescents. Kostanski and Gullone (1998) suggest that perceived body image dissatisfaction may be well established by the time an individual reaches adolescence. Their research also shows that levels of self-esteem, anxiety, and depression are positively related to perceived body image dissatisfaction. By the time a child is seven or eight years of age they have already begun to develop images of what the ideal body type looks like. A study conducted by Hill (1993) found that one in three girls wanted to be thinner and many had already started dieting.

Cash and Pruzinsky (1990) state that many people believe the body is a reflection of the self. Body image develops through society's definition of what is attractive and desirable. Cash and Pruzinsky gathered evidence that suggest male and female children and adolescents who have different body types (endomorph, mesomorph, ectomorph) receive feedback from peers that reflects the stereotypes. For example, chubby and thin children receive fewer positive peer nominations (e.g., "who is picked first for games?") and more negative nominations (e.g., "who would not make a good leader?").

Rosen, Gross, and Vara (1987) suggest there is an increased pressure from society to adhere to “ideal” physical types. This is especially true for females. Rosen et al. (1987) examined the psychological adjustment of adolescents trying to lose or gain weight. They discovered that trying to lose weight was strongly related to a negative physical self-esteem for females. The authors of the study believe that female adolescents who have negative self-perceptions may likely be the ones who are most vulnerable to today’s social pressure to be thin.

The area of body image is not new. Rosen and Ross (1968) reviewed a study done in 1953 (Secord & Jourard, 1953) and found that satisfaction with body image and satisfaction with self-concept is positively related. Since then this has been growing more so over the years. Cash, Winstead, and Janda (1985) sampled 30,000 individuals on their body-image evaluations. They found that one in four men and one in three women had negative opinions about their overall appearance. After examining age cohorts, Cash et al. (1985) found that adolescents, particularly females, reported the most negative evaluations of their appearance. Only recently has gender differences in perceived body image begun to be explored. Koff, Rierdan, and Stubbs (1990) found that females become less satisfied with their body image as they begin to mature and move away from the ideal norm. Conversely, males become more satisfied with their appearance as their bodies begin to mature and take on the ideal masculine physique, thus moving toward the ideal norm.

Families, peers, teachers, and the media all play important roles in the transmission of sociocultural messages to strive for and achieve an ideal body. Two important mechanisms, social reinforcement and imitation, are at work in perpetuating

the notion of a thin or masculine body. Kandel (1980, as cited in Stice, 1994) states that “social reinforcement is the phenomenon wherein youth internalize definitions and exhibit behaviors and values that are approved of by respected people in their environments. In contrast, imitation refers to the process where new behaviors are learned simply by observing others perform them” (p.645).

Figure stereotypes begin at an early age and affect an individual’s sense of self and body satisfaction (Staffieri, 1967). Staffieri states that adolescents who receive statements regarding body size, based on another’s perception, are likely to incorporate these perceptions into their own body image. These perceptions are likely to affect an individual’s body-esteem. Body-esteem is the affective component of body image. Mendelson and White (1982) found that body-esteem and self-esteem are correlated for children over a wide range of weight. They also found that body-esteem is correlated with relative weight. Children who are overweight had lower opinions of their body and personal appearance compared to normal-weight children. Mendelson and White (1982) suggest that children are very aware of cultural stereotypes and apply these stereotypes to themselves.

Brodie, Bagley, and Slade (1994) found that the fear of being overweight has been increasing and is affecting children as young as eight or nine. They also found that the desire to be thinner is beginning prior to adolescence. Brodie et al. (1994) concluded that preadolescent females are just as likely to be influenced by messages to be thin as adolescents.

It is obvious that today’s youth are receiving the message that the ideal image for females is thin and the ideal image for males is muscular. Female adolescents are more

likely than males to base their self-worth on physical appearance (Rosen et al., 1987). Harris (1995) suggests that these body image attitudes start at a very young age and are constantly being conveyed throughout childhood and adolescence. In order to assess which group or groups contribute to this quest for the ideal body image, family, peers, the media, and teachers will be examined.

Family Influences

The family serves as the primary socialization agent to young children and adolescents. Parents and other primary caregivers influence the way their children perceive their bodies. Parents play a role, whether overtly or covertly, in transmitting messages to their child that they need to conform to the ideal norm in society.

Many children may receive direct pressure from their parents to lose weight. Parents themselves may be overly focused on dieting and concerned with their physical attractiveness, thereby setting the example to their young son or daughter that image is everything. Rierdan and Koff (1997) report that family is a contributor to weight-related depression among early adolescent girls. Furthermore, they believe that girls in the U.S. are now being trained not only in society, but also in their own families, to adopt distorted and negative images of their body.

Children are like sponges – they absorb the information and messages surrounding them. Oftentimes parents say or do things they don't realize they're doing. All the while children are internalizing what has been said or done. A clear example of this is a study conducted by Pierce and Wardle (1993) that investigated the issue of self-esteem, parental appraisal, and body size in children. They found that children are well aware of what their parents think about their body size. They also found that fatter

girls and thinner boys had a lower self-esteem, probably due to the fact that they are far from the ideal body size. As mentioned earlier, parents were more willing to describe boys as too thin and girls as too fat.

Children often ridicule and make fun of other kids who deviate from the ideal of a thin or muscular body. Many parents want to protect their child(ren) from this teasing that can come during childhood. Parents do so by focusing on their child's body, suggesting diets and increased activity. Although parents are only trying to help, this extreme focus on their child's body weight or size may do more harm than good. Children soon learn that in order to value themselves as a person, they need to look a certain way in order to receive approval and acceptance from others.

Parents, especially mothers, may play a role in the perceived body image of their children or in dieting. Thelen and Cormier (1995) found that both sons and daughters received more encouragement from mother to lose or control their weight than they did from father. The authors further suggest that if the head female of the household places heavy emphasis on thinness and attractiveness, preoccupation with weight and dieting, and verbally encourages weight loss, the younger females in the household are more likely to diet, which can lead to the development of an eating disorder. Pike & Rodin (1991) found mothers of eating disordered girls to be more eating disordered themselves and have a history of dieting practices. These mothers further differed from mothers of girls who were not eating disordered in that they thought their daughters should lose more weight and that they were less attractive than how the girls, themselves, perceived their looks.

However well intentioned parents try to be they convey unconscious messages to

their children that appearance is important (i.e., “you need to look a certain way in order to have self-worth”). Too often parents are unaware of the power their messages regarding body image have on their children, which many times leads to damaging effects.

Peers

Childhood and adolescence is a time when the peer group is very important. It is also a time when the peer group is very influential. Trying to conform to an ideal image and at the same time finding and maintaining a peer group is not easy.

The peer group is influential in determining how one views his or her body. Stice (1994) reviewed literature suggesting that comments from friends to lose weight were often followed by an episode of dieting. Mutual role modeling and competition among friends may also play a role in encouraging their peers to diet (Paxton, Wertheim, Gibbons, Szmukler, Hillier, & Petrovich, 1991). Popularity during childhood is often determined by appearance. Adler and Adler (1998) in examining the power of the peer group, discovered children, especially girls, are learning the norms of appearance at an early age from their peers. These norms and values they develop during childhood may very well guide their future attitudes and behavior.

Children and adolescents choose as friends those individuals who conform to the ideal body image. Obese children are usually the least desired people to have as friends (Paxton et al., 1999; King, 1997). Oftentimes, children and adolescents will engage in a variety of behaviors, most of them risky, in order to be accepted into a peer group. French, Story, Downes, Resnick, and Blum (1995) suggest that many individuals who diet may also engage in high-risk behaviors (e.g., sexual intercourse, alcohol, tobacco, or

drug use) in trying to gain approval and acceptance from peers.

Other research has shown adolescents to be more concerned about weight control than such behaviors as smoking, and drinking and driving (Evans, Gilpin, Farkas, Shenassa, & Pierce, 1995). Evans et al. investigated adolescents' perceptions of their peers' health norms. They found that peer perception of weight concern begins by the age of 12. Many peers believed their female friends to be highly concerned about weight control.

Throughout childhood and adolescence, individuals do many things to be accepted. They also seek out friendships that will be accepted by others. Because this is a significant time in their young lives any comments regarding weight or appearance may very well affect them for life. Negative comments or teasing from peers can affect an individual's self-esteem, self-concept, and self-worth (Rosen et al., 1987). They are likely to remember their childhood and some may even carry these messages with them into adulthood.

The Media

People in the United States are bombarded with messages from the media. In the U.S., magazines, movies, commercials, television shows, and billboards all seem to send the same message that being thin leads to happiness and success. The images that people see in various media often have a strong influence on body image. Many messages in the media about body image suggest that in order to be successful in life, appearance is very important.

As mentioned earlier, the average child spends almost 28 hours per week watching television; the average teenager, 23½ hours. Along with that, the average child

will watch approximately 20,000 30-second commercials in a year (Adler, Lesser, Meringoff, Robertson, Rossiter, & Ward, 1980). This means that for very young children, during their most formative years, they are spending more time in front of the television than they are in the classroom.

Over the last several decades the weight of the ideal body image for women portrayed in the media has decreased. Take for example the changing shape of female fashion models. Models have become taller and their bust and hip size has decreased relative to waist size, producing a more tubular shape (Morris et al., 1989). It has also been found that American women are actually increasing in weight, while Playboy centerfolds and Miss America contestants have become thinner and thinner over the years (Wiseman et al., 1992). It can therefore be said that a great portion of society, including children and adolescents, desire the body of a person who is extremely thin.

Magazines have also portrayed the ideal of thinness. Many popular women's magazines have very thin models or spokespeople endorsing their product. Along with thin models, these magazines also have articles or advertisements giving the latest dieting tip or showing how to lose the extra weight through fast and easy exercise. Wiseman et al. (1992) found a rise in the proportion of diet, exercise, and diet/exercise articles. Their survey of magazine articles over a 30-year time period indicated an overall increase on the emphasis of weight reduction. Other studies have found that indeed, female's body image satisfaction is influenced by exposure to the thin ideal portrayed in fashion magazines. Turner and Hamilton (1997) found that being exposed to fashion magazines was related to female's greater preoccupation with being thin, dissatisfaction with their bodies, frustrations with their weight, and fear about moving away from the ideal

standard of thinness. Furthermore, preoccupation with thinness was found to heighten after looking at thin models in magazines.

Many young children and adolescents have a negative view of their body. Oftentimes, a negative body image can lead to dieting or even worse, an eating disorder, such as anorexia or bulimia. In other words, millions of girls begin dieting to be accepted. A study conducted by Field, Cheung, Wolf, Herzog, Gortmaker, and Colditz (1999) was the first to directly assess the impact of the print media on the weight and body shape beliefs of young girls in the 5th through 12th grades. The researchers found that frequent readers of fashion magazines were two to three times more likely than infrequent readers to feel that magazines influence and determine what they believe to be the ideal body shape; to exercise in order to lose weight because of a magazine article; and to diet to lose weight due to a magazine article (Field et al., 1999).

Silverstein et al. (1986) found that the current standard of attractiveness as seen in the media is slimmer for women than it is for men. Along with messages to stay slim and be in shape, they found that women receive more messages about eating than do men. They suggest that women are in a double bind; they must stay thin, but at the same time think about food and cooking.

It is obvious that the media plays a huge role in how individuals, children to adults, perceive their body. A very recent example can be found in Fiji. Traditionally, Fijian women have viewed a larger body as being more desirable than a thin one. Since Western television arrived via satellite four years ago, the occurrence of vomiting to control one's weight has increased fivefold. Specifically, shows such as *Melrose Place* and *Beverly Hills 90210* have had a negative impact on Fijian female adolescents' body

image, and cause them to feel overweight and to diet more than their peers (Petranek, 1999). From a very young age, individuals are given the message from the media that having a thin or muscular body will result in being happy and successful in life.

Futhermore, the media equates thinness as the only socially acceptable way to be.

Teachers

Little research has been done on how teachers in the classroom impact how children and adolescents perceive their body. However, it makes sense that teachers would play some role in children and adolescents' perceived body image. From grade school to junior high on into high school, kids spend about half their day in the classroom with teachers. Studies have shown that teachers are influential when it comes to perceived academic ability (Parson et al., 1982; Phillips, 1984, 1987; Harter, 1983).

A student being treated according to their physical appearance is not a new phenomenon. Adams (1977) found that teachers build expectations about their student's likely performance based on their degree of attractiveness. Research has also shown that teachers pay attention to and react more positively toward good-looking children than to unattractive children (Adams, 1977; Clifford & Walster, 1973; Martinek, 1981). It has also been found that teachers of early adolescents are more likely to rate their physically good-looking students as excelling higher in academics and athletics, and as being more attractive and socially competent, than those students found to be physically unattractive to teachers (Lerner, Kucher, East, Lerner, & Lerner, 1987).

Many students look up to teachers and regard them as role models. This may even be compounded if the child comes from a dysfunctional or broken home. The way teachers present themselves and the comments they make influence many children and

adolescents. For example, a teacher may make statements regarding a thin image or may make comments about overweight people. Children listen to what is said and what is not said and they internalize these messages. Teachers are often the ones that children and adolescents confide in. It makes sense that teachers would be influential in how one perceives his or her body, although little research could be found to support this notion.

Conclusion

As the research suggests, parents, peers, and the media are all influential to some degree in terms of how a person feels about their body. From the research it is obvious that some groups are more influential than others. The media has been most widely researched with regards to the area of body image, but that is not to say that the other groups don't play a role in how children and adolescents perceive their body.

This study will determine the degree of correlation between participant's body-esteem score and their ranking of influence given to selected groups using the Pearson product-moment coefficient of correlation. Spearman's rho will describe the relationship between fifth grade males' and females' average rankings of selected groups.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

The methodology section will include a description of the participants surveyed, as well as the instruments used in this study. It will also include a detailed description of the procedure followed in conducting this study. In addition, the data analysis and limitations of the study will be explored.

Participants

A convenience sample of sixty-seven fifth graders (35 females and 32 males) at four different area elementary schools in and around Menomonie, Wisconsin was surveyed. Only those students who had parental consent participated in the study.

Instruments

The first instrument was designed specifically for use in this study. It includes a list of selected groups: parents, teachers, same-sex peers, opposite-sex peers, and the media, and asks the participant to rank the groups from most influential to least influential (1 through 5, respectively) according to the directions. For example, participants are asked to put a “1” by the group that most influences or affects how they view their body. Because this instrument was designed solely for use in this study, no information on reliability or validity is available. A complete copy of the instrument is located in Appendix A.

The Body-Esteem Scale (Mendelson & White, 1982) is a 24-item self-report instrument that is suitable for children and adolescents (ages 7 to 11 years of age). Items included in this instrument generally reflect how a person values his or her appearance and looks and includes such items as “I’m pretty happy about the way I look”, “My looks

upset me”, and “ I wish I were thinner”. Participants are asked to circle “yes” or “no” for each of the 24 statements. The Body-Esteem Scale has construct validity and good reliability; internal consistency, split-half reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) = .83 (Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990). No test-retest information is available for this particular survey instrument.

Procedure

A phone call was placed to principals at area elementary schools informing them of the nature of this study and asking them if their school would be willing to participate in this study. For those principals that were willing to have their fifth grade classes participate in the study the researcher distributed a packet of information to these area elementary schools. Included in the packet was a letter addressed to parents informing them of the nature of this study and two copies of an informed consent form allowing their child to participate in the study. Letters and informed consent forms were sent home only with fifth graders. All of the principals asked to review the survey materials before agreeing to have their school participate in the study. The researcher dropped off the letter to the parents with the informed consents and the survey instruments for the principal to review. Adequate time was allowed for reviewing the materials and then a follow-up phone call was made.

Dates and times were set up to distribute the survey materials at a time that was convenient for both the teachers and the fifth grade students. Those children allowed to take part in the study were asked to rank order select groups in terms of the influence they have on them with regards to body image perception. They were then asked to answer each of the 24 statements by circling either “yes” or “no”. The survey took

approximately 10 to 15 minutes to administer.

Data Analysis

For the purpose of this study, a Pearson r was calculated to assess the correlation between total body-esteem and each of the five selected groups' perceived amount of influence. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed on the ranks given to parents, teachers, same-sex peers, opposite-sex peers, and the media. A Spearman's ρ was calculated to assess the correlation between fifth grade males' and females' average rankings of the selected groups. Spearman correlation coefficient is a commonly used measure of correlation between two ordinal variables. The values of each variable are usually ranked from smallest to largest. In this case, however, they were ranked from largest to smallest due to the most influential group being given a ranking of "1".

Limitations

The following limitations apply to this study:

- 1) In the Body-Esteem Scale there is no scale measuring for truthfulness. It was assumed that all participants responded to the 24 statements as honestly as possible.
- 2) There is a possibility that the sample obtained from the four area elementary schools may not be representative of fifth graders in the United States. This should be taken into consideration before generalizing the results of this study to all fifth graders.
- 3) Because this was a sample of convenience, approximately 40% of the students didn't participate in the study. Students either did not return the informed consent form or their parents did not allow them to participate in the study.

- 4) One of the instruments used to gather data for this study was evaluated in the original study. No other studies were found assessing the reliability or validity of the Body-esteem Scale.

Despite these limitations, the current study can be used as the basis for additional research examining body-esteem and the influence of selected groups on an individual's perceived body image.

CHAPTER IV

Results

The following sections will convey the results of the study in relation to the null hypotheses. After evaluating the data, two participant's results were removed due to not ranking the selected groups as directed with a "1" through a "5".

Ho₁: There is no relationship between total body-esteem scores and the ranked influentialness of parents with regards to how fifth graders view their body.

A Pearson r was calculated to assess the relationship between total body-esteem scores and the degree of ranked influence parents have in terms of how fifth graders view their body. There was no statistically significant correlation between total body-esteem scores and the ranking of influence given to parents, $r = -.019$, $p < .05$ (see Table 1).

Ho₂: There is no relationship between total body-esteem scores and the ranked influentialness of teachers with regards to how fifth graders view their body.

A Pearson r was calculated to assess the relationship between total body-esteem scores and the degree of ranked influence teachers have in terms of how fifth graders view their body. There was no statistically significant correlation between total body-esteem scores and the ranking of influence given to teachers, $r = -.118$, $p < .05$ (see Table 1).

Ho₃: There is no relationship between total body-esteem scores and the ranked influentialness of same-sex peers with regards to how fifth graders view

their body.

A Pearson r was calculated to assess the relationship between total body-esteem scores and the degree of ranked influence same-sex peers have in terms of how fifth graders view their body. There was no statistically significant correlation between total body-esteem scores and the ranking of influence given to same-sex peers, $r = .017$, $p < .05$ (see Table 1).

Ho₄: There is no relationship between total body-esteem scores and the ranked influentialness of opposite-sex peers with regards to how fifth graders view their body.

A Pearson r was calculated to assess the relationship between total body-esteem scores and the degree of ranked influence opposite-sex peers have in terms of how fifth graders view their body. There was no statistically significant correlation between total body-esteem scores and the ranking of influence given to opposite-sex peers, $r = -.046$, $p < .05$ (see table 1).

Ho₅: There is no relationship between total body-esteem scores and the ranked influentialness of the media with regards to how fifth graders view their body.

A Pearson r was calculated to assess the relationship between total body-esteem scores and the degree of ranked influence the media has in terms of how fifth graders view their body. There was no statistically significant correlation between total body-esteem scores and the ranking of influence given to the media, $r = .150$, $p < .05$ (see

Table 1).

Table 1: Correlation between total body-esteem scores and the degree of ranked influence selected groups have in terms of how fifth graders view their body.

	N	Body Image (N=65)	
		r	p
Parents	65	-.019	.879
Teachers	65	-.118	.351
Same-sex peers	65	.017	.895
Opposite-sex peers	65	-.046	.715
Media	65	.150	.234

Ho₆: There is no statistically significant relationship between fifth grade males' and females' average rankings of selected groups.

A Spearman rho was calculated to assess the relationship between fifth grade males' average rankings of selected groups and fifth grade females' average rankings of selected groups. There was no statistically significant relationship between males' and females' average rankings of selected groups, $r_s = .70$, $p < .05$ (see Table 2). Table 2 reports the average ranking given to parents, teachers, same-sex peers, opposite-sex peers, and the media by fifth grade males and females.

Table 2: Mean ranking of selected groups.

	Parents	Teachers	Same-sex peers	Opposite-sex peers	Media	r_s (n=5)
Females (N=33)	1.52	3.52	2.09	3.94	3.91	.70
Males (N=32)	1.63	3.53	2.75	3.03	4.06	

Overall, the results of this study show no significant relationship between total body image scores and the degree of influence selected groups have on fifth graders view of their body. The results also found no significant relationship between males' and females' average rankings of the selected groups.

CHAPTER V

Summary, Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Summary

This study assessed the relationship between body image, or body-esteem, and the degree of influence selected groups have on fifth graders' perceived view of their body. For purposes of this study, parents, teachers, same-sex peers, opposite-sex peers, and the media were chosen as the groups that were to be ranked as being influential to fifth graders. Overall, a review of the literature has shown parents, teachers, peers, and the media to differentially influence children's perception of their body. All of the groups reviewed have been shown to influence, either overtly or covertly, the way children and adolescents view their body (Pierce & Wardle, 1993; Paxton et al., 1991; Turner & Hamilton, 1997; Field et al., 1999; Lerner et al., 1987).

The vast majority of research pertaining to body image and children has examined the role of the media. There are various depictions of body image in magazines and on T.V. Individuals who adhere to the thin ideal body image are given positive connotations and those who are overweight or deviate from the "norm" are given negative connotations. The role that parents and the peer group play in children's lives has also been examined. Parents are influential in their children's lives from the day they are born. As children get older their friends become influential. Children who are overweight or underweight are often made fun of and ridiculed. Children spend the majority of their young lives in the classroom. However, little research has been done examining the degree to which teachers impact the body-esteem level of children and adolescents.

Body-esteem was assessed using the Body-Esteem Scale developed by Mendelson and White (1982). No instrument was found that asked participants to rank order selected groups according to how influential they were when they thought about how they viewed their body. For purposes of this study, an instrument was developed for students to rank order the selected groups.

Conclusions

The hypothesis that all of the selected groups will be influential, with the media being the most influential for both male and female fifth graders was not supported. All of the groups were influential to some degree. The media, however, was ranked as being the least influential with male fifth graders and the second to least influential with female fifth graders. It is possible that fifth grade is still too young of a grade to be internalizing messages from the media. Parents may also be monitoring the television programs that fifth graders are watching or the magazines they are reading. A final speculation as to why the hypothesis was not supported may have to do with the geographical location of the participants in the study. Participants were attending schools in cities that had populations between 10,000 and 18,000 people. It is possible that students in smaller cities are “sheltered” from media programs and magazines that portray the thin ideal body image.

No significant correlation was found between total body-esteem scores and each of the five selected groups. There are a variety of reasons as to why a significant relationship was not found. Parents were ranked as being the most influential for both male and female fifth graders. Some individuals who ranked parents as being the most influential of the five groups had a low body-esteem score. Others who ranked parents as

being the most influential had a high body-esteem score. It is possible that children are receiving different messages at home. For instance, some children may be receiving the message from their parents that size doesn't matter. These children are told they look good regardless of their body weight. Other children may be receiving messages regarding thinness or may be criticized because of what they weigh or look like. Just as everyone is a unique human being, all parents have a variety of parenting styles and approaches. Some of which may be very harmful to children.

Although none of the groups were significantly correlated with total body-esteem scores, many of the selected groups were significantly correlated with each other. For example, a significant correlation at the 0.01 level was found between the media and parents, the media and teachers, teachers and parents, opposite-sex peers and parents, same-sex peers and teachers, opposite-sex peers and teachers, and opposite-sex peers and same-sex peers. One possible explanation as to why the results were not significant could be that the groups themselves were so highly correlated with each other that it was difficult to assess their relationship with total body-esteem scores individually.

There was also found to be no significant relationship between males' and females' average rankings of the selected groups. Both groups ranked parents as being most influential and same-sex peers as being second most influential. The average rankings differed after that. In order for the results to be significant, because n was small ($n = 5$ pairs), a minimum correlation of $r_s = .90$ was needed. Therefore, the results suggest that males and females differed on their average rankings of who is influential in terms of how they view their body.

Implications

These findings have implications for mental health professionals as well as the five selected groups discussed in this study. Even though the results of this study were not significant, the five groups can conduct themselves in a way that promotes acceptance of every body shape and size. Parents and same-sex peers were ranked as being most influential for both male and female fifth graders. How parents and same-sex peers act and what they say has an impact on fifth graders. As with all the groups, these two especially need to conduct themselves in a manner that communicates self-acceptance and the irrelevance of body weight or shape.

Parents could educate children about a more accurate perception of body weight and size. The media, parents, teachers, and peers could eliminate negative statements about overweight people, and stress the fact that being thin is not necessarily ideal, nor should it be seen as a goal to be attained.

This study also has implications for mental health professionals. When working with families, the counselor can emphasize the importance of acceptance between the parent-child relationship. School counselors can work with teachers, parents, and peers in educating them about the harmful effects that a negative body image can have on an individual.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations can be made from the literature review and from the findings of research presented in this study. It is recommended that future research examine the role that other groups play in influencing body image in children. Along with examining various other groups, future research should also examine more closely

the role that parents and same-sex peers play in the lives of children and adolescents.

This study also raises some questions about the relationship between body-esteem and the level of influence that certain groups have on children. Many of the fifth graders surveyed have a very low body-esteem. Many surveyed also have a very high body-esteem. These children ranked one of the five groups as being most influential for a reason. The question then is what is contributing to the development of a low body-esteem or the development of a high body-esteem. Researchers may want to examine how big a role the group ranked as being most influential is playing in these children's lives. Future research could examine body-esteem and the factors influencing the way children view their body. For example, open-ended questions may be useful in finding out other factors that contribute to the development of body-esteem.

Future research may also examine more closely the different factors that contribute to a high or low body-esteem for males versus females. It is possible that factors that play a part in the development of body-esteem for males may be very different than those factors that play a role for females. Comparing what and who is influential for males and females is needed in order to minimize the notion of a thin ideal body image.

Finally, more research is needed in the area of body-esteem in relation to children. Childhood is a critical period in a person's life. The development of a low body-esteem in childhood can have detrimental effects on an individual's entire life. More research needs to be conducted that examines the affect a high or low body-esteem has on children. It is suggested that research be done with children as young as seven or eight. An interesting finding in this study showed fifth graders' body-esteem scores to range

from a 4 to a 24. All of the groups were ranked as being influential to varying degrees with different children. It is important that future research address the relationship between the different body-esteem levels and the degree of influence specific groups have on children's perception of their body.

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Appendix A

Read through the 5 groups listed below. Rank the groups from most influential to least influential according to the directions listed below:

Please put a “1” by the group that **most** influences or affects how you view your body.

Please put a “2” by the group that is the **second most** influential in terms of how you view your body.

Put a “3” by the group that is next most influential.

Continue by putting a “4” next to the group that is **second to least** influential in terms of how you view your body.

And finally, put a “5” next to the group that influences you or affects you the **least** in terms of how you view your body.

If you have any question please feel free to raise your hand and the researcher will help answer your question(s).

Parents _____

Teachers _____

Same-sex peers _____

Opposite-sex peers _____

The Media _____
(Television, magazines, movies, etc.)