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Breaking the Silence: The Impact of Body Diversity in Media Targeted Towards Young Girls

"I hate seeing fat girls on TV or in movies, because the only way the world seems to be okay with putting a fat person on camera is if they're miserable with themselves or if they're the jolly best friend, ("Dumplin")". Fifty percent of Americans know someone who has suffered from an eating disorder. The third most common chronic illness among children 10-19 years old is anorexia. Ninety-five percent of all those afflicted with eating disorders are within the age range of 12-25, and ¼ of college-aged women engage in binging and purging as a weight-management technique. So why are eating disorders pushed to the side, and sometimes even glorified in the media? Why is the pursuit of the 'perfect body' forced onto young people, specifically young girls? A lack of positive representation of diverse, female bodies in media targeted towards young girls has resulted in a dangerous standard of thinness that encourages young women to change themselves by engaging in self-destructive behaviors that often result in body dysmorphia or eating disorders.

So what are ED's (eating disorders) and body dysmorphia? What is the mental illness that plagues "up to 24 million people of all ages…" ("Eating Disorder Fact Sheet")? Body image is something that everyone has, whether it be positive or negative. "Body image refers to the way a person perceives their own physical appearance and how that perception affects their sense of self-worth. Body Image not only addresses how one looks, but also how one feels and acts in response to their perceived appearance." ("Body Image"). Some are more sensitive to their own

body image, and this sensitivity and hyperfixation on looks can negatively manifest as disordered eating or full-blown eating disorders. It is important to note that disordered eating and eating disorders are not the same thing, although they share some similarities. "[People] may not have an eating disorder but could still be at risk of having disordered eating symptoms which could affect [them] mentally and physically." ("Eating Disorders vs Disordered Eating"). The line between disordered eating and eating disorders is thin, but many adolescents find themselves stuck in between bad and worse. Disordered eating can include "yo-yo dieting", "weight fluctuations", "rigid exercise programs", an unhealthy obsession or preoccupation with "food, body image, and exercise", and the use of "exercise, food restriction, fasting, purging, diet pills, or laxative to compensate for 'excessive' eating". While disordered eating habits themselves are not professionally recognized as eating disorders, those afflicted with disordered eating symptoms are at an increased chance of developing a serious eating disorder than their unaffected counterparts. These negative feelings towards food and exercise typically stem from a 'disgust' or discontent with one's body, whether those feelings are from bullying, familial pressure, or unattainable social media standards. "Body dissatisfaction can begin early in life as many children and adolescents report negative body issues. The media, parents, and peers influence how young people perceive themselves… pressure to have a certain body type has led children as young as seven to engage in dieting behavior." ("Body Image"). With the seeds of body dissatisfaction being planted at extremely young ages, a new phenomenon arises: body dysmorphia.

"Negative body image can lead to Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), a mental health condition in which a persons' preoccupation with their appearance creates overwhelming feelings of shame, guilt, and self-hatred." ("Body Image"). This disorder can even result in

warped perceptions of one's body, and can become extremely dangerous when individuals with anorexia can perceive themselves as 'fat' and inspire them to strive to lose even more weight, despite the fact that they are already extremely malnourished. The constant threat of being 'too big' or 'too small' that women fight everyday can result in dangerous habits that may lead to serious health complications, whether those be physical or mental.

While most Americans are aware of the misconceptions surrounding eating disorders, (i.e., anorexia is all about starvation, binge eaters are overweight) it's not always so easy to identify those that are burdened with EDs. The numerous mental disturbances caused by an obsession with food or appearance can lead to other mental health challenges, such as depression and anxiety: "People with the most severe eating disorders are more likely to have symptoms of depression and low-self esteem," (Wexler). But here's the catch: although eating disorders can cause and/or increase negative feelings and perceptions of ones' self worth, "depression and stress… are considered the leading causes of eating disorders," (Wexler). In consequence, low self-esteem causes eating disorders, but eating disorders cause low self-esteem. A positive feedback loop of poor mental health and a manifestation of unhealthy eating habits is the perfect trap for unsuspecting teens desperate to simply 'lose weight'. Young women specifically are disproportionately affected by eating disorders, as "between 85% and 95% of people who develop anorexia or bulimia are women," (Wexler). An increased social pressure that is forced on women to fit into specific beauty standard categories of 'thin' or 'curvy' allows more women, especially young girls, to fall into the jaws of using food as a punishment. But how are women targeted by ED's? Eating disorders can't go out looking specifically for women… Right? "Women's Body Esteem is big business. Billions of dollars are spent on the 'weight loss industry' yearly. That industry is solely dependent on women's self-hatred. Women are reduced

to size, told to be less, told to shed big chunks of themselves for acceptance," (Anderberg). This infamous 'diet culture' consists of miracle pills, workout programs sold by MLMs, and overpriced recipes for meals that are similar to cardboard in both looks and taste. Models, such as the Victoria Secret Angels, openly discuss their harmful diets and workout regimes that include working out for hours a day and going on liquid cleanses before runways in order to 'drop a few pounds'. By placing these women on pedestals and mocking anyone who is a larger size than them, large corporations begin to normalize life threatening lifestyles that result in higher rates of depression and anxiety just to sell products. "We are being brainwashed to hate our bodies so that we can buy unnecessary products to remedy them, and waste endless hours on artificial beauty," (Anderberg), states female journalist Kirsten Anderberg as she describes how all of the women who attended her 'body esteem for women' workshop we all stereotypically beautiful women: "The enrollees were all young, blonde women," (Anderberg). Companies don't see the agony of the children that they are marketing their products to, only profit. The stream of emaciated women, crash diets, and plastic surgery content never stops, and children are being exposed to these harmful ideas everyday. "Ninety-five percent of those who have eating disorders are between the ages of 12 and 25," ("Eating Disorder Signs and Symptoms"). Eating disorders are harmful mental illnesses that need to be taken seriously, as they are targeting the most vulnerable demographic: youth.

  While the negative messages being sent towards young girls in the media have already been discussed, the negative portrayal of plus sized women in film and television has not been. *Mean Girls* is often described as a 'classic comedy' and a movie that 'inspires young women to be themselves', yet it contains messages that are triggering and simply serve to affirm negative emotions surrounding food and body image. One of the main protagonists in the film(Cady)

gives her enemy(Regina) 'Kalteen Bars', an imaginary brand of nutrition bars that assists in weight gain, in an attempt to get Regina to gain weight as a form of revenge. She convinces Regina to consume the bars by telling her that the bars "just burn up all your carbs" ("Mean Girls"). Regina snatches the bar from Cady and states for the second time in the movie "I really want to lose three pounds". The motive behind getting Regina to "unknowingly eat 5,000 calories a day," ("Mean Girls") is to destroy her 'hot body'. This statement implies that those who are not thin are not worthy of attention and cannot be desirable. The repeated expression of a desire to lose weight by one of the most conventionally attractive characters from the film sets young girls up for dangerous habits in the future. *Mean Girls* is widely considered a classic film that many young girls watch as a right of passage into womanhood or their teenage years. Seeing Rachel McAdamns, the actress and model behind Regina George, say that she wants to lose weight and go through drastic measures to achieve weight loss can make the young girls watching this movie self-conscious, even if she is simply portraying a bratty character. However, attempts to lose weight don't stay as verbal statements for long, as later on in the movie Regina indulges in many diets that consist of just cranberry juice, no carbs, and meals that only contain 'less than 40% fat'. These diets lead to over-eating, binge, and guilt in a scene in the later part of the movie, where Regina, Cady, and their friends are on a multiple-way call. While the other girls are sitting or laying down, Regina is seen eating donuts from a bowl and chomping on a baguette, seemingly out of control. Soon after, in the cafeteria, while the other girls have salads, Regina has a tray of processed, high sugar food that is similar to the foods typically consumed during a binge. Regina is later kicked out of the table because she's wearing sweatpants, even though they are 'all that fits her right now'. On her way out of the cafeteria, Regina is bumped into and told to "get out of the way, fat-ass" ("Mean Girls"). Regina went from being popular to

mocked simply due to her weight gain, which teaches young girls that any increase of weight can result in a loss of friends, respect, and dignity, and that weight-gain should be feared and avoided at all cost. This ideology results in young girls taking drastic measures to control their weight, such as the diets Regina took mentioned above, which can result in binges that lead to guilt, which results in an obsession over eating healthy and working out, which leads to binges, and over and over again. Aside from the insults thrown at Regina, the 'plastics' (Regina and her friends) write insults in their Burn Book, including but not limited to calling their female classmates "fat whores" and "fat asses", which allows young girls to begin associating bigger bodies with being dirty and obscene. Furthermore, at the beginning of the movie where the 'cliques' of the school are being explained, two groups of girls are categorized into "the girls who eat their feelings" and "the girls who don't eat anything," ("Mean Girls"), which locks the trap that young viewers have fallen into by saying that there are only two types of girls in the world, and neither of them have a healthy relationship with food. As if the diets and name calling weren't enough, there's an entire scene where the 'plastics', who are widely considered the prettiest girls at the school, are critiquing almost everything on their bodies, exposing young girls to insecurities that transcend the stereotypical "skinny" or "fat", as these girls critique everything from their "nail-beds" and "calves" to their "man-shoulders". If those who fit beauty standards as well as Regina, Cady, and their friends want to lose weight and change everything about their bodies, young girls begin to tell themselves that they should want to 'slim down' as well.

This may not seem like a harmful statement due to *Mean Girls* attempting to be a witty critique of an unhealthy obsession over looks, but this doesn't change the fact that *Mean Girls* ends up promoting the harmful messages that it was trying to counter. But if pre-teens and teens are the primary audience for this film, how are 'girls as young as 7' exhibiting desires to change

their body and looks? This is because negative messages about the body have leached further into the media than most people think, even infecting one of the most beloved children's media producers in the world: Disney. The iconic images of Disney princesses and princes living happily ever after may seem like a good source of entertainment for young girls, but there are multiple stereotypes that misrepresent and degrade women, such as the difference between the body types of villains and heroines (princesses). Most princesses are the stereotypes of what a beautiful woman should be: dainty and thin with a perfect body. The villains, however, are usually portrayed with "non-normal and deviant gendered characteristics…" and "are given masculine physical traits," (Wellman). Masculine traits can stem anywhere from having larger frames and bone structures, to the 'man shoulders' mentioned above. The fact that evil-doers with these characteristics are typically larger than their princess counterparts begins planting seeds in young girls' minds that anyone who is larger than the beauty standard is 'evil' and/or bad'. "... while the male villains were portrayed in a variety of ways… three out of four female villains are shown as old, ugly, and unattractive." (Wellman). Not only do these villains possess normal physical traits that are demonized, mocked, and shamed for, the motives of these female villains is just as concerning. Mother Gothel from the 2010 Disney film *Tangled* is motivated by an obsessions with staying young and avoiding the 'ugliness of old age'. The Evil Queen from 1937's *Snow White* orders Snow White to be killed simply because her magic mirror said that Snow White was prettier than her. "... many female villains become villains for trivial matters, finding the top motives for female villains are jealousy/vanity (28%)... compared to 4%... of male villains, respectively." (Wellman). Ignoring the fact that these stories urge women to fight and punish other women for attention regarding their looks, the fact that these motives are so different from the motives of male villains encourages young girls that their only goal in life

should be to obsess over their body and their appearance. "This research indicates that female villains and princesses may be portrayed differently in Disney which could influence a child's perception of societal structures," (Wellman). Constantly seeing one of the most popular production studios portray women as either beautiful and good or ugly and evil can change how young girls judge others because of their body types. Especially since most princess movies are 10, if not more, years old means that the young girls who grew up on these movies are now old enough to be raising their own children. The normalization of disordered eating and negative actions surrounding body image can leave current parents oblivious to the struggles that their children are facing, or it may be too triggering to talk about with their kids even if they do recognize harmful behaviors occurring. The exposure to toxic messages such as obsessing over beauty at such a young age from one the most popular producer of children's content results in young girls hoping that they could 'wish upon a star' and change the way that their body looks.

While media like television and movies set the beauty standards in decades prior to current years, social media has now taken on the role of setting unattainable standards through trends that harm body image and what young girls consider to be beautiful. There are photo sharing sites such as 'Pinterest' who claim to have cracked down on 'pro-anorexia content' formerly known as 'thinspo'. While searches that mention 'thinspo', or 'thinspiration', prompt an automated search result that states "If you or someone you know is struggling with disordered eating, help and resources are available" with a link attached to the 'help and resources are available' line, a simple google search of 'ways to still access thinspo on pinterest' results in multiple sources relaying new terms such as 'body inspiration' and 'korean ideal body type' that are still accessible to young, at risk women. These new search terms reveal extremely thin, fit, or in some cases, extremely emaciated individuals. While the attempt to stop triggering content was

there, young women still flock to the site to see images of what they yearn for their body to look like. These photos also result in girls criticizing themselves if they don't look like the women in the photos because "if they look like that, then I have no excuse."

With all of this negative media being screamed at young girls all of the time, it's important to acknowledge those who are becoming aware of these toxic standards and who are giving recognition and credit to actresses and people with different and larger body types. The 2018 movie *Dumplin* is a film that portrays the life of Willowdean Dixon, "The plus-size, teenage daughter of a former beauty queen signs up for her mum's pageant as a protest that escalates when other contestants follow in her footsteps, revolutionising the pageant as well as their small Texas town," (Film Synopsis). The movie contains raw and emotional scenes surrounding food, self worth, and body image. The film follows Willowdean (or Dumplin), the daughter of a former beauty queen who is still engrossed by the pageant world. Willodean joins her town's annual Teen Blue Bonnet Pageant as an act of defiance and revenge after she finds an old pageant application while cleaning out her late aunt's room. What originated from hatred and annoyance transforms into a journey with friends that results in an overturning of traditional and toxic beauty pageant standards. Willowdean's aunt, Lucy, was responsible for instilling Willowdean with confidence and self-appreciation, raising Willowdean with quotes such as "The world is full of people that are gonna try to tell you who you are, but that's for you to decide, you hear?" and "It's hard being a diamond in a rhinestone world," ("Dumplin'"). Even with a positive role model like Aunt Lucy, plus-sized Willowdean has trouble seeing herself as beautiful or worthy, as when a boy that she works with, Bo, admits to liking Willowdean, she asks how he could love someone who 'looks like her'. Willowdean also has a fight with her friend, and in her anger, says that she should go work at "the store that hates fat people" ("Dumplin'"). Both Bo

and Willowdean's friend respond with statements that actively defy harmful stereotypes and beauty standards portrayed in almost every other form of media, with Bo stating "I think you're beautiful," ("Dumplin'") and Elle, Willowdean's friend, responding with "... I never thought of you as fat," ("Dumplin'"). These responses create positive examples for young girls that counter the harmful messages forced upon them that being fat or larger than the standard of thinness is evil, and that they are unworthy and will never receive affection or love. Representing a character that has been mocked for her looks and weight, who has a conventionally attractive love interest and who receives positive attention and feedback from those in her community lets young women know that they do not have to follow damaging and unhealthy trends in order to be loved and accepted. On top of positive representation for Willowdean, she and Elle strut on stage together during the 'Health and Fitness' category of the pageant in which contestants are required to walk on stage in swimsuits. With swimwear adorned with the words "All Bodies Are Swimsuit Bodies", Elle and Willowdean receive a standing ovation from the audience and those backstage. Such necessary and accepting statements like those are not usually shown in the media, especially in media targeted towards young girls. Not only can plus-sized women find solace in knowing that they finally have positive representation that isn't reduced to comedic relief or the villain, women who have bodies that aren't seen as either 'skinny' or 'fat' but are still treated poorly can know that things are finally changing as big corporations realize the damage that unrealistic beauty standards can have on young girls. Positive representation for plus-sized and natural bodies in movies like *Dumplin* shows an important shift in the way that the world sees female bodies, as they are becoming less focused on the shape and more focused on the woman herself.

Harmful media about bodies and self image are constantly thrown at young women. Now with the rise of social media, dangerous content is just a click away from young, impressionable girls simply seeking attention and appreciation. While attempts to shield women from this content have begun, they are not always perfect and still need to be improved. However, with all of the negative content in the world, there are still positive media sources from which young women can draw inspiration. Young women and teenage girls are the most at risk for developing eating disorders, and media directed towards them needs to change their portrayal of the female body in order to protect adolescent girls.

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