

**EMERGING ADULTS' EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE MEDIA'S
ROLE IN BODY IMAGE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF EATING DISORDERS**

by

Keamogetse Senoge

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FACULTY OF THE HUMANITIES

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

at the

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SUPERVISOR: Mr Henry Taylor

September 2024

Declaration of Authenticity

I, Keamogetse Senoge, hereby declare that this dissertation focusing on emerging adults' experiences and perceptions of the media's role in body image and the development of eating disorders is submitted as a requirement for the degree of Master in Social Science with specialisation in Psychology at the University of the Free State. Furthermore, I cede the copyright of this dissertation in favour of the University of the Free State.

K Senoge

Keamogetse Senoge

Student number: 2013189572

Date: 09/09/2024

Permission to Submit Dissertation

Reference: Mr HW Taylor
Telephone: 051 401 9322
Email: taylorhw@ufs.ac.za
09 September 2024

Ms Marizanne Cloete
Faculty of the Humanities

Dear Ms Cloete

PERMISSION TO SUBMIT

Student: Keamogetse Senoge

Student number: 2013189572

Degree: Master of Social Sciences with specialisation in Psychology

Department: Psychology

Title: Emerging adults' experiences and perceptions of the media's role in body image and the development of eating disorders

I hereby give this provide permission for this dissertation to be submitted for examination, in fulfilment of the requirements for the Master in Psychology degree, in the Department of Psychology, Faculty of the Humanities, at the University of the Free State.

I approve the submission for assessment and that the submitted work has not previously, either in part or in its entirety, been submitted to the examiners.

Sincerely,



Mr. HW Taylor
Supervisor

Proof of Language Editing

LANGUAGE PRACTITIONER: Anneke-Jean Diesel

BA Communication Science (Corporate and Marketing Communications)*
BA Hons Communication Science (Corporate and Marketing Communications)*
* Cum Laude

17A Innes Avenue
Waverley, Bloemfontein

Tel: 084 244 8961
annekedenobili@gmail.com

August 2024

DECLARATION

I, Anneke-Jean Diesel, hereby declare that I did the language editing of the Master's dissertation of Keamogetse Senoge (title: EMERGING ADULTS' EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE MEDIA'S ROLE ON BODY IMAGE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF EATING DISORDERS). This dissertation is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master of Psychology in the Faculty of the Humanities, Department of Psychology at the University of the Free State. All the suggested changes, including the implementation thereof, were left to the discretion of the student.

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ABSTRACT

In today's society, the media has become the main source of attraction, significantly influencing individuals' lives in terms of their conduct, choices and decision-making. The impact resulting from such a dynamic is so permeable that it plays an undeniable role in the perceptions of individuals' body image, which could lead to the development of distorted eating behaviours and subsequently result in eating disorders. It has been found that emerging adults are susceptible to such an influence; this vulnerability stems from an underdeveloped identity, predisposing them to external influences that prescribe certain beauty standards.

This study aimed to explore emerging adults' experiences and perceptions of the media's role in body image and the development of eating disorders. The study employed a qualitative research approach and collected data using non-probability purposive sampling. The study's participants were eight students from the University of the Free State with a degree, majoring in psychology. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews and used thematic analysis to identify themes from the gathered data through the lens of the interpretative phenomenological design.

This study found that the media plays a significant role in shaping the body image perceptions of emerging adults, leading them to desire to change their physical appearance. It was also discovered that emerging adults often feel dissatisfied with their appearance, influenced by changing beauty standards presented on various media platforms. In addition, the media's portrayal of body image may trigger insecurities and a desire to conform to media-informed societal norms, affecting individuals' self-esteem, seen in media and current trends, leading to pressure to conform to certain body types. Vulnerabilities in emerging adults, such as an unstable sense of identity and social comparison, contribute to distorted body image through

exposure to unbalanced media content. It has also been discovered that unhealthy weight loss methods and promotions by media moguls further exacerbate these issues and that media personalities heavily influence emerging adults, especially in terms of body image and eating habits. The media promotes a narrative of being slim as ideal, leading to an urge for slenderness among consumers. This pressure to be thin can result in disordered eating behaviours and the development of eating disorders.

Keywords: body image, eating disorders, emerging adults, emerging adults' experiences and perceptions, media, media's role

ABSTRAK

In vandag se samelewing het die media die hoofbron van aantrekkingskrag geword, wat individue se lewens in terme van hul gedrag, keuses en besluitneming aansienlik beïnvloed. Die impak van hierdie dinamika, is so deurdringend dat dit 'n onmiskenbare rol in die persepsies van individue se liggaamsbeeld speel, wat gevolglik kan lei tot die ontwikkeling van afwykende eetgedrag en moontlike eetversteurings. Daar is gevind dat opkomende volwassenes kwesbaar is vir só 'n invloed; hierdie kwesbaarheid spruit voort uit 'n onderontwikkelde identiteit, wat hulle vatbaar maak vir eksterne invloede wat sekere skoonheid standarde voorskryf.

Hierdie studie het ten doel gehad om opkomende volwassenes se ervarings en persepsies van die media se rol in liggaamsbeeld en die ontwikkeling van eetversteurings te ondersoek. Die studie het 'n kwalitatiewe navorsingsbenadering gebruik en data versamel deur middel van nuwekansige doelgerigte steekproefneming. Die studie-deelnemers was agt studente van die Universiteit van die Vrystaat met 'n graad in sielkunde. Die navorser het semi-gestruktureerde onderhouds gevoer en het deur middel van tematiese analise temas uit die versamelde data geïdentifiseer deur die lens van 'n interpretatiewe fenomenologiese ontwerp.

Hierdie studie het gevind dat die media 'n beduidende rol speel in die vorming van die liggaamsbeeld persepsies van opkomende volwassenes, wat lei tot die wens om hul fisiese voorkoms te verander. Daar is ook bevind dat veranderende skoonheid standarde wat op verskeie media platvorme aangebied word, bydra daartoe dat opkomende volwassenes dikwels ontevrede voel met hulle voorkoms. Bykomend kan media voorstelling van liggaamsbeeld onsekerhede en 'n begeerte om aan media-geïnspireerde samelewingsnorme te voldoen, veroorsaak. Wat individue in die media sien en huidige tendense beïnvloed hulle selfbeeld en

gevolglik word druk geplaas om aan sekere liggaamstipes te voldoen. Kwesbaarhede in opkomende volwassenes, soos 'n onstabiele gevoel van identiteit en sosiale vergelyking, is bydraend tot 'n verwronge liggaamsbeeld deur blootstelling aan ongebalanseerde media-inhoud. Dit is ook bevind dat ongesonde gewigsverliesmetodes en reklame deur media magnate hierdie probleme verder vererger en dat media persoonlikhede opkomende volwassenes sterk beïnvloed, veral in terme van liggaamsbeeld en eetgewoontes. Die media bevorder 'n narratief van skraal wees as die ideaal, wat lei tot 'n drang na slankheid onder verbruikers. Hierdie druk om skraal te wees kan lei tot versteurde eetgedrag en die ontwikkeling van eetversteurings.

Sleutelwoorde: eetversteurings, liggaamsbeeld, media, media se rol, opkomende volwassenes, opkomende volwassenes se ervarings en persepsies

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 mainly focuses on the description of eating disorders, exploring the experiences and perceptions of emerging adults concerning how the media influences their body image. This chapter serves as an introduction to the media's role in the body image of emerging adults and eating disorders, underscoring their magnitude in a psychological context and prevalence to emphasise the seriousness of the matter, especially during the phase of emerging adulthood. In addition, it analyses the media's extensive role in influencing the standards of beauty and the ideals of beauty presented by the media. Consequently, it outlines the theoretical framework that guided the study, and the research methodology used. Moreover, the chapter presents the aims and objectives of the study, justification of the study, and ethical considerations. Finally, the chapter concludes by conceptualising the keywords and an outline of the structure of the study's chapters.

1.2 Background

Body image can be defined as an intuitive presentation and depiction that an individual has about their body, primarily exclusive of their outward appearance (Cash & Smolak, 2011; Grogan, 2016; Mallaram et al., 2023). Furthermore, body image is understood as a complex concept that speaks to but is not only based on thoughts, beliefs, and feelings, as well as the perspectives people keep regarding their bodies (Engel et al., 2023). Individuals' perceptions about themselves and their bodies significantly impact their wellness, psychological and

emotional health, and engagements with others (Muhlheim, 2023; Tiggemann, 2004). The core of a constructive and practical outlook and embracing one's body involves a clear perception of one's outward appearance and the ability to recognise one's innate worth without considering outward appearance (Muhlheim, 2023). Nevertheless, a distorted body image is usually identified by a degree of dissatisfaction regarding one's physical appearance as well as engaging in risky and unhealthy habits such as dieting, constant body monitoring, or shunning to reduce the experienced sense of dissatisfaction; similarly, distorted body image dispositions are more likely to surface during transition from childhood (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; Muhlheim, 2023). A poor body image affects an individual's physical and psychological well-being, impacting how they assess themselves and their perceptions of their worth, significance, and proficiency (Mallaram, 2023). Urban development, economic growth, cultural changes, and the worldwide dissemination of media are all factors that have been underscored and highlighted in the advocacy of unachievable body ideals (Radwan et al., 2019).

Disturbances in body image frequently accompany psychiatric disorders and are prevalent in sufferers of eating disorders (Engel et al., 2023; Fairburn & Harrison, 2003; Phillips, 2005). Eating disorders are grave psychological health concerns marked by pathological eating tendencies or unhealthy measures targeted toward controlling weight (Oliveira et al., 2021). Eating disorders are starting to be rife in countries experiencing changes in their culture as well as urban development (Radwan et al., 2019). It has also been discerned that most individuals with eating disorders are emerging adults who are mainly diagnosed with traditional eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa (Derenne & Beresin, 2006; Hudson et al., 2007; Lipson & Sonnevile, 2017). Indicators of eating disorders frequently manifest as behavioural adaptations that individuals capitalise on to help them cope with internal or

external changes, including poor body image, rigid thinking, and distrust of others in personal relationships (Bégin et al., 2019).

A significant occurrence of eating disorders has been identified by the Global Burden of Disease Study in 2013, specifically among young women living in wealthy countries; nonetheless, between 1990 and 2013, an increase was reported in the significant burden relating to eating disorders in low- and middle-income countries (Williams et al. 2020). In the year 2013, anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa together contributed to 1.9 million disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) worldwide (Williams et al., 2020).

There is inadequate knowledge of the root of the problem concerning body image. In this regard, several scholars have proposed that the media could significantly be contributing to the development and the aggravation of body discontent and consequently could be partially liable for the heightened frequency of eating disorders (Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Levine & Harrison, 2009; Morris & Katzman, 2003). Digital media outlets, especially image-centric ones such as Instagram and Snapchat, amplify concerns about how others perceive individuals and, as a result, bring an increase in anxiety and a sense of discomfort or embarrassment about one's body (Derenne & Beresin, 2018; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; McLean et al., 2015). Receiving criticism for content posted on social media may easily lead to engaging in pathological eating behaviours and increased constant worries concerning one's body shape as well as size (Kumar et al., 2023). The impact of mass media in the lives of individuals is crucial, as it has become one that plays a significant role in their development of self-esteem; it further reflects and influences the standards of beauty that society harbours (Groesz et al., 2002; Harrison & Hefner, 2006; Mills et al., 2017).

Previous research that examined and gauged the influence that mass media has on negative body image has primarily focused on females and has determined the negative consequences resulting from exposure to thin and fitpiration ideals that are being published by various media outlets relating to negative body image among young women (Fardouly et al., 2015). Silva and Steins (2023) noted that the advertising of half-naked men images implying the muscular ideal has been significantly detrimental to body satisfaction concerning young men. Turner et al. (1997) researched the influence that fashion magazines have on the body image satisfaction of women in college. It was found that being religiously exposed to fashion magazines is associated with body dissatisfaction, resulting in an urge to be slender among young women in college. Bessenoff (2006) explored the effect of exposure to thin-ideal media images on body dissatisfaction and discovered that young women who were religiously exposed to thin-ideal media images greatly experienced negative affect and body dissatisfaction. Thus, the excessive use of social media platforms among young adults can be associated with higher body dissatisfaction (Rodgers et al., 2018). Recently, it has been proposed that social media images promote unattainable appearance standards for the general population, and all these images result in the conclusion that one's body is not good enough and that one should, therefore, be unhappy with it (Marques et al., 2022). Mostly, these images feature peers regarded as socially important, intensifying the adverse effects of comparing one's appearance to others regarding body image, particularly among emerging adults (Marques et al., 2022).

Emerging adulthood can be described as a period of exiting the phase of adolescence but not yet fully qualifying as an adult, while this life period is also referred to as a bridge between adolescence and adulthood or prolonged adolescence (Arnett, 2007; Nelson et al., 2013; Potterton et al., 2020). The theory of emerging adulthood was initially developed to identify the polarities and discrepancies that separate emerging adulthood from adolescence and

complete adulthood (Arnett & Mitra, 2018). According to Arnett (2000), emerging adulthood is an adventurous, interesting, and quite stimulating life period characterised by identity exploration in social roles, world views, and relationships. As a result of the physical, psychological, and social growth of individuals during the phase of emerging adulthood, the presence of mental health disorders, such as eating disorders, has been duly identified (Baranauskas et al., 2022). The proneness to a distorted body image among emerging adults is characterised by susceptibility to body image concerns during a vital stage of identity and physical development (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Rodgers & Chabrol, 2009; Swami et al., 2022). In this regard, Ferguson (2013) found a very strong association between media exposure and body dissatisfaction. Thus, exposure to media content, namely visual content showing unrealistic, idealised body images, may influence body image disturbance (Ferguson, 2013). A study conducted by Groesz et al. (2002) on media, body dissatisfaction, and eating psychopathology in young adult women revealed that exposure to thin-ideal media increased body dissatisfaction levels, subsequently increasing the risk of eating pathology. Furthermore, Tiggemann and Slater's (2014) study highlighted the importance of social media for developing body dissatisfaction in young adults. This indicates that exposure to idealised media content increases body dissatisfaction and aims to present ideal body models that are not achievable (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

1.3. Theoretical Framework: Objectification Theory

This study aimed to gain insight into the experience and perceptions of media and its role in body image and the consequence of body dissatisfaction in the development of eating disorders in emerging adults. The objectification theory has become the best framework for

analysing and studying this phenomenon, especially because all participants were females. The human body is the prime source of gender differentiation (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). At the heart of the objectification theory, female bodies are viewed from social and cultural contexts with the main purpose of identifying the livelihoods and personal experiences of these victims who are reduced to sexual objectification (Calogero, 2004; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Instances of sexually objectifying situations include gazing unpleasantly, making sexual comments about a person's body, sexual assault, and exposure to overly sexualised media content (Schaefer et al., 2018). Recurrent encounters of sexually objectifying situations precede a changed perception in women viewing themselves as objects rather than subjects (Schaefer et al., 2018). When women view themselves as objects (self-objectify), they tend to place more emphasis on external appearance and engage in chronic self-monitoring (Kilpela et al., 2021; Smolak et al., 2000). This dynamic has been identified as a slippery slope down the development of negative perceptions about their bodies, making them more prone to mental health instabilities, including disordered eating (Kilpela et al., 2021).

1.4. Research Methodology

1.4.1. Research Problem Statement

The influence of the media on body image and the development of eating disorders among emerging adults has been mostly oversimplified and neglected. Emerging adults are increasingly consuming media content that compromises their body image and may eventually lead to the development of eating disorders (Curry, 2019). Mass media has been proven to contribute significantly to an individual's body dissatisfaction (Franchina & Lo Coco, 2018). Previous research showed a gradual increase in research regarding media influence on body

image and possible development of eating disorders among adolescents; however, there is a paucity of this kind of research investigating the population of emerging adults, which appears to be affected the most (Gervais et al., 2011; Slater & Tiggemann, 2015).

This study aimed to explore the media's influence on the body image of emerging adults and the possible development of eating disorders by exploring emerging adults' experiences and perceptions of the media's influence on body image and the development of eating disorders.

1.4.2. Research Objectives

The specific research objectives the study aimed to explore were:

- The role of the media in emerging adults' experiences and perceptions of body image.
- The role of the media in emerging adults' experiences and perceptions of body image in the development of eating disorders.

1.5. Research Design and Methodology

1.5.1. Research Approach and Design

The study followed a qualitative research approach (Creswell, 2014), as it was significant to the analysis and delineation of emerging adults' experiences and perceptions. An interpretative phenomenological design was employed to interpret and explore the personal experiences of emerging adults (Smith & Osburn, 2007). Qualitative research is recognised as a solid methodology and model that permits the researcher to achieve granular details in the lived experiences of individuals (Haradhan, 2018). This model also sought to reveal and narrate how individuals act and interpret their actions (Bozkurt & Ozturk, 2022). However, the data

gathered using this design is purely based on subjectivity, and the presentation of the findings can be challenging (Cresswell, 2014).

1.5.2 Participants and Sampling Procedures

The participants were recruited using non-probability purposive sampling (Stangor, 2015). This sampling method saves time and money, and the selection of participants was directed at individuals who are knowledgeable about the topic and possess the necessary personal experience (Stangor, 2015). A purposive sampling includes a moderately sized and deliberately chosen sample aimed at enhancing the thoroughness of understanding (Campbell et al., 2020). Furthermore, this type of sampling was employed to select participants who are more likely to provide relevant and valuable insights, serving as a method to identify and pinpoint cases that utilise limited resources efficiently (Campbell et al., 2020).

According to Alase (2017), the participant size should be between two and 25 in a phenomenological research convention. In this study, the researcher recruited eight African female participants studying at the University of the Free State (Bloemfontein Campus). For Fossey et al. (2002, p. 726), “No fixed minimum number of participants is necessary to conduct sound qualitative research; however, sufficient depth of information needs to be gathered to fully describe the phenomena being studied”. The sample consisted of individuals between the ages of 18 and 29, and the criteria for exclusion were individuals below and above the stipulated ages and students with no particular interest in or experience of eating disorders. The researcher obtained permission from the coordinators of the third-year undergraduate modules of the Department of Psychology to place an announcement on Blackboard to invite volunteers to participate in the study.

1.6. Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow the participants to describe the topic of interest through their own lenses and allow the researcher to collect rich and detailed information (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This intentional form of dialogue was in the format of a formal interview with an interview guide that consisted of open-ended questions addressed in conversation between the researcher and the participant (“KnowHow”, 2018). One of the main reasons for utilising this method is its adaptable structure that enables the researcher to guide or prompt the participant if they seek additional and granular information or find their responses intriguing (“KnowHow”, 2018).

The researcher endeavoured to conduct the interviews in person. However, due to certain lockdown restrictions that were in place in 2021 at the peak of the Coronavirus pandemic and because of the stark conditions of the time, the researcher conducted the interviews telephonically. The researcher phoned all the participants to gather the necessary data.

1.7. Data Analysis

An interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to analyse the data. This type of analysis enables the researcher to make meaning of the stories provided by the respondents and further establish an interpretative relationship with the transcript (Smith & Osburn, 2007). An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) entails the following stages: reading and re-reading the interview transcription (this is done with the aim of familiarisation oneself with the accounts), identifying themes (documenting emerging themes from the transcript), connecting the themes (the researcher tries to understand the connections between

emerging themes, clustering some together), producing a summary table of the themes (themes are listed in a table together with each cluster theme with an identifier to assist with the order of analysis), and writing up (involves the process of translating the themes into a narrative account) (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a philosophical method aiming to present an account of firsthand experiences without imposing preceding theoretical frameworks. IPA acknowledges the interpretative nature of this process, recognising humans as relevant parties to attach meaning to their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015). In utilising IPA, the researcher endeavoured to understand the participants' comprehension of their own experiences. Ultimately, IPA examines the categorical experiences of each individual case before transitioning to generic declarations (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

1.8 Trustworthiness and Rigour

In qualitative research, credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability are considered criteria for trustworthiness (Schwandt et al., 2007). Credibility refers to the degree of consistency that exists between the participant's views and the researcher's representation of them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ryan et al., 2007). This was attained through persistent observation, extended engagement, triangulation (interviews), member checks, or participant validation. The researcher also sought different perspectives and perceptions about the phenomenon under study by engaging in peer reviews, which encouraged the researcher to be fully immersed in the work. The stability of findings over time refers to dependability, while confirmability indicates the degree to which other researchers can confirm a study's findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher kept an audit trail

describing the research steps transparently from the start to the development and reporting of the study's findings. The researcher also kept records of the research path throughout the study, transcribing all the information collected verbatim. The researcher ensured that the findings of the study applied to similar situations (Mookherji & LaFond, 2013). Reflexivity, keeping frequent debriefing sessions between the researcher and the research supervisor, assisted in steering the study in the right direction.

1.9 Ethical Considerations

One of the most notable inferences when conducting research is the paramount importance of the necessary procedures that need to be followed to protect human subjects (Yin, 2011). Participants were provided with the necessary details, aims and objectives of the study and signed informed consent was obtained from the participants. Before executing the research project, the researcher obtained ethical clearance from the General Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of the Humanities (GHREC) as well as the Dean of Students Affairs and the Rectorate of Research. Participants received a thorough explanation of their rights and were informed that their participation was needed. However, they were not coerced to take part in the study. The researcher informed the participants that if they decided to participate, they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative repercussions. Participants were also informed about any possible risks arising from their participation in the study. Prior arrangements were made in cases where participants experienced emotional distress as a result of their participation; they could use the counselling services offered by the Adult Practice of the Master's programme of the Department of Psychology. The participants were also informed that if face-to-face

counselling were not possible, the distressed participants would be provided with the contact details of MobieG, an online counselling platform. All the information provided by participants was kept private and confidential to protect their confidentiality. The researcher also ensured that the results of the study do not, in any manner, make participants identifiable. In terms of the safekeeping of the data collected, the researcher used a password (only known by the researcher) protected computer and a safe to keep all the information contained in hard copies.

1.10 Justification and Significance of the Study

Media and peer influences are significant pressures to lose weight, maintain a thin figure, and diet to obtain this “ideal” body form. Tiggemann and Pickering (1996) found that media exposure and the pressure presented by media and peers to look a certain way directly influence body image satisfaction. Further research supports this notion that exposure to media and the pressure instilled by peers is, in fact, related to body image dissatisfaction (Davison & Birch, 2002). Consequently, body dissatisfaction has been found to be the largest single contributor to the development of eating disorders (Keel & Forney, 2013; Shisslak et al., 1999; Thompson & Stice, 2001).

This study examined the extent to which the media influences body image and the development of eating disorders among young adults, who are known to be most vulnerable to the influences the media presents. This may be regarded as a delicate issue, as some men and women are indeed comfortable with their bodies and are free of any body image or eating problems. However, this study may contribute to the efforts directed to dealing with and preventing further negative feelings about body image and self-dissatisfaction among young

adults who feel there is a specific way they need to appear to be accepted by peers and the media.

1.11. Clarification of Key Concepts

1.11.1. Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are a range of mental disorders which are primarily identified by pathology or disturbed eating behaviour, resulting in possible critical impairments in an individual's physical as well as mental well-being (American Psychiatric Association, 2023; National Institute of Mental Health, 2024). Eating disorders are essentially linked with exaggerated and unwarranted concerns about body shape and weight, as well as food (Keel, 2017). The most prevalent eating disorders include **anorexia nervosa** (an eating disorder characterised by a distorted body image with an irrational fear of gaining weight, which leads to a restricted food intake or excessive exercise to maintain the below-normal body weight) and **bulimia nervosa** (an eating disorder characterised by regular, and often secretive episodes of binge-eating followed by compensatory behaviours such as vomiting or excessive exercise to avoid weight gain) (Muele et al., 2019; Mussell & Mitchell, 2001).

1.11.2. Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood is a developmental stage that spans from the ages of 18 to 29 and is mostly described as a bridge between adolescence and adulthood, as these individuals do not qualify as adolescents nor as adults (Arnett, 2000; Wood et al., 2017).

1.11.3. Body Image

Body image refers to the individual's thoughts, feelings and perceptions harboured by them regarding their outward appearance (Cash, 2012). It incorporates an individual's personal view of their body, how they perceive their body, and how they think others perceive it (Grogan, 2021).

1.11.4. Body Dissatisfaction

Body dissatisfaction primarily refers to negative thoughts, perceptions, and feelings about one's body (Grabe & Hyde, 2009; Rodgers & Chabrol, 2009). It typically entails a discrepancy between an individual's perceived body and the body that an individual considers to be ideal, further breeding feelings of dissatisfaction with one's outward appearance (Heider et al., 2018; Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019).

1.11.5. Mass Media

Mass media essentially refers to channels of communication capable of reaching a large audience at the same time through the nature of its mass communication (Entman, 2007).

1.11.6. Media

Media refers to various outlets or tools used to store or deliver content and is one of the means of communication that mostly includes broadcasting, publishing, and the Internet (Baran & Davis, 2014; McQuail, 2010).

1.12 Outline of the Study

This dissertation consists of five chapters. This chapter served as an introduction to the rest of the chapters to follow. This chapter provided an overview of the following sections: The background of the study, problem statement, research methods and designs utilised, ethical considerations, justification and significance of the study, and clarification of the key concepts. Chapter 2, the literature review, provides a detailed account of the existing body of knowledge focusing on eating disorders in emerging adults, especially relating to the influence of the media on emerging adults' body image. Chapter 3 discusses the methodological aspect of the dissertation, outlining procedures that were followed in the execution of the study, which includes the research approach and design, participants and sampling procedures, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study. Chapter 5 provides a detailed discussion regarding the results of the study relative to the existing body of knowledge, concluding the chapter with limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides an overview of the existing literature on the topic of the current study, focusing on each of the constructs and the relevant theoretical frameworks. The overview of the chapter follows the following sequence: the first section covers eating disorders (definition and history in South Africa) and their global prevalence, focusing also on common eating disorders in South Africa. The second section explores emerging adults, focusing on the stormy transition to emerging adulthood, its definition, and the five markers of emerging adulthood. The third section focuses on mass media, emphasising its influence. The fourth section discusses body image, its definition, psychological implications, the body image of emerging adults, and the media's influence that disturbs the development of a healthy body image. For the sake of thoroughness, the last section directs attention to additional contributing factors to the development of eating disorders.

2.1. Eating and Eating Disorders

2.1.1. Eating Disorders Definition and Emergence in South Africa

Eating is a necessary activity vital for survival. It is managed and controlled by mechanisms in the body that lead to the development of eating patterns (Campbell, 2017). Eating patterns are often the result of biological, environmental or cultural influences, complicating the process of identifying the causes of eating disorders (Striegel-Moore & Bulik, 2007). Abnormal eating patterns are usually caused by negative feelings or concerns about body shape or weight and can become detrimental to one's normal body composition (Fairburn

& Harrison, 2003). People with disordered eating behaviours have had normal eating patterns and behaviours that eventually developed into an urge to eat more or less than their usual consumption, and with time, the urge to drastically increase or decrease their food consumption spiralled out of control (Campbell, 2017).

Eating disorders are a group of disorders identified by abnormal eating habits or patterns that comply with the criteria of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th Revised Edition (DSM-5 TR) for feeding and eating disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Feeding and eating disorders are characterised by a disturbance of eating or eating-related behaviour which is persistent and results in the altered absorption or consumption of food that significantly impairs psychosocial functioning or physical health (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Eating disorders are a heterogeneous group of psychiatric illnesses, which include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorders (BEDs), characterised by overconcern with body shape and weight and the development of abnormal eating habits and dysregulation of body weight (Wu et al., 2020). According to Kumar (2023), eating disorders are mental conditions where individuals exercise excessive control over eating to achieve a desired appearance or cope with negative feelings. Eating disorders are, therefore, characterised by atypical eating patterns, which include compulsive overeating, restrictive diets or skipping meals, resulting in bulimia nervosa or anorexia nervosa (Taylor et al., 2018).

Eating disorders are identified by marked changes in an individual's food consumption and conduct around food and body weight (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Eating pathology is marked by a negative body image, preoccupation with body weight and shape, disordered eating habits as well as low self-esteem (Dahlgren et al., 2024). Failure to deal with

symptomatology is very likely to result in the development of clinical eating disorders (Dahlgren et al., 2024). Eating disorders commonly surface during adolescence or young adulthood, with less possibility of development during childhood (Swanson et al., 2011). Ragnhildstveit et al. (2024) emphasised that although eating pathology may develop during adolescence, it becomes more persistent and aggressive in adulthood. Furthermore, there is compelling evidence indicating that nearly all initial occurrences of clearly defined eating disorders take place in adolescence and young adulthood (Hay et al., 2023).

However, eating disorders are treatable illnesses and can be comorbid with other psychiatric disorders, such as depression, substance abuse or anxiety disorders (Wonderlich et al., 2020). The effects of disordered eating are not only limited to psychological imbalances but may also result in somatic disturbances such as the organs of the patient (including cardiac abnormalities and cerebral atrophy). As a result, eating disorders are the most prevalent causes of death, considering all psychiatric disorders (Ragnhildstveit et al., 2024). It has also been discovered that eating disorders impair and have long-term negative effects on individuals' functioning in terms of social settings and employment opportunities (Lee et al., 2021). Eating disorders frequently present a chronic course coupled with positive episodes of recuperation alongside negative episodes of regression experienced during the lifespan (Hay et al., 2023).

The emergence of these disorders in South Africa dates back to the 1970s. This pathology was first identified in individuals who presented with some of the symptoms of the disorders and were first located in Cape Town and Johannesburg (Szabo, 2019). Historically, eating disorders were regarded to exist only in urban Western settings among young, White females (Szabo, 2019). Further investigations on eating disorders brought about an evolution in the specificities of eating disorders, which revealed an increase in the reported cases of eating

disorders, discarding its notion of existence only in specific cultures, ethnicities and races (Hay et al., 2023; Wassenaar et al., 2000). The discovery of clinically diagnosed Black South African women with eating disorders had broken down the conventional stereotypes of disordered eating behaviours and the belief that Black people were immune to these pathologies (Makara-Studzinska et al., 2010). Several South African studies indicated high levels of abnormal eating habits and attitudes among Black South African females (Le Grange et al., 1998; Szabo & Hollands, 1997; Wassenaar et al., 2000). Furthermore, it has been proven that eating disorders occur not only in females but also among males, with estimates of between 5% and 10%; the majority of males were diagnosed with anorexia nervosa (Freeman, 2005; Hay et al., 2023).

2.1.2. Eating Disorders' Prevalence in Western and Non-Western Contexts

The rareness of eating disorders in Africa began to decline in the 1970s, discerning the primitive ideal body among Africans, which reflected a slight shift towards voluptuous body types (Nasser, 2006; Swami, 2006). The subscription to this ideal led to the credence that “fatness” was associated with fertility, which further ushered the practice of “fattening up” adolescent girls with the intent of preparing them for marriage (Ulysse, 2015). This was an accepted state of normalcy, particularly in African countries, until January 1993, when Szabo diagnosed the first Black South African woman with anorexia (bulimic subtype) (Szabo & Allwood, 2004). An occurrence of this nature has changed the status quo and induced fear of being fat, which has affected African women’s perceptions of beauty standards and led them to doubt that everyone is beautiful in their own way (Szabo & Allwood, 2004). These women now have a tainted belief that there is only one particular type of look that is beautiful and attractive; as a result, they find it embarrassing to be plump (Szabo & Allwood, 2004). For Erskine et al. (2017), the borderless effect of eating disorders is “a watershed moment”, declaring them to be

more recognised, prevalent, and percolated throughout the world. It has been reported that of all the disorders that affect individuals physically and mentally, anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa together ranked as the 12th leading causes of disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) in females from high-income countries (Hoek, 2016).

There is a paucity of research regarding the prevalence of eating disorders in most parts of the world; such studies are usually conducted in areas where the populations are more vulnerable to the development of eating disorders (Hay et al., 2023). Africa has been identified as the most understudied continent in eating disorders and their epidemiology (van Hoeken & Hoek, 2020). They reported only four studies from the entire African continent with limited information on the epidemiology of eating disorders recorded for over 20 years, which only traced the prevalence of bulimia nervosa and eating disorders not otherwise specified (EDNOS) without considering anorexia nervosa. It was believed that many African women would have fulfilled the criteria for anorexia nervosa. However, due to limited research, such statistics could not be acquired (van Hoeken & Hoek, 2020).

The prevalence of eating disorders has doubled in the United States of America in the past years, supporting the fact that during the same period, the media has publicised and magnified the thinner representations of the female body (Cohen, 2006). This is further corroborated by the significant decrease in the body measurement and weight of *Playboy* centrefolds and Miss America Pageant contestants (Cohen, 2006). The American Psychiatric Association has reported that females are more at risk of developing common eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa than their male counterparts. Females are also ten times more likely to develop an eating disorder (Barakat et al., 2023).

A comparison of the prevalence rates of eating pathologies made among Western and non-Western countries, using tools such as the Eating Attitudes Test-26 (EAT-26) to assess and evaluate individuals' food conduct (Makino et al., 2004), revealed that South Africa was one of the countries that scored the highest on abnormal eating attitudes (Makino et al., 2004). This further revealed that an increasing number of individuals in South Africa had high levels of body dissatisfaction, leading to a distorted body image (Makino et al., 2004). These investigations led to the conclusion that Americans are more cognisant and constantly guard against the possible development of any abnormal eating behaviour or pattern, while in Africa, a large-scale National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey in South Africa discovered that more African women are satisfied with their current body shape and size than females from other ethnicities (Hoek, 2016). Emerging adulthood has been identified as the most vulnerable and at-risk age cohort for the development of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction (Potterton et al., 2019). As much as the prevalence of eating disorders is gradually spreading globally, it is important to note that eating disorders are still more rife in Western countries than in non-Western countries (Soh & Walter, 2013).

2.1.3. Common Eating Disorders in South Africa

The most common eating disorders in South Africa include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder, and research shows that the average duration of these disorders is about six years (Williams et al., 2020). Anorexia nervosa is characterised by limited food consumption or energy intake restrictions; individuals with this disorder are consumed by an uncontrollable fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, further leading them to develop a distorted body image (American Psychiatry Association, 2022; Moore & Bokor, 2023). The sufferers of this disorder have a body weight of nearly 85% less than expected,

considering the individual's age and height and a distorted perception of weight and shape (American Psychiatry Association, 2022; Nagy et al., 2023). These individuals are a gullible crowd that easily falls prey to the external unwarranted influence of the ideal weight and shape that an individual is said to have; women with this pathology also experience cessation of menstrual periods (Puhl & Heuer, 2010). Moreover, these individuals engage in multiple techniques to lose weight, such as the abuse of laxatives, fasting, excessive exercising and purging (Schaumberg et al., 2017). Anorexia nervosa is reported to run a chronic course and could result in debilitating medical conditions (Schaumberg et al., 2017).

Binge-eating is, however, the reverse of anorexia nervosa in that it is marked by an uncontrollable urge to continue eating even if an individual reaches a state of satiety and eats larger portions than what an average person would eat (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Bhandari et al., 2023). This disorder is also marked by eating alone due to the embarrassment of the amount of food that is being consumed and experiencing distress because of their abnormal patterns of eating (Kessler et al., 2013). However, this eating disorder is not characterised by purging as compensation for abnormal food intake; it is coupled with conditions such as obesity, weight cycling and health complications (Grucza et al., 2007).

Bulimia nervosa is identified by a strong urge to indulge in binge-eating episodes. Individuals suffering from this disorder are proven to lack control over their eating habits, engaging in risky techniques to compensate for the guilt that accompanies their over-eating episodes (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Jain & Yilanli, 2023). They are also vulnerable to the external inappropriate influence of glorified perceptions of the ideal body weight and shape (Clark, 2021).

In analysing the distinctive elements of eating disorders, it is impossible not to take notice of the fact that the gender ratio in the diagnosis of these disorders is not equal, with females more likely to incur an eating disorder than their male counterparts (Schaumberg et al., 2017). Sufferers of disordered eating behaviours mainly consist of individuals who had normal eating patterns and behaviours which then became disturbed by a developed strong desire to consume more or less than their usual eating portions, giving rise to maladaptive eating behaviours (Zanella & Lee, 2022).

These pathological eating behaviours bring forth marked changes, inabilities, and malfunctions in an individual's social environment, employment, and overall quality of life (Barakat et al., 2023). Eating disorders are one of the most expensive psychological disorders in terms of the finances required for treatment needed to assist sufferers' recovery (Surgenor et al., 2022). It was also discovered that the caregivers of disordered eating patients tend to regard them as a burden, and as a result, they are not always given the best possible care (Surgenor et al., 2022).

2.2. Emerging Adulthood

2.2.1. Transitioning to Emerging Adulthood

Approximately several decades ago, it was typical for an individual in advanced countries in their early twenties to be united in wedlock, be at least a first-time parent and make plans to buy property (Arnett & Tanner, 2006). It is quite evident that the age period of the twenties has, in the previous years, been filled with a swift process of transformation and modification (Arnett & Tanner, 2006). Significantly, few individuals in this cohort sought further education or training after completing their high school education. Consequently, most

young men transitioned to the world of work by the conclusion of their teenage years (Jensen, 2011). Macroscopically, the majority of young people a few decades ago had a short-lived period of adolescence, which promptly metamorphosised to solid and stable adult roles while in their early twenties (Jensen, 2011). Furthermore, the roles constructed during this time would be the blueprint and guide their future adult lives (Jensen, 2011). Now, most of the dynamics of that time have changed; more young people are pursuing an education and training beyond high school, and this phase is accompanied by a dense instability in terms of jobs, followed by many other changes (Arnett & Tanner, 2006). The journey toward adulthood has become more complicated and prolonged (Negru-Subtirica, 2012).

2.2.2. Emerging Adulthood as a Developmental Stage

Over the years, emerging adulthood has gradually gained popularity in public health research (Baggio et al., 2017). Life transitions introduce an element of change which affects the different life domains and human day-to-day interactions of individuals; however, this change can bring a lack of normalcy in mental health and psychopathology (Brandt et al., 2022). Levison (1978), in his research, conducted interviews with middle-aged men and developed a theory coined “The Novice Phase”. This theory postulates that as individuals transition from adolescence to adulthood, they are subject to significant flux and uncertainty while trying to figure out the different dynamics experienced (Levinson, 1978). This can place emerging adults at a greater risk for the development of psychiatric disorders, such as mood and personality disorders (Black et al., 2022). Studies conducted revealed that individuals who are still in the process of transitioning to adulthood are reported to have lower levels of psychosocial well-being and healthy lifestyle, implying that they are more likely to experience depression and lack of social support (Campbell, 2022). This stage of ambivalence has been

mostly identified with the internalisation of problems and dependence on alcohol (Baggio et al., 2017).

The typical onset of eating disorders has been traced to the period of emerging adulthood, which is between the ages of 18 and 29 (Potterton et al., 2019). Emerging adulthood comprises the period of exiting the phase of adolescence but not yet fully qualifying as an adult, with many researchers defining this life period as a bridge between adolescence and adulthood or prolonged adolescence (Arnett, 2012). The theory of emerging adulthood was initially developed to identify the polarities and discrepancies that separate emerging adulthood from adolescence and adulthood (Arnett & Mitra, 2018).

The term “emerging adulthood” does not have a clear and exact definition because this period, with its roles and expectations, is coupled with an overlap of adolescence and adulthood characteristics concerning developmental tasks (Arnett, 2012). Arnett (2012) argued that the quintessential factor of emerging adulthood is that due to ever-changing social and economic trends, emerging adults have now increased the average age of getting married and achieve higher levels of education than any other previous generation. It is these sociocultural changes that introduce a different and distinctive group. According to Arnett (2000), emerging adulthood is regarded as an adventurous, interesting and stimulating life period, further characterised by identity exploration in social roles, worldviews and relationships. However, mental illness is rife in the transition to adulthood (Potterton et al., 2019). This life period is crucial in terms of decision-making since the decisions made during this period may have long-term effects on individuals (Wood et al., 2017). These decisions often involve education, romantic relationships, family, social class, social capital and the larger sociocultural milieu (Arnett & Mitra, 2018).

Emerging adulthood is a relatively new term to classify these young people; historically, it was understood that the phase of adulthood begins at the age of 18, as this age is generally acknowledged as the age of shedding minority status (Potterton et al., 2020). These individuals now acquire the freedom to get married, drink alcohol, smoke, obtain a driver's licence, vote in elections and conduct themselves without the need for parental consent (Potterton et al., 2020). However, this developmental period has introduced the acceptance of delay in marriage, childbearing, parenting and extended duration of tertiary education completion (Lee et al., 2019). Coupled with financial struggles that stem from increased tuition fees, lack of job security and housing fees, emerging adults are said to remain dependent on their parents for a prolonged period (Lee et al., 2019). Recent technological improvements in brain imaging prove that by age 18, an individual's brain has not yet developed enough to be identified as an adult. However, it has developed beyond the stage of adolescence (O'Rourke et al., 2020). Furthermore, the human brain is not fully developed until the mid- to late twenties (Hartley & Sommerville, 2015). In addition, this period of transition into adulthood is mostly and easily affected and controlled by interpersonal and intrapersonal elements that may derail emerging adults from contributing and subscribing to body appreciation (Marta-Simões & Ferreira, 2019).

Emerging adults experience a range of challenges physically, psychologically and socially, and the effects of these compromising situations may lead them to develop several mental illnesses, including eating disorders (Brandt et al., 2022). This life period is regarded as a very crucial time to emphasise the importance of healthy eating habits due to the staggering fact that most emerging adults are consumers of sugar-sweetened beverages and fast food (Mahesh, 2024). Thus, engaging in these unhealthy eating habits leads to the possible

development of health issues such as cardiovascular diseases and diabetes (Almutairi et al., 2023).

2.2.3. Five Markers of Emerging Adulthood and their Possible Contribution to the Development of Eating Disorders

2.2.3.1 Age of Possibilities. Arnett (2000) identified five fundamental features of emerging adulthood that define the developmental changes during this period. The first feature is the age of possibilities, which encompasses emerging adults' overall positive outlook on life. Emerging adults at this stage start to feel more in control of their own lives and develop a sense of independence (Arnett, 2018). Some emerging adults were raised with a mentality that they could achieve whatever they wanted to if they worked hard. However, some realised that not all dreams and goals are feasible, resulting in an element of disappointment (Henig & Henig, 2012). Regardless of recognising that not every goal is feasible and achievable and that one will not always succeed at everything, these young people remain hopeful that they still have their entire lives ahead of them and, therefore, there is still the possibility for achievement (Arnett, 2015). As they try to find their feet in emerging adulthood without committing to any role in their careers or love lives, they constantly explore multiple routes or paths in life until they make definite choices; these possibilities remain open to them (Amreen, 2019). Emerging adults often experience delays in romantic relationships, family, and other commitments. Despite these delays, they tend to develop a sense of confidence that they will somehow achieve their goals (Lanctot & Poulin, 2017).

2.2.3.2 The Age of Identity Exploration. Secondly, one of the most crucial markers of emerging adulthood is the age of identity exploration, resulting from emerging adults' lack of devotion and obligation to roles or a specific sense of identity (Specht, 2017). Erikson

developed the human development theory spanning across the lifespan positing that adolescence is marked by a period where individuals explore their identity (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). However, Erikson acknowledged an exception to his theory and recognised that prolonged adolescence is a strong likelihood, making him more aware that advanced societies have the propensity to afford young individuals a period to be versatile and explore different roles until they reach a profound understanding of their place within society (Tribble, 2015). It has been acknowledged and noted the discrepancies present in the identity-pursuit process that occurs in adolescence and emerging adulthood and noted the delineating factor, which is a heightened level of seriousness in emerging adulthood than in adolescence (Arnett et al., 2014). Additionally, during adolescence, work mainly centres around being responsible and spending money earned on leisure activities (Tribble, 2015). Moreover, the aspect of love during this phase is of a transient and experimental nature, determined by immediate attractions (Tribble, 2015). In contrast, work in emerging adulthood presents a heightened degree of significance as individuals become more intentional about their future goals, plans and career building (Wood et al., 2017). Similarly, relationships that emerging adults build with significant others become pivotal to shaping their identity, as evident in partner selection that rests upon factors such as shared values, having similar goals and assessing the relationship's potential for long-term fulfilment (Arnett, 2015). Identity exploration in this context lays out the challenges that emerging adults experience in their pursuit to establish an identity; emerging adults explore different prospects in love, work and paradigms, causing them to fall prey to the negative effects that come from their engagement in some of the media content (Arnett, 2018). With much change experienced in this transitory phase, there is a decreased sense of urgency in getting married or establishing a family (Specht, 2017). In the process, these young people develop a sense of who they are, their purpose in life and how they fit in their communities

(Raelene, 2016). In essence, this dimension allows emerging adults to explore different ways of living and possible identities in different contexts while figuring out who they are (Baggio et al., 2017). This is an important process for solidifying their beliefs and values (Lanctot & Poulin, 2017).

2.2.3.3. The Age of Instability. The third feature is the age of instability, which occurs in response to the exploration process in emerging adulthood. Emerging adults are more likely to experience a lack of stability due to the changes they make regarding love, work and perspectives on how they view the world (Arnett, 2018). Most emerging adults tend to find the phase of emerging adulthood rocky and challenging, especially if they experience high levels of instability and unpredictability which accompany the phase (Lanctot & Poulin, 2017). Emerging adulthood has been identified as the only phase in the natural life course with an enormous sense of variability in an individual's demographic status (Arnett, 2000). These young people go through this stage with a deep sense of uncertainty and change, but these dynamics also allow them to build patience, endurance and resilience (Tribble, 2015). Arnett (2015) emphasised the adaptability of emerging adults in this phase. These young people can attempt to do something; if it does not work, they know they are in an opportune moment to change the plan (Arnett, 2015). They are not ignorant and oblivious that their attempts might fail. However, they acknowledge that if it occurs that their efforts do not pay off, they are aware of their luxury of adaption (Arnett, 2015).

2.2.3.4. The Age of Self-focus. The fourth feature is the age of self-focus. Some of the often-voiced critiques about emerging adults are that they are self-absorbed, constantly prioritising their happiness, and lack the responsibility to complete tasks they do not wish to complete (Tribble, 2015). This period is marked as a self-preparation by emerging adults for the

adult world they are about to enter; they acquire knowledge, develop skills and make important decisions about their future (Arnett, 2018). This is considered an essential element during the period of emerging adulthood because it has been established that emerging adults engage in the task of self-focus (Wood et al., 2017).

Arnett (2015) meticulously articulated the concept of self-focus in emerging adulthood and explained how they can benefit and learn from it:

By focusing on themselves, emerging adults develop skills at daily living, gain a better understanding of who they are and what they want from life, and begin to build a foundation for their adult lives. The goal of their self-focusing is to learn to stand alone as a self-sufficient person, but they do not see self-sufficiency as a permanent state. Rather, they view it as a necessary step before committing themselves to enduring relationships with others, in love and work. (p. 14)

These young emerging adults are in the process of developing the self, which consists of two aspects: the self-concept and the self-presentation (Heiman & Zafir, 2024). These concepts contribute to what individuals think of themselves and aspects about themselves that they make available to the public (Heiman & Zafir, 2024). Research has demonstrated a correlation between self-concept and self-presentation, also corroborated by a study that proved that adolescents who possessed a less solid sense of self presented an idealised version of themselves, and those with a more solid sense of self presented their true genuine self (Bailey et al., 2023). This explains the different types of online presence people choose to engage in and how they present themselves to the public (Bailey et al., 2023). The media greatly impacts emerging adults' self-development process because media content has often become their point

of reference in exploring their identity (Bjorsen, 2018). The images, videos, statuses, and other information shared in the media and all its different platforms encourage these young people to judge themselves based on this content (Farooq et al., 2023). It has been proved that the more individuals focus on their positive self-image, characteristics, and abilities, the more likely they are to experience positive outcomes. However, if an individual focuses on other people's idealised images, they are more likely to experience negative outcomes (Tort-Nasarre, 2023). Ideally, emerging adults will commit and respond positively to others, work, lifelong relationships, and family only when they experience the exploratory stage to be solid (Trible, 2015).

2.2.3.5. The Age of Feeling In-between. The final feature, the period of feeling in-between, brings an element of ambiguity in the lives of emerging adults. This is a period characterised by uncertainty where these young people find themselves entangled between certain continuing roles of adolescence and newly found roles of adulthood (Arnett, 2018). When asked, “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” a vast majority of emerging adults do not answer directly ‘yes’ or ‘no’ but rather describe their stance as “in some ways, yes, in some ways, no” (Arnett & Mitra, 2018). Emerging adults live within an intermediate, liminal space, frequently challenging standardised and regular markers and classifications (Trible, 2015). The vast majority of emerging adults no longer reside with their original families, nor do they have their own place of dwelling; they often relocate frequently and struggle to develop a significant connection with their current geographical location (Arnett, 2015). Many of them are in romantic relationships or even cohabiting. However, very few of them have taken a step into marriage. Some have initiated tertiary qualifications but have not yet completed them, and most notably, they are no longer teenagers nor are they adults (Arnett, 2015).

2.4 The Media

2.4.1. *The Media's Role and Influence*

Mass media has been defined as the primary means of mass communication used to store or deliver information or data. Mass media also institutes different methods or tools, such as newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and the Internet, to make a profit (Paul & Rai, 2021).

The sociocultural model posits that the existing pursuit of slenderness has been society-imposed, peer-pressure-induced, and influenced by family dynamics, creating unattainable standards for young people to achieve (Fitzsimmons-Craft, 2011; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). The role of two key mechanisms in this process is as follows: First, the pursuit and internalisation of unattainable appearance standards, which are socially imposed (Thompson et al., 1999); second, individuals evaluate themselves against others or their images as depicted on social media, referred to as appearance comparison (Shaefer & Thompson, 2014). The repetitive exposure to idealised images by social media leads individuals to strive for and endorse these unrealistic appearance standards (Hannah et al., 2022). However, despite the pressure from such dynamics, this model has echoed the media's clear, powerful, and undeniable influence as a major contributor to society (Heinberg, 1996). The media has been found to play a vital role in the global increase of pathological eating behaviours and the risk of developing eating disorders, specifically among adolescents and emerging adults (Blowers et al., 2003; Dane & Bhatia, 2023; Mora et al., 2022; Mushtaq et al., 2024; Shirokova et al., 2023). Primitively, contents about beauty, such as images, were conveyed through platforms or modes such as artistry, sonic art, and written works (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). However, it is the current and today's most pervasive mode of communication, which is the

media, that has been severely evaluated by body image and eating disorders scholars (Heinberg, 1996). The current effect of computer-generated art is different from that of primitively known and used fine art (Freedman, 1986). The main reason is that traditionally, pieces of art were idealised and glamorised as something far out of reach and impossible to achieve; therefore, individuals primarily indulged in such content for sheer “gazing” (Freedman, 1986). On the other hand, virtual art has made the distinctions between fictitious content and reality less defined with a bait that sells what the media presents as attainable, provided a set of directives is followed (Freedman, 1986). This platform has undergone several gradual developments in the past decades. Traditional media forms such as newspapers, magazines, television and radio are slowly losing vogue and hype to internet-based media (Frachina & Lo Coco, 2018).

The media has become important in defining beauty ideals and what others consider a physically attractive appearance (Syron, 2018). The media further paints the bodies of its consumers as imperfect if they are not on the same level as those portrayed as perfect by media content, subsequently reflecting an Orwellian effect on eating habits (Curran & Seaton, 2010). Eating pathologies manifest in both males and females; however, they are more pronounced in females than males at a ratio of 10:1 (Cohen, 2006). Previous research revealed that females have a thinner female ideal body than males’ ideal female body. Thus, females are more credulous to be influenced by the media’s fear-inducing content than males (Cohen, 2006). More recent research findings, also indicate females have a smaller or thinner female ideal body than males’ ideal body of females (Sagrera et al., 2022). Therefore, technological advances have afforded producers, mass production and distribution of messages that enable them to advertise their contents and make them available to a wide range of populations, which has proven to have a probable number of negative consequences for those on the receiving end

(Segrera et al., 2022). This is evident in how the media has manipulated human eating behaviour through their advertisements of food, eating and dieting (Syron, 2018).

The media is well-known for promoting ultra-thinness, controlling people's perceptions of beauty by communicating a certain body shape or size as ideal using images of models (D'Alessandro, 2007). Furthermore, the media tends to associate thin characters with beauty, popularity, and success, while overweight characters are unloved and unsuccessful (Kite et al., 2023). This negatively affects the minds of most girls from a young age (Kite et al., 2023). Appearance is an important factor that most individuals are constantly battling to improve as it affects self-evaluation and societal success and leads individuals to chase the ideal icons and symbols of beauty to attain high social status (Caddel, 2018). A study done as far back as 1954 revealed that individuals judge their appearances by comparing themselves with models in advertisements. The results also reported that the more individuals are exposed to such stimulating media content, the greater their chances of reporting body dissatisfaction (Bozsik, 2020). The media continues to advocate for the thinner-body representation. It has been shown that women's magazines contain a higher number of diet plan advertisements (with 83% of women who read these fashion magazines) than men's magazines; therefore, the media places significant importance on appearance and the slender-ideal (Spettigue & Mazzella, 2004). Television has also been identified as one of the sources of persuasion or impact in that in a typical household, the television (TV) remains on for more than seven hours every day, exposing viewers to explicitly presented unrealistic and unattainable ideals on TV shows that are mostly adored by adolescents and young people (Levine & Smolak, 1998). It is imperative to note that studies have discovered that it is not the regularity of watching TV shows that creates a certain level of exposure and vulnerability in viewers but rather internalising the content being consumed that exposes them to possible body image issues (Tiggemann &

Pickering, 1996). It was discovered that internalisation is linked to body dissatisfaction and distorted eating habits, predicting variations beyond those linked with mere recognition of other contributing factors, such as negative comments about one's physical appearance (Cusumano & Thompson, 1997). This particular content that the media sells to its end-users disempowers them, especially women, who are expected to achieve these unrealistic and mostly unreal beauty standards (Kumar, 2023). This has negatively affected women's perceptions of beauty, as demonstrated in a survey that investigated what every girl (between the ages of 11 and 17) wishes and the answer that dominated was "to lose weight and keep it off" (Spettigue & Mozzella, 2004). Another survey explored what older women would like to change about themselves, and most said "their weight". Therefore, negative body image and dissatisfaction have become so prevalent, normal and part of women's experiences that psychologists ended up coining the term "normative discontent" (Marshall, 2014). Normative discontent defines a state of women's dissatisfaction with their bodies and how it has become part of their experience and its acceptance as a normal "thing" that women go through (Tantleff-Dunn, 2013). Humans belong to a community inspired by universality, making it difficult not to want to have similar appearances (Watson et al., 2016).

The self-discrepancy theory posits that when individuals compare their attractiveness to images published in the media, they will experience body dissatisfaction due to the discrepancy between their actual self and ideal self (Möri, et al., 2022). This theory further identifies three domains of the self: the actual self, the ideal self and the ought self (Möri et al., 2022). The actual self represents an individual's sense of self and the specific individual aspects they have subscribed to, while the ideal self mirrors the person that they wish to become and the longing to have attributes they possess, whereas the ought self represents the person they feel they should become (Bak, 2014). If a discrepancy exists between the actual self, the

ideal self, and the ought self, then depression, sadness and low self-esteem will be experienced. However, if there is a balance between the three domains of self, happiness and satisfaction will be experienced (Oliver, 2023).

The Institute of Behavioural Sciences has classified media messages into five subdivisions: “be thin, consume and eat, be afraid of food, food will disappear, and you are not feminine/masculine enough” (Syron, 2018). The internalisation of these messages can create a pathway for eating disorders, thus further changing the eating habits of people who now do not eat as their physiological hunger dictates to them but rather follow an eating plan or diet prescribed by media messages (Syron, 2018). The 20th century has introduced marketing strategies that aim to prescribe specific eating habits to people, that taught people to allow their hunger to be controlled by external stimuli, leading to the establishment of scientific eating, which is explained as a type of feeding for children that dictates what children should be fed and when (Glanz et al., 2021). Consequently, this type of feeding informs parents about the times they are to be fed and the amounts they are to be fed, expropriating the natural inclination of these children to detect hunger during early childhood (Harris, 2010).

Much concern has been raised as to why one-sided, biased and prejudiced advertising that uses abnormally thin models is still progressive (Dittmar & Howard, 2004). There is credence that small sizes attract more customers, especially women, as they are easily drawn in by the desire to look like the image and will thus purchase the product (Syron, 2018). This notion is supported by a study conducted by Dittmar and Halliwell (2004), which found that using beautiful, thin girls on magazine covers increased sales. However, the opposite has also been proven in a study that showed that the product has a poorer recall when the media uses images that categorically impact body dissatisfaction (Mulgrew & Tiggemann, 2016).

Conversely, a study done by Halliwell and Dittmar (2004) revealed a different notion, highlighting that the type of models used in the media to advertise products does not affect whether the product will be bought, subsequently vouching for the use of bigger models and all sizes.

Traditionally, parents were the main responsible party for their children's eating habits. However, since the world at large is faced with a borderless pandemic of eating disorders and pathology, it has been proven that the media has taken over the role of prescribing and controlling their eating habits (Erriu et al., 2020). With this kind of evolution, the media is enforcing dependence on the communities, with people now depending on the media for what they should eat, the portions they should eat and how often they should eat, erasing the natural processes that every individual body must follow and act according to (Syron, 2018). The media continues to influence individuals' eating habits, as evidenced by the effects media advertisements have on people (Arnolds, 2023). These food advertisements regulate people's food choices in terms of quality and quantity, overlooking the fact that every individual is different and requires their own specific needs (Arnolds, 2023).

The media continues to aggravate eating disorders with its faulty and destructive marketing strategies. In a study that examined 1,200 diet commercials, it was discovered that only 120 of these commercials were health-conscious, signifying the negativity communicated to consumers through media content (Syron, 2018). The internalisation of media ideals can cause body dissatisfaction, which on its own instigates pathological and unhealthy eating behaviours (Fu et al., 2022).

The internet has introduced social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and many others, gaining many users. These platforms are used for voluntarily

sharing personal experiences, photographs, and worldviews (Greenhow et al., 2017). The personal content that individuals share on these platforms is viewed by others (friends or followers), and they can also comment or react to this content (Franchina & Lo Coco, 2018). It has been proven that the comments individuals receive from the pictures they share have a detrimental influence on how they view their bodies (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022). Sometimes, some of these comments or messages are positive. However, they are still regarded as a constant reminder that other people are judging their physical appearance, instigating a certain level of pressure to always aim to look perfect (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022).

Newly found evidence suggests that social networking sites as well as other online mediums, are becoming more and more influential and popular in South Africa (Bhanye et al., 2023). As further proof, recent statistics demonstrated a 15% increase in social networking site usage in South Africa, making emerging adults more vulnerable and subject to the negative and positive effects of the media (Lukose et al., 2023). It has been reported that the amount of time individuals spend on the internet is increasing, and an average person is said to spend 10 hours daily on the internet (Franchina & Lo Coco, 2018).

Social networking sites are less likely to promote images of models (who encourage and endorse thin-body types) than the media. However, it does not mean that regular people on these platforms do not share irrational images that do not mirror reality (Duan, 2022). Certain individuals share pictures which have been edited to accentuate their appearances by using filters and other modifying apps (Duan, 2022). This can be further interpreted by friends as original and authentic, deeming such images as socially accepted standards of beauty (Stein et al., 2014).

Although mass media, amongst many other things, is notorious for the publication of images and messages that encourage and enable eating disorders (“thinspiration”), there are websites and other media platforms that do allow and advocate for the publication of images and messages that encourage and promote fitness inspiration, also known as “fitspo” (Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016). At its core, fitspiration is meant to encourage healthy eating, exercising, and promoting physical fitness; however, this has been proven to have a dent in body image (Lewis & Arbuthnott, 2012). This occurs because people are allowed to post or publish images of their ideal body types or shapes to promote fitness and good health and not instigate unhealthy habits (Jerónimo & Carraça, 2022). This paves the way for people to end up publishing content that endorses “thinspiration” as “fitspiration” (Jerónimo & Carraça, 2022).

The main reasons internet-based media gained so much momentum, is that it allows users to interact with their friends, which is not possible with traditional media, and its convenience and easy access on smartphones and tablets (Shen et al., 2022). Such technological advancements have made it easy for individuals to access platforms that tend to glorify certain body shapes or sizes as ideal (Shen et al., 2022). There is a growing concern that an excessive amount of consumption of media content is connected to the possible development of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive symptoms (Zubair, 2023). However, nutrition and health professionals, including health organisations, are capitalising on these online platforms to encourage and promote healthy food choices and habits to ensure healthy eating behaviours among emerging adults (Gorski & Roberto, 2015). Unfortunately, this initiative has proven to be inadequate in promoting healthy eating due to a lack of engagement from the targeted population as well as the mounting pressure to compete against

established and powerful campaigns of corporate brands and food industries with solidified marketing strategies and a high fan base volume (Vaughn et al., 2019).

Recent research investigated the existence of a link between media consumption and body image. It was reported that the more exposed individuals are to media content, the more negatively their body image is affected (Nghaimesh et al., 2023). Social media, specifically, has been revealed to negate the body image perceptions of the users, causing them to be more prone to a disturbance in eating patterns and behaviours (Jiotsa et al., 2021). Previous studies have highlighted that mass media has a tremendous influence on body dissatisfaction, mostly among women. This concept was birthed by exposure to the thin-body type, promoted by television, magazines, and other mediums (Caddel, 2018). However, the content made available on these mass media platforms does not always reflect reality. The end-users find themselves under pressure to engage in social comparisons with peers who are regarded as more attractive or thinner (Franchina & Lo Coco, 2018). Social comparison can be defined as the conscious perceptions by individuals about their bodies compared to others (Crusius et al., 2022). Body dissatisfaction is regarded as secondary to social comparison and is a major influence in the development of body image dissatisfaction (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022).

Several studies found a relationship between exposure to mass media and body image. The findings had an element of ambivalence. Despite the relationship between mass media and body image disturbance, there was also a correlation between mass media and positive body image (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). Amidst these opposing findings, the most prevalent notion remained the media's negative effect on body image because whenever such fear-activating correlations are discovered, they are often publicised (Silva & Steins, 2023). However, there are movements in the media, especially on social media, advocating for positive body image;

these movements oppose the accepted “glorified” body shapes and sizes in the media, beauty standards and the endorsement of such concepts (Bi et al., 2024). These movements achieve this by sharing information on mass media platforms, encouraging every individual to embrace their appearance, feel good about their bodies and, most importantly, shun the famous and unrealistic body ideals (Khushwaha et al., 2022).

2.5. Body Image

2.5.1. Body Image Defined

Body image is defined as an instinctive presentation or description by an individual regarding their body without reference to their appearance (Mallaram, 2023). Body image is further interpreted as a multifaceted concept relating but not limited to the thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and perceptions individuals hold about their bodies (Engel et al., 2023). Historically, body image was defined as a mental image of one’s body, including negative and positive evaluations (Quittkat et al., 2019). Body image is mostly encapsulated as inclusive of an evaluative aspect (satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one’s appearance) and a deep assessment of the significance of an individual’s body image in shaping their sense of identity (Rodgers et al., 2023). The subjective perception of body image is mainly pertinent to body size; it is indicative of a risk factor for the development of eating disorders when individuals perceive their body size to be larger than they are (Gruszka et al., 2022). Negative evaluations of one’s body have been strongly associated with an internal sense of inadequacy, which may ultimately lead to health-compromising conditions such as eating disorders, while positive evaluations thereof lead to an internal sense of fulfilment, satisfaction and good health (Zanella & Lee, 2022). An individual’s body image can be tainted due to the development of body

dissatisfaction, which is the presence of a negative depiction of one's body (Barnes et al., 2020). Body image is not limited to the innate genetic makeup of an individual or the spoken perceptions about an individual held by their significant other, albeit the undeniable influence that these factors contribute to body image, the onus of how an individual evaluates and experiences their body strongly rests upon them (Gruszka et al., 2022).

Several theoretical frameworks provide perspectives on how body image is developed and, in the process, maintained: Psychodynamic theories underscore the influence of early childhood experiences, parental influences, as well as inner struggles in moulding body image (Traylor et al., 2022). Social comparison theory postulates that individuals' body perception is strongly influenced by comparing their bodies to others, engaging in either upward or downward comparisons (Festinger, 1954). While the objectification theory suggests that society's adoption of treating the body as an object causes individuals to take on an observer's perspective, self-objectification is about developing body dissatisfaction (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

A four-component model of body image has been proposed, consisting of different elements that comprise body image (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). These elements include the affective dimension, referring to feelings about one's body and the emotions evoked due to body evaluation (Murray et al., 2024). Secondly is the cognitive dimension, which refers to the accepted opinions and thoughts about one's body (Murray et al., 2024). Thirdly, the behavioural dimension, relating to one's reactions that reflect the idea of their body, is the subjective satisfaction dimension, which is one's overall satisfaction with the way they look (Murray et al., 2024). The inability to understand and acknowledge these different pillars separately may result in a failure to realise that the negative impact of the media, has the power to attack

different dimensions of body image differently (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). Research has discovered that media content may have differing effects on body image; appearance-based content has been reported to lead to upward social comparison more than any other content (Silva & Steins, 2023). There is limited understanding of the origins of the concerns related to body image. However, many researchers have hypothesised that the media may play a central role in creating and intensifying the phenomenon of body dissatisfaction and, consequently, may be partly responsible for the increased prevalence of eating disorders (Morris & Katzman, 2003). In investigating the effect of mass media on body image, it was found that gender and ethnicity play a role in some of the causal factors (Holmstrom, 2004). This is supported by a research study that was done on Caucasian and non-Caucasian women, which found that non-Caucasian women are less prone to engage in upward social comparison, making them less vulnerable to developing body image dissatisfaction and distortion. However, the opposite has been reported for Caucasian women, who are more likely to engage in upward social comparison and, therefore, experience a negative body image (Cornelissen et al., 2022).

Body image has been identified as one of the important factors that influence the lifestyle choices of emerging adults, as body image can be influenced by media content containing aesthetic ideals (Santarossa & Woodruff, 2017). This suggests a bidirectional relationship between the media's influence and body image towards the development of disordered eating behaviours (Derenne & Beresin, 2018). Furthermore, the media has been identified as the primary medium utilised to spread messages about weight. Moreover, the media conditions teach society about the "right" body shapes and sizes and that anything outside of these specificities should not be embraced and acknowledged as beautiful (Santarossa & Woodruff, 2017). Due to emerging adults' heightened exposure to the internet, radio and

television, they are more prone to be negatively influenced by the content shared on these platforms (Franchina & Lo Coco, 2018).

Body image is encountered on a continuum from positive to negative, meaning that individuals with a negative body image are more likely to feel dissatisfied with their body appearance, proving the existence of a discrepancy in what the individual looks like and what the individual would like to look like (Rounsefell et al., 2020). This growing feeling of dissatisfaction with appearance predisposes individuals to serious complications such as low self-esteem, depression and low quality of life. Furthermore, a negative body image produces pathological eating behaviours such as dieting, binge eating, calorie counting and self-induced vomiting (Dane & Bhatia, 2023). Regardless of attempts to maintain its stability over a period, body image is prone to fluctuate in specific circumstances, as indicated by longitudinal and experimental studies that highlight an increased risk associated with older age, changes brought about by media influence, as well as alterations in health status (Joitsa et al., 2021).

2.5.2. Psychological Implications of Body Image

2.5.2.1. Body Dissatisfaction. Psychological implications on body image are broad and can remarkably impact an individual's health and well-being. Body dissatisfaction, a negative subjective assessment of an individual's physical appearance, is a common psychological symptom of more serious body image issues and is linked with diminished self-esteem, depression as well as eating disorders (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002). Studies revealed that certain individual characteristics, reduced self-esteem, feelings of depression and a high body mass index (BMI) place an individual at risk of developing body dissatisfaction (Van den Berg et al., 2007). Body dissatisfaction is a psychological symptom derived from the difference or gap an individual recognises between their self-image and preferred body image (Heider et al., 2018).

2.5.2.2. Body Image and Eating Disorders. A distorted body image often appears as a major psychological symptom of eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorder. Individuals suffering from these disorders are more likely to perceive themselves as overweight despite the reality of them being underweight (Thompson & Stice, 2001). This may cause them to engage in harmful behaviours such as excessive exercise and restrictive dieting (Thompson & Stice, 2001). Various eating disorders have been closely associated with body image concerns, pathological eating behaviours and distorted body image, which are important attributes of the onset of several eating disorders (Mallaram et al., 2023). Historically, research that focused on body image and eating disorders primarily underscored negative body image as the major contributing factor, with more significance placed on negative attitudes concerning one's body (Engel et al., 2023).

2.5.2.3. Low Self-esteem. Body image has a huge influence on one's self-esteem. An individual who is regarded to have a positive body image is confident about their outward appearance and has learned to accept their flaws, and as a result, they have heightened self-esteem (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002). The opposite is also true. An individual who experiences a lack of satisfaction and anguish about their body is more likely to have a negative body image, subsequently experiencing significantly low levels of self-esteem, which can, in turn, lead to feelings of insufficiency (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

There is a strong corroboration from previous research studies that found a link between body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem. This trend is primarily rife during the adolescent years and in young adults (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010). The interiorising of unattainable aesthetic requirements and expectations from mass media, family and age peers aggravates body dissatisfaction, further tainting self-esteem (Grabe et al., 2008). Moreover, human

functions that require some form of mental energy, such as selective attention and prejudiced interpretation, are major contributing factors that support the development of debilitating psychological symptoms such as diminished self-esteem and a distorted body image (Cash, 2012). Sufferers of a distorted body image are fairly engaged in unhealthy tendencies such as magnifying their own perceived flaws, disregarding positive comments on their physical appearance, constantly fixated on outward appearance worries, and negating their body image (Cash & Labarge, 1996).

2.5.2.4. Social Comparison. The social comparison theory posits that individuals' social and personal significance is wholly dependent on how they perform compared to others (Festinger, 1954). Research found that being exposed to suggestive and toxic content on social media and other media platforms encourages upward social comparison (the tendency to compare oneself to others who are regarded to be more attractive and desirable), leading to negative evaluations of one's body (Fardouly et al., 2015). Furthermore, receiving feedback on one's appearance on these platforms, whether positive or negative, can significantly affect how an individual sees their body by comparing themselves to others (Myers & Crowther, 2009). Additionally, individuals who experience excessive exposure to desirable media content, such as images and internalising it, tend to compare themselves unfavourably, leading to feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with their bodies (Levine & Piran, 2001).

2.5.3 The Body Image of Emerging Adults

When entering the stage of emerging adulthood, emerging adults are naturally vulnerable to negative feelings such as fear and sadness due to having to move away from their families and friends for university or even work purposes, but in contrast, elated and inquisitive about the future that lies ahead (Gillen et al., 2006). At this stage, emerging adults are very

prone to comparison and competition because they often find themselves surrounded by their peers (especially in tertiary institutions), where they compare their appearances with their peers, increasing anxiety about being evaluated (Gillen et al., 2006). Body image concerns mostly develop as a discrepancy between their actual self and their ideal self; thus, the greater the discrepancy, the poorer an individual's body image becomes (Woodman & Hemmings, 2008). Also, all decisions made by emerging adults during this period significantly impact the development of their body image (Ramos et al., 2019). This stage introduces a new environment to emerging adults, coupled with several options available, which also carry potential risks (Ramos et al., 2019). Due to the pressures that emerging adults experience, they gradually develop certain behaviours that could potentially impact their body image negatively (Barnes et al., 2020). Body image is closely associated with other conditions, such as depression, substance abuse, and eating disorders (Satghare et al., 2019).

Body image is strongly connected to the process of identity formation during the phase of emerging adulthood. As individuals try to adjust to the phase of stark uncertainty and intricacies and develop a sense of individuality, body image perceptions play a major role in forming and understanding their self-regard and identity (Arnett, 2000). Body image is a complicated and multifarious concept that greatly influences and shapes the lives of emerging adults (Arnett, 2000).

2.5.3.1. Media Influence that Disturbs the Healthy Development of Emerging Adults' Body Image. Young adults are battling with two major issues that are steadily growing in prominence: distortions regarding body image and the persistent unreasonable or unfair treatment of people because they are overweight (Aziz, 2017). A meta-analysis of 77 correlational and experimental studies found that prolonged exposure to mass media portraying

desirable body shapes and sizes is closely associated with a heightened awareness of women's bodies and bears a great possibility of uncovering their flaws, therefore creating anxiety about their bodies (Grabe et al., 2008). Thus, when women interiorise body ideals suggested by the media, they may experience feelings of inadequacy or dissatisfaction with their bodies, which can manifest in pathological behaviours in pursuit of accentuating their outward appearance to achieve the glorified body standards (Ferguson & Winegard, 2011).

An increasing and penetrating phenomenon that hinders the healthy development of emerging adults' body image is fatphobia, which is characterised by pervasive hatred, feelings of anxiety, and bigotry around the phenomenon of "fatness" (Robinson et al., 1993). The stigma that is attached to "fatness" has a detrimental effect and prejudice toward weight because of societal stereotypes that place negative connotations on being overweight, such as laziness, unattractiveness, and weakness; consequently, individuals who are categorised as "fat" suffer dire discrimination in important life domains and are thus unfairly judged because of their physical appearance (Gailey, 2016).

Emerging adulthood is an essential period in examining and developing body image concerns (Green, 2018). Undoubtedly, emerging adults have greater access to the media than any other preceding generation, as the messages emerging adults receive about physical appearance from the media are so robust that they can permeate the self in such a powerful way, leaving a longer-lasting effect on these young people (Bjornsen, 2018). Perceptions about physical appearance can be delivered in two ways: firstly, through modelling that is suggestive about body types and sizes, and secondly, through categorical comments made to individuals about their bodies (Heiman & Olenik-Shemesh, 2019). Therefore, individuals exposed to such messages inevitably develop a sense of dissatisfaction with their bodies (Singh & Gadiraju,

2020). Research has revealed that most emerging adults report high rates of issues regarding how they view their bodies, which is mostly manifested in body dissatisfaction and unhealthy eating habits (Rounsefell, 2020). Emerging adulthood is, therefore, identified as the bedrock for body-related problems (Gillen et al., 2006).

The media often relays a message regarding idealised aesthetic standards by constantly and explicitly endorsing messages, images, television programmes, magazines and other media outlets that induce and encourage thinness or slenderness as the “norm” for women and masculinity is presented for men (Grabe et al., 2008). These demarcated ideals create unrealistic expectations and cause emerging adults to experience a diminished sense of worth in failing to adhere to these expectations (Grabe et al., 2008). The thin ideal that is being promoted by the media contains content that is highly unachievable. This content often depicts women with a slender frame, with most models having body shapes and sizes that fall below the healthy acceptable threshold according to BMI standards (Aziz, 2017). This content presented by the media (e.g., images) undergoes technological alterations such as photoshopping, editing and filtering, which the media publishes as attainable, even though it often requires radical and extremely harmful measures (Engeln–Maddox, 2005). The dominance of idealised images does not exclusively affect women, but men are not immune to the pressures of the media. Some men may feel obligated to adhere to these ideals, causing them to resort to the use of dangerous substances such as anabolic steroids and performance-enhancing drugs in pursuit of achieving the glorified body ideal (Oppenheim, 2016).

The media is one of the strongest forces behind transmitting messages about physical appearance. The media sells the slender body type as the norm and insinuates that people should attain that body type (Mills et al., 2017). It has a detrimental effect on emerging adults’ body

image as they have reported that media content containing such material pressurises them to want to achieve what is represented as the ideal (McCombs & Mills, 2021). The media has become a transmitter of the drive for thinness and body dissatisfaction in a very powerful way, and this kind of influence from the media penetrates so deeply that it reaches and affects men and women across the world (Spettigue & Henderson, 2004). Research done in Fiji also found that the media has a powerful influence on the possible development of body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptomatology (Becker, 2004). Television had only been introduced in Fiji in 1995, following its introduction to adolescent girls, there was a significant change in their eating attitudes and behaviours around food (Becker, 2004). These results then led to the conclusion that pathological eating behaviour and patterns are due to prolonged exposure to the media (Spettigue et al., 2004). Numerous studies done in the past have found a positive correlation between media exposure, eating disorder symptomatology, and poor body image (Morris & Katzman, 2003).

Media globalisation is one of the strong forces behind the possible development of disordered eating behaviours. The production, distribution, and consumption of media products on a global scale has facilitated the promotion of unrealistic aesthetic ideals (Radwan et al., 2019). Research has discovered that countries that align themselves with Western aesthetic ideals and beauty standards are more likely to have young people with low self-esteem, distorted body image, and body shaming (Radwan et al., 2019). Also, the most important factors that buffer against the development of disordered eating behaviours are embracing and contending with how one looks and developing a positive mental image of one's body (Kapoor et al., 2022).

In pursuit of identifying the major contributing factors in the relationship between mass media exposure and appearance dissatisfaction, it was revealed that media internalisation is one of the leading causes of the connection between the two constructs (Franchina & Lo Coco, 2018). Media internalisation is interpreted as the subscription to ideals of beauty published by the media and further embracing these ideals as a personal goal and standard (Betlisson & Gillberg, 2017). Media internalisation promotes appearance dissatisfaction, as subscribing to beauty ideals in the media by individuals creates a gap between exaggerated and unachievable media standards and the individual's physical appearance, subsequently giving rise to feelings of dissatisfaction (Bi et al., 2024). Previous research revealed that the ideal body has evolved over the years and that certain types of physiques have been labelled inadequate by the media (Lewallen & Behm-Mariwatz, 2016). This had a negative effect mostly on women and was corroborated by research that was done on female university students who engaged in social comparison and later developed depression, body dissatisfaction and lowered mood compared to those who were not exposed to the media (Lewallen & Behm-Mariwatz, 2016).

Developmental psychologists have argued that the intentional comparisons individuals engage in result from self-exploration and means individuals possess a natural inclination to acquire an exact assessment and judgement of the self (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). This exploration allows them to accept or discard certain traits about the self (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). Psychologists have also found that the motivation for people to feel good about themselves is what inspires social comparison (upward comparison) and maintains positive self-esteem (downward comparison) (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018). The debacle of pathological eating behaviours has been aggravated by online communities that encourage and uplift eating disorders (Branley & Covey, 2018). Social media continues to be the base root of the spread of such information regarding eating behaviours. The essence of this sort of

information reaches healthy individuals who may be unable to resist the attractive force being sold to them, leaving them with no choice but to succumb to the temptation (Branley & Covey, 2018). Moreover, these propelling assumptions and perceptions around eating disorders may be within reach of individuals who are already suffering from eating disorders, potentially encouraging them to continue this path and, in return, worsen their condition and even lead to death (Salafia et al., 2015).

Eating disorders are justified and defended by “pro” communities, who believe that eating disorders are rather a particular unconventional manner of living that is to be accepted as normal and not considered as an illness that needs to be treated (Troscianko & Leon, 2020). These communities share photographs of human skeletal frames, describe them as beautiful and encourage their followers to engage in anorexic eating behaviours (Branley & Covey, 2017). Pro-eating disorder communities portray disordered eating behaviours as normal conduct, creating an effect that makes the consumers feel as though this is just, morally correct and altogether faultless (Branley & Covey, 2017). This is an alarming factor due to social media’s lack of censorship and the synergetic power between social media and its heavy use by emerging adults, who are mostly vulnerable to eating disorders (Branley & Covey, 2017).

Researchers have continued to explore the causal effect of media influence on pathological eating behaviours and body dissatisfaction among young people, exposing young women to images of slender models in fashion magazines to gauge their body image, body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness and their immediate reaction after exposure (Spettigue & Henderson, 2004). The results indicated that the women’s level of body satisfaction was significantly lowered post-exposure to images of slender models, which correspond with the parameters of the sociocultural theory positing that the media causes many adolescent girls and

young women to experience body dissatisfaction (Spettigue et al., 2004). Another study has pointed out that the overwhelming influence of the media could indirectly influence young women's body image and self-esteem, which stems from the influence on boys' expectations of females' appearance (Mellor et al., 2010).

The confirmation that the media has a negative influence on body image, self-esteem, and emotional well-being through the content that it delivers for consumption by its end-users has intrigued researchers into investigating and identifying the prime purpose for individuals to be prone to the negative messages and images portrayed by the media (Nene & Olayemi, 2023). The researchers found that individuals who are more vulnerable to the negative effects of the media are those who are already at-risk, women who have internalised the "ideal" thin body and already report low levels of body satisfaction (Frederick et al., 2017). In addition, a meta-analysis review discovered that pubescent girls who already present a lack of social support and have succumbed to the social pressures to be thin are more susceptible to negative media content (Spettigue & Henderson, 2004). The omnibus research results on media influence, body dissatisfaction and the negative effects on eating disorders revealed the causal role of the media in the development of eating disorders (Spettigue & Henderson, 2004).

Many men and women who are suffering from body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, weight concerns and internalisation of negative media content on appearance are often regular media users (Joitsa et al., 2021). Most individuals who suffer from disordered eating behaviours are also heavy media users and are more inclined to read fashion magazines, identifying themselves as "media content addicts" (Joitsa et al., 2021). Qualitative results concurred with this theory by indicating the similarities that exist between the theory and models that are often used to explain other compulsive and addictive processes (Creswell et al., 2021). Women with

disordered eating behaviours have now made fashion magazines their point of reference in terms of beauty standards in pursuit of achieving the unreal cosmetic standards portrayed by the media (Henriques & Patnaik, 2020). Beauty magazines reiterate the thinner body by promoting and echoing messages that insinuate the slender body as the ideal, further cancelling any categorical messages (that they are too thin) from sufferers' friends and families (Veldhuis et al., 2014).

Although not the primary focus of this study, for a balanced and thorough overview of the causes of distorted body image and eating disorders, the additional contributors to the development of eating disorders will conclude this chapter.

2.6 Additional Contributors to the Development of Eating Disorders

2.6.1. *Culture*

In as much as the period of emerging adulthood is centred around individuals, it is greatly shaped and influenced by culture, being fixated on universal dynamics and being unalterable (Arnett, 2000). Eating pathology is also regarded as culture related. Eating disorders do not only pertain to eating but an individual's attempt to achieve and maintain a "glorified" aesthetic ideal, making it challenging to marginalise eating socialisation in deliberating eating disorders; food is the most important instrument in the process of the development of eating disorders, mainly due to its expediting nature in pathology (Markey, 2004). Eating socialisation has been defined as a robust constituent of family socialisation, which is deeply amalgamated and rooted in culture (Rochedy et al., 2023). Research has shown that eating behaviours and patterns are culturally influenced and learned in the family context

from an early age because these familial interactions mostly dictate what one eats, when, and how much one eats (Song et al., 2023).

Culture is a key factor in establishing culinary rules, conduct around food and specified food habits (Markey, 2004). The eating habits introduced and practised in the familial context play an immense role, as research found that social settings promote restrictions in diets, leading to a lack of control over food intake (Czarniecka-Skubina et al., 2023). Parents who create rigid dietary plans for their children may forbid their children the ability to regulate their own food intake, therefore causing them to be dependent on internal (portions prescribed by parents) cues for food intake and not external (hunger) cues, while culture also influences the body image of emerging adults, as cultures tend to initiate acceptable body shapes and sizes (Ravikumar et al., 2022). Emerging adults are taught from an early age what is considered attractive and what is not, and cultural beliefs and perceptions of body image are promoted through the media (Xie, 2024). Acculturation is another dynamic that interprets the migration from one's own culture and way of doing things to another culture, which may mostly be domineering (Shekriladze & Tchanturia, 2017). This process could transpire due to being exposed to another culture and may lead to the development of acculturative stress, which is an unhealthy manner of addressing multiple changes, losses, and uncertainties that, in turn, negatively affects an individual's well-being (Shekriladze & Tchanturia, 2017). Disordered eating patterns normally develop due to changes experienced in culture and, therefore, correlate with eating disorders, culture change and acculturative stress (Song et al., 2023). Research has found disordered eating patterns and behaviours amongst cultures and communities engaged in the acculturation process (Chen et al., 2023).

2.6.2. Biological Factors

Genetic predisposition plays a significant role in the aetiology and development of eating disorders, and genetic heritability has been held accountable for almost 50% of cases of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa (Donato et al., 2022). Eating disorders, amongst other pathologies such as depression, substance abuse, obsessive-compulsive disorder and personality disorders, have also been traced in the family history of individuals with disordered eating (Berrittini, 2004). It has been proven that genetic endowment has a significant influence on the development of eating disorders, and corporate perceptions of body image, weight and ideal bodies are communicated in this specific context (Salafia et al., 2015). This was corroborated by research that studied the perceptions of weight among mothers of eating-disordered girls and discovered that the mothers were overly concerned about their weight, their physical appearance as well as their diet (Kontele et al., 2023).

Neurochemical imbalance can contribute to the disruption of normal eating habits and lead to pathological eating disorders. This occurs when the neurochemicals begin to affect and influence imperative processes that determine an individual's behaviour around food. These include state of mind, processes that regulate food intake, impulse control, and reward processing (Monteleone et al., 2005). Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that is pivotal in pleasure, motivation and learning; imbalances that affect it have been closely linked with psychological disorders such as pathological eating disorders (Frank et al., 2005). Frank et al. (2005) discovered that individuals whose dopamine function in the brain had been disturbed were reported to suffer from anorexia nervosa, indicative of a possibility of contributing to the development of restricted eating habits. Serotonin is a chemical in the brain that is considered a mood stabiliser and directly regulates mood, appetite and impulse control; an imbalance of

the serotonin system has been strongly associated with psychiatric illnesses, such as eating disorders (Monteleone et al., 2019). A meta-analysis revealed a significant imbalance in the serotonin systems of patients suffering from anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, signalling a possible role in the pathophysiology of these disorders (Donato et al., 2022).

2.7 Theoretical Framework on The Development of Eating Disorders

2.7.1 The Self-discrepancy Theory

The self-discrepancy theory posits that when individuals compare their attractiveness to images published in the media, they will experience body dissatisfaction due to the discrepancy between their actual self and ideal self (Syron, 2018). This theory also identifies three domains of the self: the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self (Syron, 2018). If a discrepancy exists between the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self, then depression, sadness and low self-esteem will be experienced. However, if there is a balance between the three domains of self, happiness and satisfaction will be experienced (Hu et al., 2022). The period of transition to adulthood is mostly and easily affected and controlled by interpersonal and intrapersonal elements that may derail emerging adults from contributing and subscribing to body appreciation (Marta-Simões & Ferreira, 2019).

2.7.2. The Objectification Theory

The objectification theory posits that women are often devalued as sexual objects across interpersonal settings and media-based encounters through sexual assault, sexually suggestive comments, and the use of women models in magazines that promote racy content (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Gradually, these women are subject to self-objectification, where they begin

to view and identify themselves as objects and not subjects, placing their focus more on their outward appearance than their inner selves (Moradi & Huang, 2008). The recurring emphasis placed on external appearance is seen behaviourally in the maintenance of regular surveillance of one's appearance (Moradi & Huang, 2008). As a result, body shaming occurs when women perceive their bodies as different from accepted beauty ideals (Calogero et al., 2011). This theory further postulates that eating disorders may develop because of the various paths that women may follow to achieve their ideal body shape or size to minimise body shame (Klipela et al., 2019). Social media allows emerging adults to engage in self-objectification by sharing photos of themselves, followed by reactions from people (Fox et al., 2021).

2.7.3. Social Comparison Theory

Social comparison theory is pivotal in elucidating how individuals perceive themselves and the avenues explored in the process of self-evaluation, emphasising the importance of the social comparison theory in understanding how people judge themselves in relation to others in their social environment (Aziz, 2017). According to the social comparison theory, individuals have a natural inclination to appraise and gauge themselves by comparing themselves with others (Cohen, 2006). This term was introduced by social psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954 to describe the process of comparing one's opinions within social settings, further postulating that individuals possess an innate drive to evaluate themselves by comparing their skills and beliefs with those of others, to comprehend how individuals sought information about themselves through comparisons with others, which can shape their self-perceptions and behaviours (Festinger, 1954). He further explains the role of external sources in the development of an individual's self-understanding, deeming it limiting for individuals to

depend only on objective reality to obtain meaning, encouraging them to seek validation and confirmation from others (Festinger, 1954).

The social cognitive theory identifies two social comparisons: upward and downward. Upward comparison is described as comparing oneself with individuals who are perceived as superior, while downward comparison relates to the comparison of oneself with individuals who are perceived as worse off (Cohen, 2006). When there is a discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self, individuals will seek out methods to bring them closer to their ideal self (Jacobs et al., 2023). The concept of downward comparisons posits that it places individuals in a better and more favourable standing where they can boost their self-esteem by comparing themselves to others who are believed to be beneath them (Gibbons, 1986). Similarly, upward comparisons result in diminished self-esteem by comparing oneself with individuals who are believed to be of higher status (Gibbons, 1986). This theory is necessary in understanding eating pathology sufferers' intense desire to be thin (Cohen, 2006). Individuals who engage in social comparison are more likely to develop a distorted body image.

2.7.4. *Cultivation Theory*

George Gerbner developed the cultivation theory with a primary focus on exposure to television. He stated that excessive exposure to media content “cultivates” perceptions and conceptions that are reflective of the reality sold by the media and not the real-world social realities (Perera, 2023). Often, the media goes to great lengths to contradict, such as combining unhealthy habits with healthy outcomes (a healthy and attractive woman binging on junk food), which relays a negative and incorrect message to the end-users (Rounsefell, 2020). The cultivation theory further discerns that immoderate television exposure leads to the adoption of unreal and unrealistic media realities that do not mirror the realities we experience in the real

world (Perera, 2023). This theory also describes the negative influence that media has on body image, the drive for thinness and disordered eating (Cohen, 2006).

2.7.5. *Social Learning Theory*

Social learning theory, proposed by Albert Bandura, posits that humans learn behaviours through observation, imitation, and modelling of others in the social environment (Bandura, 1977). According to this theory, young adults observe and interiorise the ideal beauty standards identified and prescribed by the media, which means there is a high possibility to identify with and imitate certain behaviours that they observe of influencers who personify the specified media “ideal” standards, resulting in them believing and absorbing these behaviours in such a way that they become their character (Grabe et al., 2008).

2.7.6. *Cognitive Behavioural Theory*

The cognitive behavioural theory posits that our thoughts, feelings and behaviours are intertwined and have a mutual interaction and impact on each other (Beck, 1976). This theory suggests that individuals make meaning of their life events by cognitive processes, resulting in emotional responses and behavioural reactions (Beck, 1976). The connection between thoughts, emotions, and behaviours structures a repetitive and predictable pattern, where negative thinking patterns can spark negative emotions, resulting in the development of dysfunctional behaviours (Hoffman et al., 2012).

In applying this theory to the study, it may be deduced that emerging adults’ malformed thoughts and beliefs regarding body image are influential in the development and upkeep of eating disorders (Cash & Smolak, 2011). Exposure to media presenting unrealistically unattainable ideals about beauty may be influential in the individual’s malformed body

perceptions, possibly leading to pathological behaviours such as eating disorders (Cash & Smolak, 2011).

2.7.7. *Ecological Systems Theory*

The ecological systems theory was developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, which examines and analyses how individuals engage with and are influenced by their immediate environments (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This theory focuses on the significance of comprehending the process of growth and changes that humans experience within the context of different yet interrelated systems: immediate microsystems (proximal environments), mesosystems (connections between microsystems), exosystems (external environments that have a direct influence on development), and macrosystems (cultural values as well as norms) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The undeniable and powerful influence of the media plays a crucial role in understanding their effect on body image and the possible development of eating disorders. The media is understood as a source that is potently active at the macro and exosystem levels (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), where cultural ideals and societal norms informed by the media form individuals' perceptions and their behavioural patterns.

2.7.8. *Self-schema Theory*

Self-schema theory, developed by Markus (1977), posits that individuals develop and structure information about themselves into mental channels called self-schemas. These schemas encompass the individual's belief systems, feelings, and encounters they have captured about themselves in certain areas of their lives, such as elements in their academic and social life or their outward appearance (Markus, 1977). The self-schema theory highlights the schemas as mental banks individuals utilise to make sense or meaning of important information, they feel is pertinent to them (Pankin, 2013). Media representation of leanness

and glorified standards of beauty may impact the information that individuals garner about their body image and how they structure it, further eliciting negative reactions about one's body, leading to the possible development of eating disorders (Markus, 1977).

2.8. Chapter Summary

This chapter presented relevant theories concerning eating disorders, emerging adulthood, body image as well as mass media influence, delineating the connection between these constructs, together with a comprehensive discussion on the prevalent themes that explain the occurrence of eating disorders influenced by the media, including capturing how the body image of emerging adults is affected in the process. In conclusion, it is evident that media influence significantly impacts how emerging adults view and evaluate themselves.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the research design and methodology used in executing the research process. This chapter also justifies and elaborates on the suitability of the specific research approach used in the study and the methods involved in collecting, analysing and presenting the data. Furthermore, an explanation is rendered regarding the sampling procedures used, and the most vital research principles are highlighted. The chapter concludes with the ethical considerations and the important blueprint for dealing with ethical issues in research are presented.

3.2 Research Approach

This study was conducted through the lens of a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research mainly allows researchers to study phenomena in their natural settings and understand or interpret phenomena according to the meanings individuals attach to them (Aspers & Corte, 2019). This approach also entails the studied use and collection of multiple empirical materials such as case studies, personal experiences, life stories, interviews, and observations that narrate the patterns and challenging junctures and meanings in people's lives (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative research was a suitable approach for this study due to its holistic nature, and the ability to collect rich data to fully comprehend the deeper subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Also,

the qualitative research approach allows researchers the opportunity to advance and harness their interpersonal and subjective skills in their research process (Alase, 2017).

While significant research has been conducted on disorders of eating behaviours and media usage amongst emerging adults in America, India, Hong Kong, Fiji, and other parts of the world, this research aimed to explore and describe emerging adults' experiences and perceptions of the media's role on body image and the development of eating disorders within the South African context. This was executed with the aspiration that the findings of the study will provide a perspective of South African emerging adults' experiences and perceptions of the media's role in body image and the development of eating disorders.

3.3 Research Design

An interpretative phenomenological design was used in this study as it allows researchers to comprehend the profound deliberation of the lived experiences of the research participants (Alase, 2017). Its participant-orientedness also allows research participants to adequately articulate their personal stories and journeys from their own points of view and personal impressions without any condemnation or criticism (Alase, 2017). Essentially, the use of an interpretative phenomenological design reflects its essential nature to explore the personal and lived experiences of participants and gives them the liberty to narrate the research findings through their lived experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Smith et al. (2009) noted that:

Interpretative phenomenological design is a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences and shares the views that human beings are sense-making creatures and therefore, the accounts

which participants provide will reflect their attempts to make sense of their experiences
(Smith et al., 2009, p.4).

An interpretative phenomenological design creates a safe environment where research participants who share similar events express their experiences, allowing the researcher to explore and identify the commonalities in individual stories (Neubauer et al., 2019). Therefore, it was deemed necessary that the study adopted this particular design as it catered to the specificities and qualities that the study subscribes to and also afforded the researcher the innermost understanding of emerging adults' experiences and the subjective meanings they attach to them. The most salient factor of an interpretative phenomenological design is its ability to allow for the understanding and investigation of lived experiences and the close investigation of the phenomenon at hand (Alase, 2017).

The study also utilised the social constructivist lens, highlighting that individuals or communities are constantly pursuing to comprehend the world in which they live and, in the process, creating meanings reflective of their experiences (Creswell, 2014). This design enabled the researcher to obtain rich data and assisted in understanding the participants' meanings. However, the data gathered using this design is purely based on subjectivity, and the presentation of the findings can be challenging (Cresswell, 2014).

3.4 Participants and Sampling Procedure

For this study, the population of interest was emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 29 who were registered students completing their Honours degree in Psychology at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein. Non-probability sampling in the form of snowball sampling was used to select participants for this study. According to Johson et al. (2020),

qualitative research does not attempt to generalise from the sample to the population, but instead, focuses on making sense of lived phenomena with specifically selected individuals in a specific context. However, in this type of sampling, not all members of the population have an equal chance to be selected to participate in the study; therefore, selection relies on the subjective judgement of the researcher (Stangor, 2015). Non-probability sampling saves time and money. However, the gathered data cannot be generalised because the sample does not represent the entire population. According to Johnson et al. (2020), the final sample size depends on adequate opportunity to collect data until no new information emerges from the data or new themes emerge, thus reaching data saturation.

The demographics of the participants are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' Demographics

Participant Identification	Participant Gender	Participant Age	Participant Race
P1	Female	27	Black
P2	Female	24	Black
P3	Female	26	Black
P4	Female	26	Black
P5	Female	25	Black
P6	Female	22	Black
P7	Female	22	Black
P8	Female	22	Black

Table 1 indicates that eight participants participated in the study. All participants were Black females, aged between 22 and 27, representing the emerging adult stage of development.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

Regarding the data collection method, a multiple case study design with semi-structured interviews was used to address the research objectives and questions. According to Yin (2013), case study research is suitable for exploring a phenomenon in its natural context. Case studies entail the descriptive records of the experiences or behaviour of one or more individuals (Stangor, 2015). This study utilised a multiple case study approach to understand the experiences and perceptions of several participants, ensuring the findings were not limited to a single case study (Yin, 2009). Therefore, although the study aimed to understand the experiences and perceptions of the media's role in body image and the development of eating disorders, the participants presented with different experiences and perceptions. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions prohibiting face-to-face interviews, the researcher had to resort to a single session of one-on-one telephonic interviews with each participant. The importance of interviews is reflected in the ability to allow the interviewees the opportunity to describe the topic of interest through their own lenses, allowing the researcher to collect rich and detailed information (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.5.1 Semi-structured interviews

An in-depth semi-structured interview is a one-on-one conversation between the researcher and the participants. Although the questions in a semi-structured interview are specified, they do not have to be asked in the exact order and can be asked in a conversational style (Hamilton & Finley, 2019). To fulfil the main purpose of this study, namely to explore emerging adults' experiences and perceptions of the media's role in body image and the development of eating disorders, the following objectives were addressed:

- Emerging adults' experiences and perceptions of the media's role on body image.

- Emerging adults' experiences and perceptions of the media's role on body image in the development of eating disorders.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the eight participants, and the duration was approximately sixty minutes. The interviewer followed the interview schedule, which entailed open-ended and closed-ended questions to engage the participants in their personal lived experiences. The researcher ensured that before the interview, the participants were thoroughly taken through the purpose and objectives of the study to enable them to make an informed decision in terms of participating in the study. The researcher received verbal permission from the participants before the interviews were conducted, ensuring that participants understood and consented to recording their conversation. Furthermore, due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, the interviews had to be conducted telephonically. According to Opdenakker (2006), telephone interviews are characterised by synchronous communication in time but asynchronous communication in place. Mann and Stewart (2000) indicated the suitability of telephone interviews when access to dangerous (e.g., sites where diseases are rife) or politically sensitive sites is required. Although the interviewer thus could interview people who were not accessible in person, one of the disadvantages of asynchronous communication of place by telephone is the reduction of social cues (Opdenakker, 2006). Body language cannot be used as a source of additional information since the researcher did not see the interviewees. However, Opdenakker (2006) highlighted that social cues such as intonation and voice are still available.

3.6 Data Organisation and Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify themes from the gathered data. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to take the data that has been gathered, arrange it in a certain

order and identify patterns that will make it easier to provide meaning to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Thematic analysis consists of six phases as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012): familiarising yourself with the data (transcribing audio recordings and reading through the texts and getting an overview of the data), generating initial codes (highlighting important sections of the text and create labels that will describe their content), searching for themes (generate themes from the identified codes), reviewing potential themes (ensure that the themes represent the data), defining and naming themes (creating names that will be understandable for each of the themes) and producing the report (provide a thorough explanation of the process undertook to get to the final stage) (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

3.7 Trustworthiness and Rigour

In their seminal work, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that qualitative research should not be assessed with validity and reliability but with trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is a concept that implies and strives to ensure rigour. It refers to the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study (Pilot & Beck, 2014). Guba (2004) proposed four criteria that he aspired to lead qualitative researchers to conduct research that can be regarded as sound and trustworthy. The following section outlines the necessary steps taken to ensure trustworthiness and rigour.

3.7.1 Credibility

The primary premise of credibility is whether the study measures or tests what it was intended to measure or test (Shenton, 2004). Merriam (2004) argued that credibility highlighted and emphasised “How congruent are the findings with reality?”. According to Lincoln and Guba, ensuring credibility is a vital step in instituting the concept of trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004). Credibility ensures that individuals’ life experiences are presented and interpreted as

accurately and self-same as possible (Middleton, 2023). In this study, literatim extracts were included to achieve the necessary level of credibility and present the original and intended views of the participants. Each of the participants was informed of their right to refuse to take part in the study and to withdraw from the study at any point. This was to ensure honesty in all the data collection sessions and to recruit individuals interested in participating in the study.

Credibility was also ensured by building trust and rapport with the participants to understand their perspectives on a deeper level, and to capture rich data (Ahmed, 2024). Even though the interviews had to be conducted telephonically, the researcher attempted to spend adequate time with each participant. The researcher also demonstrated prolonged exposure by reading and re-reading the participants' transcripts.

To ensure the credibility of qualitative research, reflexivity is a critical aspect of rigour (Johnson et al., 2020) and refers to a researcher's personal preconceptions and biases, which can influence decisions and actions during the research process (Ahmed, 2024; Johnson et al., 2020). The researcher remained aware of her biases and maintained a more objective stance through bracketing during data collection, analysis and interpretation.

Triangulation refers to multiple data sources or methods (Ahmed, 2024; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Although this study only employed semi-structured interviews as a data collection method, triangulation was achieved by corroborating the data and research information with the research supervisor.

3.7.2 Dependability

Dependability establishes uniformity in ensuring that if a study were to be replicated in the same context, with the same methods and the same participants, the same results would be achieved, ensuring the stability of findings over time (Shenton, 2004). Furthermore,

dependability relies on a thorough explanation of all the steps that were followed in the execution of the study for future researchers and allows a certain level of scrutiny of the followed research process (Shenton, 2004). In this study, the researcher documented the steps in the research process and dedicated a segment which outlines all the steps and procedures that were followed during the execution of the study. This will allow others to replicate the study or assess the dependability of the study's findings by following the same procedures (Ahmed, 2024; Kakar et al., 2023). Dependability was further ensured by keeping an audit trail of changes and decisions made during the research process to ensure traceability (Ahmed, 2024; Creswell, 2013).

3.7.3 Confirmability

Objectivity is the most important perimeter in instituting the concept of confirmability (Shenton, 2004). The issue of confirmability mainly deals with confirming a study's research findings by other researchers, ensuring that researchers do not fabricate their information and findings, but rather handle the data available to them with objectivity (Forero et al., 2018). In this study, the data was collected through audio recordings. The researcher engaged in the process of transcribing the reported texts from the participants without modifying the data. Furthermore, the researcher ensured a fair representation of the data, and the data did not lack any consistency.

Feedback was also sought from the research supervisor to assist in validating the interpretations to minimise possible personal biases and confirm the accuracy of the findings (Ahmed, 2024). The researcher kept track of her thoughts, reflections and biases as they evolved during the research process through a reflexive journal (Ahmed, 2024).

3.7.4 Transferability

Transferability relates to the ability of the findings of a study to be administered in other contexts with a different population to ensure the generalisability of the research findings (Shenton, 2004). Transferability is achieved through thick descriptions and detailed contextual information (Ahmed, 2024). In this study, a thorough and detailed description of the participants, data collection methods, and the underlying setting of the study were outlined. Ahmed (2024) added that describing the sampling method employed and the criteria for selecting participants can assist in determining if the findings might be transferable or applicable to similar populations or settings.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Researchers have a legal commitment and responsibility towards their research participants (Lune & Berg, 2017). The main reason is that researchers inquire about and explore the livelihoods, personal meanings and experiences of human beings and, to a certain degree, invade their privacy (Barrow et al., 2022). Therefore, it is paramount that researchers protect the rights, confidentiality and overall welfare of people or communities who are part of their research (Lune & Berg, 2017). Issues concerning research ethics include matters such as harm, consent, privacy, and confidentiality of data (Yip et al., 2016).

The researcher ensured that all the stipulated ethical processes and guidelines were observed and upheld. Prior to the execution of the research project, ethical clearance was applied for and obtained from the General Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of the Humanities (GHREC) as well as the Dean of Students Affairs and the Rectorate of Research of the University of the Free State. The Ethical clearance reference number is UFS-

HSD2020/1293/261. Ethical clearance was granted on 2 February 2021. Once ethical clearance was obtained, the researcher provided participants with all the necessary details, aims, and objectives of the study and obtained, in addition to verbal telephonic consent, signed informed consent from them. Participants were provided with a thorough explanation of their rights and were informed that their participation was needed. However, they were not coerced to participate in the study, and if they decided not to be involved, they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. Participants were also informed about the possible risks that could be incurred due to their participation in the study.

Furthermore, participants were informed that if they experienced emotional distress as a result of their participation, arrangements would be made for them to be referred to the Adult Practice of the Master's programme of the Department of Psychology for counselling. If face-to-face counselling was not possible, participants were provided with MobieG's contact details, an online counselling platform. All information provided by the participants was kept private and confidential to protect their right to confidentiality.

The researcher ensured that the results of the study did not, in any manner, make participants identifiable. The participants' anonymity was maintained in this study following stipulated ethical guidelines. Identifying codes (P1 to P8) were used to refer to the participants. In terms of the safekeeping of the data collected, the researcher used a password (only known by the researcher) protected computer and a safe to keep all the information in hard copies.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the research design and methodology employed in executing the study to explore the experiences and perceptions of eight emerging adults regarding the role of

the media on body image and the development of eating disorders. The chapter further provided an overview of the research steps and a justification for the chosen methodology. Also, the chapter presented the methods involved in data collection, the participant population, and important procedures that rendered rigour to the study, such as credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. The chapter concluded with the ethical considerations necessary during the research process. The following chapter details the results of the study.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the study derived from the data collected and analysed, as outlined in the previous chapter. This chapter also provides an overview of twelve themes that emerged from the collected data: the media's influence; the desire to change physical appearance; the diminishment of feminine characteristics or traits; body image perceptions shaped by personal experience; plus size body type promotion; internet trends as triggers; societal influence; vulnerability of emerging adults; weight-loss; perpetuation of eating disorders; general perception of the body image of emerging adults and acculturation. Verbatim extracts from the interview transcripts support the discussion of the identified themes.

4. Identified Themes

4.1. The Media's Influence

The findings indicated that the media significantly influences the body perceptions of emerging adults, compelling them to conform to idealised body standards depicted in media representations. Excessive exposure to media content imposes pressure on individuals to align with the advertised body shapes and sizes. Participants in the study exhibited a notable degree of identification with the meticulously curated images circulated on social media platforms, perceiving them as epitomes of perfection and normative standards. Consequently, this engenders a heightened desire to modify their physical appearance. The pervasive influence of media fosters a perceptible alteration in the body image perception of these emerging adults.

Anonymous (P3) stated:

“I think we are a generation that most of the young emerging adults are in varsity now and the generation that, I think we are classified as generation Y, so the media is playing a very crucial and very big role in how we look at ourselves, what we consume because we are using a lot of technology.”

The participant provided additional clarification:

“So, the media does play a very big role, especially now that we are in a technological age, the media tells us what to eat, the media tells us what to dress, the media tells us who to accept, who to vote for and what to study.”

Anonymous (P1) concurred with the following assertion:

“I think if you’re going to convince yourself that you look beautiful but you’re going to go on Twitter or whatever platform it is, and someone is being body shamed, it’s going to trigger you, you understand. So, as much as you try to convince yourself that you’re beautiful, as soon as you get on social media, and someone says the opposite, then it’s going to hit home.”

Anonymous (P6) stated:

“I..I think that...uhm, people tend to see what other people their age group look like, and they automatically think this is the right way to be or this is how people my age group should be like.”

Anonymous (P6) further expressed:

“Uhm, when we say media, we also look at maybe the kind of music that we listen to, the music videos. It’s rare to find maybe video vixens or models that are actually plus size you know, so automatically you feel like maybe people who are big-bodied don’t actually deserve to be heard.”

It is evident that these emerging adults are often confronted with feelings of inadequacy when unable to attain the standards of physical appearance propagated by the media. The influence of media content is undeniable in shaping societal perceptions of idealised body image, eliciting a compelling urge within individuals to modify their own appearance accordingly.

4.2. Desire to Change Physical Appearance

Emerging adults have shown to harbour a propensity to seek adjustments to their physical appearance, particularly concerning body shape and size. This inclination underscores a prevalent dissatisfaction with one’s outward presentation among this demographic cohort, subsequently prompting a persistent pursuit of diverse aesthetic avenues.

Anonymous (P2) asserted:

“Uhm, okay, in most cases, even if the person is happy with the way that they look, there’s always a certain aspect they would like to change, maybe body size or one would feel like they’re too big for their body. And even for those the slim ones, they may feel that maybe they are too skinny, hence they would like to change certain aspects.”

Anonymous (P3) conveyed a similar viewpoint:

“Uhm, in my experience, uhm, as an emerging adult, I don’t think we are ever fully happy with how we look.”

Anonymous (P3) further explained:

“So, I don’t think emerging adults are ever really happy with how they look because of the generations that keep changing the perception of beauty.”

Anonymous (P8) echoed an identical sentiment:

“Uhm...I think right now...everyone, like, wants something that they can’t have...like if you’re fat, you want to be skinny, if you’re skinny, you want to maybe have a bigger breast, or you want a lighter complexion or it’s about your hair...like, I think we’re at a place where no one is satisfied with anything.”

Anonymous (P8) further stated:

“Uhm, I think right now, if not everyone...like we want to change something like there’s always something that you want to change.”

Anonymous (P6) affirmed:

“Uhm....I think a large percentage of people aren’t really happy with the way that their body...their body looks naturally, and so they go to extreme means to look the way that they want to look and not the way that they were actually meant to be.”

When confronted with a perceived misalignment between the idealised body representations propagated by the media and their own corporeal realities, emerging adults have indicated to often encounter feelings of inferiority, subsequently experiencing a decline

in self-assurance regarding their natural aesthetics. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the adverse feedback elicited from exposure to media scrutiny, particularly when they share personal content on digital platforms.

4.3. The Diminishment of Feminine Body Autonomy and Identity

The pervasive influence of media and societal norms has been identified to significantly shape young women's perceptions, compelling them to adhere to established beauty standards propagated through media channels. This continuous pursuit of external validation regarding their appearance makes them susceptible to conforming to media-centric ideals of beauty. Empirical evidence suggests that many young women perceive a loss of autonomy over their bodies, feeling obliged to conform to prescribed aesthetic norms to garner societal acceptance.

Anonymous (P3) conveyed her viewpoint:

"I don't know if there's such a thing as slender clothes, but I do feel that there are certain items or things that were designed for a certain body type, and now they are being translated into this thick model type of thing, so I don't think we're starting...it's a slow conversation because I feel like women never really own their body."

Anonymous (P3) further elaborated:

"So, in as much as they're changing the conversation, we still have parts of ourselves that are being projected by the media. The media is projecting unto us what is acceptable for our own body."

Anonymous (P6) stated:

“Social media says women shouldn’t be fat, so I don’t want to be fat cause social media says so.”

Anonymous (P6) added:

“So, people posting a woman should be this size or a woman should be like this or a woman should be like that....like, cause....you’re under so much pressure as a person to try to fit in.”

Participants frequently prioritise their external presentation and the impression they convey to others, significantly emphasising their outward appearance. The main premise derived from the narratives of interviewed participants suggests a pervasive societal expectation for them to maintain a standard of beauty, leading to a fixation on their physical attributes.

Anonymous (P5) recounted her experience following the viewing of a television programme that encourages self-objectification among women:

“I know this other programme of Bekha Mina Ngedwa, which means that only look at me and the girls that they use...it’s actually, you know, the buttocks are there, the hips are there, and the men are just looking at their behind. The men are just looking at their behind; you can see already what the programme is doing. Imagine being a girl, sitting and watching it. I’m like, ‘Oh, my gosh, so this is the attention I get when I’m this kind of body size’”.

Anonymous (P5) further expressed:

“You are so concerned, you keep on looking at yourself, and if on that day you feel like ‘I’m not looking so cute’ when people look at you, you start being concerned or even when someone says ‘oh my goodness, what’s wrong?’ Like my sister sometimes would be like, ‘Oh girl, your shoe,’ and I would immediately go and change my shoe.”

The experiences and perceptions elucidated by these emerging adults indicate a diminishing sense of autonomy concerning their ability to determine their preferred appearance, thus constraining their conception of acceptable beauty standards.

4.4 Body Image Perceptions Shaped by Individual Experiences

Several emerging adults have reported that they were not cognisant of any body image concerns or perceived shortcomings in their appearance until they encountered disparaging remarks or received negative feedback on social media platforms, subsequently altering their perception.

Anonymous (P1) shared her sentiment:

“Uhm, I honestly think it depends on the kind of company that you keep because not everyone has a negative body image until someone says, “You do not look the way that you are supposed to look”, or give you a compliment.”

Emerging adults have articulated that their individual experiences significantly shape their perceptions of body image, exemplified by the adverse impact of negative comments on their self-image. Such negative experiences profoundly affect emerging adults, leading to a devaluation of self-worth

In agreement anonymous (P1) expressed:

“Yeah, you might have a positive body image, but as soon as someone starts talking about how big your stomach is or their stomach is, you start realising that ‘okay, maybe I need to do something about this’”.

Anonymous (P7) stated:

“So, whatever I went through with my weight-loss journey, I was never happy because the damage was not the weight itself but how I actually felt about my body, so I had to accept the body I was in.”

4.5 Promotion of Plus-Size Body Types

4.5.1 Subtheme 1: Positive Reviews

The media’s portrayal and endorsement of plus-size body types have cultivated body positivity, enhanced confidence, and heightened self-esteem among numerous plus-size women. Within the cohort of emerging adults who participated in the study, several individuals highlighted the emotional comfort and solace derived from encountering representations of plus-size individuals on media platforms. Such depictions were noted to evoke feelings of acknowledgement and visibility, fostering a sense of validation among these young individuals.

Anonymous (P6) testified:

“I’ve seen many girls that look like me that are actually getting recognition like any other girl, so it made me feel good. I stopped with the bad habits of starving myself and started appreciating who I am. If it wasn’t for social media, I wouldn’t have known that

there are other people who look like me, you know, so it's getting good. It's coming along very fine."

Anonymous (P3) recounted her individual experience:

"Uhm, as a plus size woman myself, uhm, sometimes I'm happy (laughs), but most of the time I'm not (laughs). Sometimes it's good to look, to open your TV or open your cell phone and see someone who looks like you. Because then in your mind or whatever mind of a girl who's there somewhere thinking my body is ugly or whatever, it changes something because then you can see that 'oh, I can also be a model. Oh, I'm also accommodated.'"

Anonymous (P3) further stated:

"I think there's that comfort when you turn on the TV or whatever and you see something or someone that looks like you. I think for everyone, everyone feels like, 'oh, I'm not alone; the world can see me even though it's not me, but the world can see me.'"

Anonymous (Participant 1) expressed her perspectives on plus-size individuals:

"Uhm, I think the media is starting to realise that there is a market for plus-size women, and there are a lot of plus-size women out there who cannot buy their brand because they're advertising only bodies that we cannot relate to. So, I think they're trying to say that, 'hey, we are here for you as well, so we're putting it out there, and we're showing you that you can look good with these Nike types, and it's not just for White slim women.'"

4.5.2 Subtheme 2: Negative Reviews

The promotion of plus-size body types has elicited mixed responses, including concerns regarding its potential to endorse unhealthy dietary behaviours and contribute to the normalisation of obesity. A prevailing negative stigma attached to larger body sizes and weight is grounded in the perception that such body types pose health risks and subject individuals to social scrutiny. Consequently, a subset of participants expressed opposition to the promotion of plus-size body types based on several considerations.

Anonymous (P7) articulated her apprehensions regarding the health implications associated with the promotion of plus-size individuals:

“.....on the other side, I feel like the overly celebration, the overall acceptance of the plus-size body also poses health danger because people are not equating not being healthy to being overweight or being healthy and overweight and being skinny and healthy and being skinny and not being healthy.”

Anonymous (P7) further stated:

“So, celebrating plus-size women who may have medical dangers or exposed to any medical or health dangers is not necessarily body positivity because how long are they gonna have the body for if we celebrate them for being unhealthy, not necessarily being overweight but being unhealthy.”

Anonymous (P5) expressed her views:

“When I walk in town with either my mom or sister and I think Ackermans has that plus size women with bras..yeah.. they have that, and you know the remarks and comments that we give. We'd be like, 'Oh, why don't they do that, those stretch marks, and you

know, why would you want to show your body like that?’ and I asked my sister who’s plus size, and she feels like that’s body shaming.”

Anonymous (P5) further explained:

“Because even when you are at a beach, even when we are in town, and you see a woman with... a plus-size woman and she’s wearing something shorter, the reaction....I mean, not only men are looking, but also women are looking, and in my head, I’m like, ‘If women are looking, it’s like, oh my goodness, why are you wearing something that short?’”

Echoing similar sentiments, Anonymous (P6) remarked:

“It does...it does...uhm, like big-bodied people have to go through a lot to actually be heard, you find that something like body positivity, they post a picture of themselves, and maybe they are wearing underwear, and they’re still gonna get negative reviews from people.”

4.5.3 Subtheme 3: Marketing Strategy

The promotion of plus-size women was perceived by participants as a strategic marketing tactic by brands to expand their customer base. Insights gleaned from discussions with these young individuals suggest a prevailing interpretation that media representations of plus-size individuals primarily serve as a means to capitalise on this demographic to promote and sell clothing and related products.

Anonymous (P3) stated:

“But which is a positive thing, but at this day and time, I look at all these commercials, and I look at all these products, and honestly, I don’t see them trying to say, ‘Oh, big

women, you are beautiful'. I just see people who are saying, 'Oh, big women, there are more of you in the world, so we want to make money of you, so let's make you acceptable in the media so we can get your money since before we couldn't get your money.'"

Anonymous (P4) voiced her apprehensions regarding the promotion of plus-size body types:

"I think if the...if the media can shy away from wanting to promote their companies or their products or the advertisement and rather focus on sending a message like truly sending a message to the people, make the whole thing about the community not necessarily the product or the campaign that they're trying to promote but really focus on the person's health, you know."

Anonymous (P8) shared the same sentiment:

"So, I think it's the same way even with body images. Like models will always be preferred, and if you're not a model, you'll have to do slim or slick fit or whatever they come up with, plus size, I think, basically it's a marketing thing....uhm, like businesses and media outlets kind of had a choice to stick to what they've always done...I think they're doing it because people are getting called out for everything, like if you don't cast your Black actors, they call you out."

Anonymous (P6) stated:

"I think maybe...you see, as a brand, you have to understand that in order to get supporters, you have to be accommodating to everyone. There are brands that now support plus size, but the trick is it's not as much as small size brand or... and it's something that's

starting recently. Actually, like maybe Kelvin Klein recently started having plus-size models after so many years...it's changing, it is, but it's very small...yeah."

4.6 Internet Trends as Triggers

The emerging adults in the study consistently highlighted the influence of internet trends as a significant factor driving their desire to modify their physical appearance. Given the dynamic nature of these trends, emerging adults frequently perceive the need to adapt their appearance to align with evolving trends. Emerging adults' pervasive consumption of media content underscores their susceptibility to trend-driven influences. What may initially manifest as a transient trend subsequently transitions into habitual behaviours, ultimately shaping a lifestyle that individuals become accustomed to.

Anonymous (P6) stated:

"Meaning, they see that kids my age, 22-year-olds....uhm, are...are slimmer in size because it's a trending thing to do now. I think that I have to look like that as well. Forgetting that people are not the same...all of us are not the same. Just because now I see people my age look the way that they look, I feel the pressure to want to be like that myself...yeah."

Anonymous (P6) further expressed:

"So, people just...they don't consider things like that. They are always thinking for the now because now it's trending to be like this or it's sexier."

Anonymous (Participant 3) expressed a comparable perspective:

“One minute thick is in, and you have to be thick, and you are busy getting Botox. We’re getting, uhm, I saw that there’s a trend that a lot of varsity students are getting, there’s this thing of...what do they call it...uhm, I forgot the name, but it’s an injection to make their skin lighter, I think it’s R2000 a par, so I think they’re getting pressured to do that.”

Anonymous (P8) expressed the following:

“For example, there was a trend...I can’t say it’s a trend, but it’s a thing that started in Asia, where they have this thing called Mokban. They just sit there and eat a lot of food in front of the camera and maybe talk or whatever, and people do that. I’ve seen people in South Africa on YouTube do that, having a Mokban and just eating and talking, and usually it’s supposed to be a lot of food.”

These fleeting trends necessitate emerging adults to continually adapt to evolving aesthetic standards that frequently emerge and fluctuate.

4.7 Societal Influence

The data analysis revealed that while the media plays a significant role, it is not the exclusive determinant in shaping body image and susceptibility to eating disorders among emerging adults. The social milieu encompassing peer networks and familial environments has notably influenced individuals’ self-perception and evaluation. These interpersonal relationships serve as ongoing influences guiding the formation and refinement of body image perceptions among emerging adults.

Anonymous (P5) stated:

“So, even if I switch my TV...Instagram, the people I live with will make me feel like, ‘Girl, there’s something wrong with your body weight’. It’s not...yes, the media has a huge impact, or it plays a huge role, but in the same breath, our communities and our very own families have that.”

In agreement, Anonymous (P1) expressed the following:

“So, besides social media, definitely the people that you allow around you, even church members. You know a church person would ruin your whole Sunday because they said a negative comment about how your dress is fitting on you and how it’s inappropriate for church because your curves or your butt is showing, and it’s a lot. Some of these spaces are very triggering sometimes, and you can’t say you are safe anywhere because if you’re not safe at church, then (laughs)...you know.”

Anonymous (P6) additionally emphasised the impact of societal influence:

“I won’t necessarily say it all lies on the media, but the media just has an influence somehow. It would be less, but maybe, like, we can’t combat it completely because, besides the media, I also look at people my age, people that I live with and my surroundings and people that I go to school with. We can’t really blame the media alone.”

Society has been recognised to significantly influence individuals’ appearance, dietary choices, and overall life perspectives. It imposes expectations of beauty upon its members, fostering a culture of social comparison. While aesthetic standards theoretically entail subjective determination, societal norms prescribe specific criteria for beauty. Individuals have

indicated how oftentimes failing to meet these standards leads them to face marginalisation and are perceived as societal misfits.

Anonymous (P2) stated:

“Okay, I would say that as much as there are factors affecting the way we see ourselves in terms of society, the way we are supposed to be and all of that, most young people, especially in their twenties, tend to go with what we are supposed to look like in terms of what society prefers and all that.”

Anonymous (P6) added:

“So, we’re living in a life of, like, what other people say is really important, like you don’t look like that, then you don’t fit into society.”

Anonymous (P3) stated:

“So, I think the standards of beauty are subjective and but society definitely, or the media definitely does influence how we look at ourselves and what length we’re willing to go to, to change or to conform to the normal or accepted standards of how we should look.”

4.8 The Vulnerability of Emerging Adults

4.8.1 Subtheme 1: Unstable Sense of Identity

Emerging adulthood is characterised as a period of exploration and experimentation across various life domains, including career pursuits and romantic relationships. During this phase, individuals commonly deviate from conventional timelines associated with milestones such as

marriage, financial independence, and personal responsibility. Given this developmental stage's inherent uncertainty and instability, emerging adults are particularly susceptible to external influences. Moreover, the absence of a firmly established identity exacerbates their vulnerability to such influences.

Anonymous (P3) stated:

“So, now you get to varsity; obviously, you experience a crisis because you meet someone who has their thing put together; they know what they want, and they experienced their crisis and whatever, and they’ve reached an identity. Whereas you have not, so I think it does influence a lot of emerging adults because they have not experienced any crisis, therefore, they didn’t commit to any identity. So, when they now become exposed to this thing of ‘oh, I have to be thick and look a certain way’, they take that as their identity.”

Anonymous (Participant 5) articulated the following in this context:

“Remember as emerging adults, as much as we try and find our identity during our adolescent stage, but I feel like we are still trying to find our identities even as emerging adults. The reason I say that is because we care so much about what other people have to say about us.”

Anonymous (P7) shared a similar sentiment:

“I think they are vulnerable because the young adults that we are talking about is the group that is full on self-discovery, and we are obsessed with how other people look at us that we always want to know how the world perceives us. And by using images and being on social media all the time and seeing what is being portrayed on TV as the

ideal body, we are at a vulnerable state because we look at and we wanna be it because we're at a self-discovery age in that age group."

Emerging adults have articulated that the transitional phase of emerging adulthood, characterised by its inherent vulnerability, is a fundamental factor contributing to the predisposition toward distorted body image perceptions.

4.8.2 Subtheme 2: Social Comparison

Media content, particularly through social media platforms, has been identified as a conduit fostering social comparison and vulnerability among emerging adults. Participants consistently noted a pervasive desire to emulate the appearance of individuals depicted on social and other media platforms. This underscores a predominant external locus of control shaping the body image perceptions of the majority of emerging adults. Furthermore, emerging adults exhibit a significant susceptibility to the physical appearances of their peer cohort, ultimately yielding to social pressures for conformity.

Anonymous (P7) stated:

"I would say they compare themselves a lot to other people, especially with their exposure to social media and overly exposure to other people and how other people live. So, they tend to compare themselves to how other people look and they want to basically achieve an unrealistic image of themselves."

In this context, Anonymous (Participant 3) conveyed the following sentiment:

"If, for example, if I were to right now as we're having this interview and I decide, 'Oh, tomorrow I have an event or later I have an event', the first thing probably I would do is pick my phone and Google potential outfits or Google a look, evening look for a ball

or evening look for a party. Casual look for a party and what does that do? It plays a role in how I see myself compared to this picture that is portrayed in whatever media I'm using currently, and I would want to look like that."

In agreement, Anonymous (P6) stated:

"You've got social media influencers making money because there is.... into what other people want, so now I don't get that opportunity because of the way that I look. So, I have to change that. I have to change it somehow. It's either I'm starving myself or buying products just to be as other people...live like other people are living, you know...yeah."

Anonymous (P6) elaborated:

"I can be born...like to be fat or plus size...I want to look like my friend, so I will go to extreme measures to be like the next person, forgetting that I'm not them, I was never them in the first place."

Anonymous (P7) echoed a similar sentiment:

"So, I thought maybe if I would look like this person, I would be happy. If I looked like that one, I would be happy, so I wasn't. So, I just had to remove myself from such expectations with what I look online, what I look on social media and what I tell myself every day."

4.9 Weight-loss

4.9.1 Subtheme 1: Unhealthy Measures Used to Lose Weight

Emerging adults often do not adhere to healthy and balanced dietary practices. These individuals have echoed typically encountering various weight loss measures through media channels, including magazines, social media, television, and the Internet, where such information is disseminated for consumption.

Anonymous (P4) stated:

“So, those of us who are bigger in size, we strive to be like others so much that with the media also having different advertisements about how you can lose weight, how to be smaller. They’re everywhere, we’re like bombarded with that, so we follow these measures such as eating once a day, and with that eating, you’re basically eating fruits, also doing extreme exercises like two hours a day, only drinking water and all that.”

Anonymous (P6) expressed her own personal experience:

“I would starve myself, go to diets, I’m joining the gym, I’m buying products to slim, which in a later stage affects oneself.”

Anonymous (P3) added:

“You’ll find someone who’s having an unbalanced diet. I remember there was a case of a girl I once read; she only ate carrots for an entire year just to lose weight, and that’s not healthy because that means that your diet is not balanced, your body is not getting the nutrients that it needs.”

Anonymous (P3) further stated:

“There is....for me, extremes are a lot, uhm, because there are people who go for surgery....there are those who actually start developing depression because they don’t look a certain way.”

Anonymous (P5) shared the following in agreement:

“We talk about our body sizes, and for them, they feel like, ‘I need to lose weight’, and some of them, they’re on these intense diets such as eating once a day and once a day would mean having that....uhm, or let me say some of them would have a shake or some of them would have, let’s say all-bran cereal. They would have that, and that would be it for the day and from there, they would take a lot of water; some of them drink warm water; and some of them also do take supplements...or rather tablets that would help them lose weight.”

In this regard, Anonymous (P2) added:

“In order for them to slim, they would somehow go to the gym, starve themselves, use slim body products like Herbal Life and all that.”

Anonymous (P6) provided additional insights into her personal experience with weight-loss strategies:

“So, I adopted...uhm, a bad habit of eating once a day. I’d eat once a day. I’d actually lose weight but then it was not good for my health, but I want to be like the next person. I want people to actually notice me.”

4.9.2 Subtheme 2: Media Moguls Endorsing Diets and Weight-Loss Products

Celebrities exert a considerable influence on the lives of emerging adults through the

content they disseminate via media outlets. Certain media figures, known for either adhering to unhealthy dietary habits or undertaking weight-loss endeavours, publicise such information to their fan base. Given the substantial influence of these celebrities, their followers (participants) are more inclined to emulate their behaviours, including dietary practices and weight loss strategies.

Anonymous (P4) stated:

“If you look at what’s happening now on social media platforms in particular, it’s dominated by Asian people, and we all know Asians being small-bodied as the ideal body, so if you’re influenced by the Asian lifestyle, you will obviously gravitate towards being smaller in size because they showcase their diets and their exercises, so they lean towards that.”

The media assumes a significant role in promoting and advertising weight-loss brands, often utilising celebrity endorsements as a strategic marketing approach. Renowned brands, particularly those specialising in weight-loss products, diets, and exercise equipment, commonly employ celebrity promoters to endorse their offerings. This marketing tactic is intended to captivate consumers and drive sales of these products. Additionally, it is noteworthy that some influential figures are remunerated for endorsing specific body types, potentially influencing their fan base and followers to emulate such appearances.

Anonymous (P7) stated:

“I think it does, and I think maybe it is misinterpreted a lot, or maybe there is so much on printed media surrounding eating and losing weight and gaining weight and all of that and maybe this supplementation that are now available for people to lose weight.”

Anonymous (P4) also stated:

“This is like dangerous times where you open the TV, the only thing you see is protein shakes or slimming tea, or you know all these herbal thingies that are not necessarily...that are not convincing as to whether are they really tested because they convince us that this tea was tested but how do you know whether that’s true. But you’re gonna buy it just because you saw a model who has become slimmer and says, ‘Oh, I lost 2kg per week.’”

Anonymous (P4) further stated:

“For one, there is, uhm, if you look at the world is now when it comes to, like, if you listen to music, there’s this genre that’s called the K-pop, it’s a Korean pop music. It’s a genre I am more interested in, and you know, once you get interested in a genre, you see different lives, different journeys which come from how they started their music career and because it’s in Asia and I’ve seen a large majority of the young kids. The youth today are more into that and those people they come forth with not only their music but with their sense of style, their sense of eating.”

Anonymous (P4) concluded with the following:

“And most of them are being told by their companies that you eat a meal once a day, so they take that and put it on social media so the people who look up to them, their fans, they try to follow what the artist is putting out there.”

Media figures wield significant influence over emerging adults, who often admire and derive inspiration from them. It emerged from the study that many emerging adults base their

lifestyles on the behaviour and endorsements of these icons. Consequently, this demographic proves highly susceptible to the social influence exerted by media personalities.

4.9.3 Subtheme 3: Urge for Slenderness

The media is widely perceived as a conduit for promoting a narrative emphasising the desirability of slender body ideals through pervasive messaging such as “Get slim or lose weight”, which is present in numerous publications focusing on body weight. Participants believe that this narrative perpetuates the notion that society universally accepts and upholds slenderness. The media consistently reinforces this notion by featuring slender models in advertisements, actively endorsing weight-loss products, and predominantly casting slender individuals in film productions. Such practices contribute to normalising and perpetuating slender body standards within societal contexts.

Anonymous (P4) stated:

“But you know, society that we live in, we see...you know, different people of different sizes and like I said, we are being reinforced to believe that being a smaller size is what’s expected. It’s a norm, basically.”

Anonymous (P1) shared her perspective:

“Yoh, I think everyone is striving to be thin or slim because being plus size or what’s the other term....thick-boned is not as glamorised as being slim is.”

Anonymous (P7) recounted her experience regarding the influence of media representations of slender body types:

“It does, Kea...it really does, but I won’t lie, I do feel pressure myself....you know. I’ve gone through extreme means to actually lose weight because now I don’t look appealing in pictures as other people do, you know.”

Anonymous (P5) expressed the following:

“I feel like, uhm...let’s say most girls are the ones in particular who are quite concerned with their body image. And they think an ideal body or weight, if I could say so, is more of a slender girl, so immediately they see that they are becoming a bit fatter or they feel they are gaining a lot of weight, they feel that they’re not part of society because that’s not how the society sees it or regarded as an ideal body weight. So, emerging adults, I could say that they see that being very thin or slim is what they call a good body weight.”

4.10. Perpetuation of Eating Disorders

Disordered eating behaviours manifest in individuals who adopt precarious and unhealthy methods to achieve weight loss. This trajectory has been empirically linked to the progression towards diagnosable eating disorders.

Anonymous (P3) stated:

“There is...for me, extremes are a lot, uhm...because there are those who go for surgery....uhm, there are those actually start developing depression because they don’t look a certain way....uhm, there are those who become anorexic and stop eating

altogether because even though it wasn't a biological thing but they start doing it as a means to try and lose weight."

Anonymous (P3) further stated:

"They don't eat. Some of them actually binge-eat; they hide what they're eating, and when they get home, they binge-eat, which is not healthy. So, I think those are some of the extremes that emerging adults go through, especially when looking at the role of the media when looking at where they currently are in their lives...yeah."

Anonymous (P4) expressed the following:

"And there's a point in time where we'll be going back to the petite people once again, so everything has its turn. Before the plus size, there was like slimmer people, they were like promoting smaller bodies so much that people ended being anorexic."

Anonymous (P4) further explained her own personal experience:

"Like there was a diet that I personally almost fell victim to because of how interested you are as a person, it's a diet in specific that would, I think, impose people into bulimia if not anorexic behaviour. Because it entails one meal every day, like twenty hours in between and if you look at the meal itself, it's basically vegetables and drinking water throughout the day, so you can lose 10kgs in two weeks."

Anonymous (P1) stated her opinion in this regard:

"You know, some people have a...I don't want to say weak, but some people are more affected by this than others are, and you're not destined to wake up one day and start binge eating or having bulimia because you decided...no. It starts somewhere. You need

to be triggered by someone or something, so yeah, I think social media in that regard definitely does have an impact on or does affect, and it might lead to disordered eating.”

Anonymous (P7) also stated:

“So, I think that the media is playing a huge role in eating disorders because that in itself encourages people to maybe binge-eat and then go puke all of the food or maybe going into an anorexic state where they don’t want to eat. They starve themselves and then problems arise from the starvation or binge-eating and bulimic tendencies.”

Anonymous (P1) explained how the media influence affects her diet:

“Uhm (laughing) honestly speaking, when I wake up in the morning, I’m not thinking about what I’m having for breakfast, but as soon as I get on social media and I see these people who look a certain way, I’m now wondering ‘should I have eaten those French fries, maybe I should’ve opted for a salad.’”

Echoing similar sentiments, Anonymous (P6) expressed:

“Somehow so, yes. Because if I felt like social media treats people differently, I wouldn’t have a problem with the way that I look now. Social media says I should be a size 32, let me eat this, let me eat once a day, maybe eat three times a week, you know. To stick to the body that I want and with this comes a lot of health issues...you can end up being malnutrition because you’re not eating right.”

4.11 The General Perception of Body Image of Emerging Adults

The responses provided by emerging adults regarding the portrayal of body image in the media exhibit notable variations, reflecting a fragmented spectrum of perspectives. These disparities underscore various viewpoints among emerging adults regarding portraying and interpreting body image within media contexts.

Anonymous (P3) stated:

“Uhm, I can say that the narrative is changing, but I’m worried about how the narrative is changing because, uhm, the reason why I’m saying that is before the narrative or the ideal body was slender and petite. But now the narrative is the ideal body is not necessarily slender, but as I said before, thick and you have to be this thick girl, you have this thick girl’s body, but you still have to dress for a slender person.”

Anonymous (P2) expressed her view of the current body type on media content:

“I would say not too skinny and at the same time not too big, maybe someone who is fit and someone who gyms and all that.”

Anonymous (P6) expressed her view as follows:

“You know....they are not happy if I could say that, and funny enough, lately, it is that it’s not only about losing weight, it’s also about gaining weight on the other side. Because you’ll find that people like me who feel like, ‘if I could just gain a little kilogramme, it would be so good.”

4.12 Acculturation

Emerging adults have articulated that the prevailing standards of beauty predominantly reflect Western cultural influences. This observation underscores a discernible shift among many Africans away from indigenous conceptions of beauty toward the emulation and adherence to prescribed norms propagated by other cultures, notably those associated with Western lifestyles.

Anonymous (P8) explained:

“Uhm, I think...in South Africa...I think there’s a big difference because beauty standards are very evenly influenced by the West but also somehow very rooted in our cultures and stuff. And so, I think it’s divided sort of. On one hand, we want to do like people from the West as we see on television screens and all of that.”

Anonymous (P8) further stated:

“Uhm, in the South African context, I don’t think it’s as serious, but I think eventually it will be because I think like we’re the country that we are open to Western influence and catch on to things quicker than other countries.”

Anonymous (P3) expressed her view:

“I think, as I have previously mentioned, the media plays a big role. It is currently what’s shaping us and influencing the culture or trends that are coming up. So, if the media is telling us that ‘Oh, if you are, for example, a chubby woman, you have to be thick, and if you’re slender, you’re somewhat acceptable, but you still need to be a little bit thick’, I feel like that’s what the media is currently doing.”

Anonymous (P7) expressed the following in terms of acculturation:

“In South Africa, I think it’s a little bit of both because we’re so influenced by other countries. So, I think in South Africa also culture, maybe traditional body shape also plays to mind in the body image of South Africans.”

In conclusion, this study elucidated significant insights concerning the impact of the media on body image and the potential relationship with the development of eating disorders among emerging adults. A comprehensive examination of the gathered data uncovered discernible patterns and trends, enhancing the comprehension of the intricate relationship between the media’s influence and body image perception within this demographic cohort, along with its implications for eating disorder susceptibility.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This study investigated the experiences and perceptions of the role of the media on body image and the development of eating disorders among emerging adults. The main purpose was to capture the personal experiences of emerging adults by allowing them to define the topic of the study from their point of view, primarily relying on subjective encounters. Participants provided personal accounts of their eating behaviours and patterns, which indicated the media's role in shaping their perceptions. Above all, the findings have revealed how emerging adults experience a lack of control over their bodies and are being dictated by the media on what they are supposed to look like. When they fail to accomplish the media-prescribed look, they engage in unhealthy and risky measures to achieve their desired body shape or size. The following sections will focus on presenting the major trends that emerged from the analysed data and will be aligned and discussed with existing literature.

5.1 The Media's Influence

Mass media communicates and transfers values, ideals, principles and behaviours that can create a socially constructed reality for consumers (López-Guimerà, et al., 2010). During the interviews, the participants referred to the media as their prime trigger and greatest influence over their lifestyles, mentioning the dictatorial role the media is playing in their lives and the lives of others. They added that sometimes, they tend to experience a lack of control over their negative exposure to media and its effects on their lives. This aligns with current literature as it has been reported that mass media platforms such as television, magazines and the Internet have a vast impact on the behaviour of emerging adults and can shape their body

image (Curry, 2019). In this regard, Spettigue and Henderson (2004) stated that various media platforms, both print and digital, create a social context that causes young women and girls to develop body dissatisfaction and eating disorders.

Some participants stated that they were a generation and age group most impacted by media influence, which could be due to the process of identity development, they are going through. Also, the time spent using technology might aggravate their vulnerability. This is in line with Curry (2019), who reported that not only are emerging adults more vulnerable to media influence, but emerging adults are more likely to allow media content to control their lives because of their incomplete sense of identity. Furthermore, emerging adults have been pointed out to spend a substantial amount of time consuming media content. This pervasive consumption of media content makes them more susceptible to the impact of media descriptions and prescriptions regarding aesthetic possibilities, which may lead to issues related to self-esteem, body image and mental health (Abie-Jaoude et al., 2020). The media has become a significant point of reference in the lives of many young people in such a way that it sets social norms and expectations that they eventually internalise as reality and deem worth pursuing (Pulnama & Asdlori, 2023).

Research also revealed the overpowering influence of the media in shaping and reshaping the identities of emerging adults (Curry, 2019). The study's participants associate greatly with the content, especially images the media sells, interpreting these images as reality. It is evident that mass media, mainly television, magazines and the internet, present a distorted world perception (López-Guimerà et al., 2010). It has been emphasised that media content, especially reality TV shows, can distort viewers' understanding of reality by presenting a glamorised and often manipulated version of life, leading to reduced self-esteem (Bhandari,

2023). Participants in this study have shared multiple accounts of how what they saw on media affected how they viewed themselves and determined how they wanted to look, which resulted in some of them experiencing a sense of discrepancy. This aligns with the literature, as Kumar (2023) found that some of the media faculties provide a platform for self-expression while exposing young people to unattainable aesthetic standards of beauty. Often, this exposure leads to a sense of inadequacy accompanied by an urge to conform to the “glamorised” images, further creating distance between the real self and the ideal self.

The media’s impact on emerging adults has been mostly identified as negative due to their experiences, which are largely classified as unfavourable and caused by what they read in a magazine, on social media, or even seen on television. This emphasises the permeating and undeniable power of the media on emerging adults’ perceptions. Previous research confirmed this, indicating that the mass media greatly benefits the distorted body image and perception of beauty experienced by emerging adults (Curry, 2019). In agreement with this observation, López-Guimerà et al. (2010) stated that magazines are also powerful message carriers and promoters, as seen in how underweight models are on almost every page, coupled with articles focusing on tips on how to lose weight and trim your body. This is further corroborated by research that was done by Field et al. (1999), who investigated the effect of magazine content on females and discovered that 69% admitted that the images they saw in magazines altered their body image and somehow triggered body dissatisfaction, while 47% of the participants felt the need to lose weight.

In pursuit of gauging how emerging adults perceive the impact of the influence of the media, it was discovered that emerging adults alluded that this impact places them under immense pressure to look the socially prescribed way and accept the images that the media

sells as reality. Literature has indicated that individuals are seldom cognisant of the degenerating and destabilising effects derived from unbalanced and far-fetched media ideals, as the media downplays these effects with the aim of continued and increased media consumption (López-Guimerà et al., 2010).

5.2 Desire to Change Physical Appearance

When asked about how they think emerging adults view their bodies, most of the participants expressed that emerging adults like themselves always feel the need to want to change something about their physical appearance. Such a pattern in the responses provided paved the way to assume that emerging adults may lack satisfaction with their outward appearance. In addition, it is evident that this sense of inadequacy mostly surfaces when emerging adults are exposed to media content that is provocative in nature (Kumar, 2023). Due to exposure to media, emerging adults tend to constantly compare themselves to others. This is confirmed by the literature stating that when young people are barraged with images of models with thin and perfect bodies, they feel the need to alter something in the way they look (Caddel, 2018). Furthermore, a study conducted by Tiggemann and Slater (2014) revealed that young people who constantly consumed media content representing petite body types as “beautiful and worth pursuing” and idealised it, experienced a negative body image and were overwhelmed by a strong desire to change their appearance.

It has also emerged from the participants’ responses that a certain degree of their happiness depends on their physical appearance, and how they evaluate themselves and feel about how they look. The undeniable presence of media has been proven to have a negative psychological influence on the individual. This may lead to negative implications such as

negative body image, heightened anxiety regarding one's body and diminished self-esteem; these feelings of discontentment often urge individuals to change their physical appearance (Jiotsa et al., 2021).

Some of the responses from emerging adults indicated that because they are not satisfied with how they look, they then use extreme measures to achieve the look they want. This further shows that some emerging adults are not content with their natural looks. Therefore, they go through aesthetic procedures to manipulate their looks. Similar findings are reflected in the literature. For instance, Saarsar et al. (2023) found that a strong desire to change one's physical appearance is mainly influenced by body dissatisfaction induced by media content, and this may lead to the development of risky and unhealthy habits (e.g., eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa) in pursuit of achieving prescribed physical appearances.

5.3 The Diminishment of Feminine Characteristics and Traits

Women are mostly affected by media influence, considering a greater portion of the media content made available to the public is aimed at women more than their male counterparts. López-Guimerà et al. (2019) echoed this approach by stating that many print media, especially magazines that are mainly targeting women, have significantly increased in number, further escalating women's vulnerability. Anderson and DiDomenico (1992) greatly emphasised this, whose research discovered that women's magazines promoted diets and advertisements of food restriction ten times more than men's magazines.

Unfortunately, how the media portrays women often perpetuates stereotypes and unachievable and unrealistic ideals, leading to the defeminisation of women and, in the process,

undermining their womanhood (Seluman et al., 2024). One of the most notable ways that the media undermines women is through its misrepresented and narrow standards of beauty, portraying women in the media as having blemish-free and perfect skin, a rail-thin figure, and perfect physical features, creating an impractical and unachievable ideal (Klein, 2013).

The participants expressed that the media had deduced them to subjects that are to be controlled, communicating a lack of control over their physical appearance. Despite media portrayals suggesting that women have full control over their outward appearance, many women still struggle with the pressure of the media to “adhere” to certain prescribed beauty ideals (Naslund et al., 2020). This is further aggravated by the fact that mass media representations of women in their content continue presenting them as objects of beauty and perfection, regardless of their evident lack of control over their outward appearance (Santonniccolo et al., 2023). The media continues to perpetuate the validation of certain body types, and this is evident in how these emerging adults have indicated that some body types are marginalised by the kinds of clothing that are made and promoted. The media has a notable body preference, which is apparent in how clothing choices and promotions do not include certain body types, negatively affecting the self-perceptions of emerging adults (Hester & Hehman, 2023).

The results of the study have revealed that the media is constantly projecting onto emerging adults the look that they are to achieve by setting standards of beauty. They then internalise these standards and develop the desire to achieve what is being promoted. Research revealed that the media is responsible for setting unreasonably high and unattainable ideals of beauty that emerging adults internalise, fostering a desire to achieve these beauty standards (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). According to Francina and La Coco (2018), when emerging adults

internalise media content, they tend to subscribe and endorse the media ideals as personal goals and work towards achieving them. Furthermore, this sense of internalised media has been reported to have negative consequences for individuals' body image, leading to the development of body dissatisfaction (Francina & La Coco, 2018). This is evident in how some participants expressed their lack of confidence in their physical appearance after encountering media content containing unhealthy perceptions of beauty. Emerging adults are particularly at risk of internalising media ideals due to their developmental stage. Emerging adulthood is a bridge period between adolescence and adulthood coupled with identity exploration and validation seeking from sources such as peers and society (Ferguson et al., 2014).

The persistent and continuous exposure to media that places much value on beauty may lead to the internalisation of media-derived beauty ideals, which occurs when female emerging adults start to identify with the glorified media ideals as their own and then consolidate them into their self-concept (Ferguson et al., 2014). The internalisation of media ideals can have debilitating effects on the self-concept of female emerging adults as well as their behaviour. Individuals who internalise media content are reported to have diminished self-esteem and heightened levels of body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). Dissatisfaction as a result of this experience may lead to the development of harmful behaviours such as pathological eating, excessive exercise, and even surgical procedures to enhance and reshape structures of the body in an attempt to improve appearance and confidence in achieving media-generated standards (Grabe et al., 2008). Furthermore, the internalisation of media may carry a negative influence on female emerging adults' interpersonal relationships and social interactions, as they may develop a habit of constantly and unduly placing judgement on themselves and others using media content as a point of reference, leading to feelings of inadequacy, social comparison and body dissatisfaction (Ferguson et al., 2014).

Participants have reported the discomfort experienced whenever a male person constantly gazes at their bodies and makes sexually suggestive comments, which was also attested to by other participants who recounted a reality TV show that portrays women as objects. In line with this, at the heart of the objectification theory, female bodies are viewed from social and cultural contexts with the main purpose of identifying the livelihoods and personal experiences of these victims who are reduced to sexual objectification (Calogero, 2004; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Instances of sexually objectifying situations include gazing unpleasantly, making sexual comments about a person's body, sexual assault, and exposure to overly sexualised media content (Schaefer et al., 2018). Recurrent encounters of sexually objectifying situations precede a changed perception in women viewing themselves as objects rather than subjects (Schaefer et al., 2018). Saartjie Baartman (also known by then as the "Hottentot Venus") is probably the most striking case of objectification of Black female bodies. She was an enslaved South African woman, and her naked body was prominently displayed in Paris and London for possessing "exotic" body features such as large breasts, genitalia and buttocks (Lowy et al., 2021).

When women view themselves as objects (self-objectify), they tend to place more emphasis on external appearance and engage in chronic self-monitoring (Kilpela et al., 2021; Smolak et al., 2000). This dynamic has been identified as a slippery slope down the development of negative perceptions about their bodies, making them more prone to mental health instabilities, including disordered eating (Kilpela et al., 2021). Research indicated that when women are treated as objects and not subjects, they are more likely to develop heightened levels of body shame and dissatisfaction (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). Furthermore, being on the receiving end of unwanted racy attention may bring forth feelings of anxiety, discomfort and even trauma (Karsay et al., 2020).

5.4 Body Image Perceptions Shaped by Personal Experience and Internet Trends

Emerging adults highlighted that body image perceptions are influenced by negative social encounters that alert individuals that there could be something wrong with the way they look. Some of the participants shared that most of them did not have weight concerns or with their body shapes until this was activated by a negative comment about their physical appearance, which dented their mental view of themselves. Emerging adults often do not experience any issues related to their physical appearance (especially body shape and size) until they are pointed out by someone else, normally in the form of remarks by peers, friends or even family. However, it is worth noting that this is mostly received through social media (Fardouly et al., 2015). It has been scientifically proven that negative feedback on media platforms may negatively taint the body image of young people. Comments regarding an individual's weight, shape or size can trigger a cascade of negative emotions, low self-esteem as well as a distorted body image (Fardouly et al., 2015). A study that was conducted by De Vries et al. (2019) found that receiving negative comments on social media is highly linked with diminished self-esteem and heightened body dissatisfaction. Due to social media's public nature, these comments are seen by many others, increasing the potential for shame as well as embarrassment. The psychological effect that follows negative comments an individual receives on social media platforms regarding their general appearance may evoke long-term issues relating to body dissatisfaction as well as other mental health problems (Perloff, 2014).

Studies that have sought to determine the relationship between media (internet use such as social media) have found that internet use has been correlated with a disturbed body image (Franchina & La Coco, 2018). Social media contains social profiles, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, that allow users to share images, videos and other content of themselves, which

are viewed and reviewed by others in the same space. However, the feedback that users receive from these platforms is not always positive and can negate how individuals experience their bodies (Franchina & La Coco, 2018). In line with this, the emerging adults in the study consistently highlighted the influence of internet trends as a significant factor driving their desire to modify their physical appearance. Given the dynamic nature of these trends, emerging adults frequently perceive the need to adapt their appearance to align with evolving trends.

Some participants unsolicitedly expressed how their ideas and thoughts about beauty were challenged when they realised that the fashion industry only caters for “slender” people. This was ascribed to the fact that beautiful and fashionable clothing is mostly made in smaller sizes, while bigger sizes have less appealing clothing fabrics and designs. Young people’s ideas and thoughts regarding the perception of beauty are challenged by the realisation that the fashion industry does not cater to other body types besides slender ones. This often happens when they become aware that most beautiful clothing is tailored in smaller sizes rather than bigger sizes. Kozar & Damhorst (2009) pointed out that this is also aggravated by the fact that most clothing tailored for bigger people does not seem to have appealing fabrics and designs. Furthermore, such negative shopping experiences lead to altered perceptions of self (Rashid, 2020). Because clothing has been regarded as a second skin for a person and is further seen as expressive of factors such as lifestyle, social status and interests, when individuals with certain body types feel marginalised in this area, they tend to automatically think something is wrong with the way they look (Rashid, 2020).

The emerging adults in this study have testified how this marginalisation further leads them to desire the type of body that is being accommodated by the clothing industry in media outlets. The discrepancy in clothing options may significantly impact young people’s

perception of self, self-esteem, and body image (Tort-Nasarre et al., 2021). When emerging adults realise that desirable clothing designs depicted in media are made in smaller sizes, they may end up believing that beauty and glamour are only suited for smaller body types and that fashionable clothing is only meant for petite body types. This is further aggravated by the fact that when there is trending clothing tailored for plus-size people, its quantity is almost always limited (Laitala et al., 2011).

For victims of unhealthy media, internet trends are regarded as the right thing to follow to be recognised by others. Participants indicated how they felt victim to trends, regarding clothing, eating habits, or lifestyle in general and how this coerced them into exploring trending aesthetic standards. One of the most prevalent negative effects of following social media trends is the accompanying reinforcement of unattainable beauty standards (Fardouly et al., 2015). Technological advancements have made it easy for individuals to access platforms that tend to glorify certain body shapes or sizes as ideal (Shen et al., 2022). There is a growing concern that an excessive amount of consumption of media content is connected to the possible development of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive symptoms (Zubair, 2023). In this study, the emerging adults' pervasive consumption of media content underscores their susceptibility to trend-driven influences. What may initially manifest as a transient trend subsequently transitions into habitual behaviours, ultimately shaping a lifestyle that individuals become accustomed to.

5.5 Plus Size Body Type Promotion (Positive and Negative Reviews)

The media has undergone significant transformation in the last few years regarding its representation of body types. One of the significant changes is the media's inclusion of plus-

size body types in advertisements, television programmes, magazines, and even on social media (Stein et al., 2023). The media is currently venturing into promoting the plus-size body type, and some research studies are attempting to investigate the experiences of individuals with a plus-size body type (Rashid, 2020). We live in a social world where an individual's body shape and size are used to determine whether they will be accepted by their community, peers and even family (Rashid, 2020). It is gathered from the experiences of participants that the promotion of plus-size body types has received both positive and negative reviews from the public. The main positive review was the confidence that this promotion has given to many plus-size women. Emerging adults in the study have expressed a sense of relief when they see someone with a similar physical appearance in the media, which further creates a positive sense of self.

A study done by Puhl et al. (2013) found that individuals are more prone to experience reduced feelings of body dissatisfaction and diminished self-esteem if they are exposed to different body types in media, mitigating the possibility of developing pathological eating habits and disorders. This was particularly based on young people who are in the process of identity development when they encounter characters or public figures who have body types or sizes that are more like theirs, which helps them to accept their own as normal and acceptable, countering the prevalent unachievable rail-thin ideals presented in the media (Puhl et al., 2013). Moreover, these representations can challenge and improve previously “learned” societal perceptions regarding body ideals. Seeing plus-size individuals in various roles, whether in films, TV reality shows, or influencers on social media platforms can teach and encourage the public to embrace diversity in terms of body types and sizes, which is a significant cultural change that empowers society with knowledge to accept, commemorate and acknowledge all body types and sizes (Davis et al., 2020). Similarly, within the cohort of

emerging adults who participated in the study, several individuals highlighted the emotional comfort and solace derived from encountering representations of plus-size individuals on media platforms. Such depictions were noted to evoke feelings of acknowledgement and visibility, fostering a sense of validation among these emerging adults.

Cultural values, social norms, and the media generally fuel the urge to have a particular body shape or size. It is a sensitive and subjective concept that should not depend on unanimous opinion according to Rashid (2020). Currently, the media aims to uplift and recognise other body types previously sidelined and denied, raising awareness and advocacy in the fashion and beauty industry (Barakat et al., 2023). In line with this, according to some of the participants who are plus size themselves, the media's ability to allow their representations of realistic body types makes them feel good. It stops them from engaging in risky, unhealthy measures to achieve the media-promoted look. This has been attested to by researchers who have discovered that the promotion of plus size by the media reduces the chances of social comparisons, which trigger negative feelings (Gillespie, 2018). Above all else, positive media representations of plus-size body types and sizes have the potential to have role models who incorporate and personify confidence, resilience, and other positive traits regardless of society's tainted perceptions (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). This inspiration can encourage and motivate young people to work towards achieving their dreams and not allow the shape or size of their bodies to be a limiting factor (Davis et al., 2020).

However, the negative stigma that is attached to plus-size body types is gradually becoming prominent, emerging from prior societal biases and medical perspectives (Latner et al., 2005). This stigma is often seen in the form of othering in terms of body weight, and this can be the cause of psychological issues such as depression, anxiety and diminished self-

esteem, which can later lead to the development of eating disorders (Latner et al., 2005). Antagonists of media promotion of plus-size body shapes and sizes argue an important factor that acknowledges the importance of maintaining an equilibrium between body positivity and health consciousness (Joitsa et al., 2021). Their reasoning centres around the acknowledgement of the positive impact resulting from the promotion of self-acceptance and reduced stigma; it is deemed equally significant to encourage and promote healthy living as well as inform the public about the negative health consequences that are associated with obesity (Griffin et al., 2022). Similarly, the emerging adults in the study attached a prevailing negative stigma to larger body sizes and weight, grounded in the perception that such body types pose health risks and subject individuals to social scrutiny. Consequently, some participants expressed opposition to the promotion of plus-size body types based on several considerations. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that public messages about body positivity promote and encourage healthy behaviours. When individuals feel accepted and seen regardless of their body shape or size, there is a greater possibility of them practising positive, healthy behaviours such as exercising regularly and following a balanced diet (Tylka et al., 2015).

Obesity is an alarming health condition that is a result of multiple factors, such as behaviour, the environment, and heredity. Therefore, media messages for public consumption should be centred on the awareness of such precipitating factors without stigmatising individuals because of their body shape or size (Lee et al., 2019). Similarly, advocates for media plus-size representations state that it is possible to promote body diversity while adequately maintaining health promotion, arguing that the promotion of body diversity can be done simultaneously with promoting healthy habits and lifestyles; for example, the media can use

plus-size models who lead active, and healthy lifestyles, thus eliminating good health in the balance of a certain body shape or size (Cohen et al., 2020).

5.6 Societal Influences

One of the most noticeable influences in the onset of eating disorders is the pressure from society on its members to adhere to society-prescribed body standards (Grabe et al., 2008). Some participants constantly referred to the community or society's accepted physical appearances and that individuals are rejected when they do not conform to the outlined beauty standards. The majority of communities have a set norm relating to physical aesthetics, and most of them subscribe to the slender body type as a prime identity of beauty, achievement and self-control, as communicated through various media channels such as fashion, advertising and entertainment industries (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019). Studies have revealed that the internalisation of such media fabric carries a greater degree of propensity that places individuals at risk of developing eating disorders (Makki et al., 2023).

Clearly, even ubiquitous media images and messages about physical appearance are not the only prime sources that contribute to disordered eating and poor body image (Levine & Harrison, 2009). It is evident that the influence of mass media coupled with other social contexts, such as home and school environments, are contributors to a distorted body image (Levine & Harrison, 2009). Emerging adults have identified social engagements at home and school as synonymous with the powerful media tool. The sociocultural model posits that the existing pursuit of slenderness has been society-imposed, peer-pressure-induced, and influenced by family dynamics, creating unattainable standards for young people to achieve (Fitzsimmons-Craft, 2011; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). For example, a girl raised in an

environment where family members emphasise weight concerns and physical appearance is likelier to behave in the same fashion when they grow up (Levine & Harrison, 2009).

Peer relationships and family dynamics are pivotal social factors that play a role in the development of eating disorders (Einsernberg et al., 2011). Some participants shared accounts of how the people they live with make them feel negative about their body weight. This impact was not only familial. Even church members made individuals feel like they were in the wrong body. Because emerging adults have not yet developed a stable identity, they are at risk of comparing themselves with their friends or peers, while families that practise weight control, dieting, or have a history of pathological eating disorders play a significant role in the development of such distorted eating habits in their children (Stice & Shaw, 2002). It is equally important to highlight the parents' behaviour around food and body image and how that may compromise the children's self-perception and conduct around food (Erriu et al., 2020). A study conducted by Keel and Forney (2013) revealed that parents' conduct around food and their dieting habits has a significant role in contributing to children's heightened risk of developing pathological eating disorders. Furthermore, parents' critique regarding physical attributes may lead to body dissatisfaction and distorted eating behaviours.

5.7 Vulnerability of Emerging Adults

Emerging adults with identity crises continue to look outward for affirmation that will help stabilise their goals and values, and while the perfect body ideals perpetuated by the media at all times become crucial sources of such affirmations as a result, this search may be highly related to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviours (Thompson & Stice, 2001). Some of the participants have indicated the experience of going to university, and because of

an unstable identity, they easily become vulnerable to external influences concerning beauty standards. Identity development in emerging adulthood is a key stage. Persons who have not consolidated their identity yet must rely on external sources for self-portrayal and validation. This hedonic approach may easily lead other people to unhealthy practices to have things as they are portrayed in the media, exposing them to the risks of having eating disorders (Wood et al., 2017).

In line with this, some participants have reported that this incomplete identity predisposes them to be impressionable to what others say about them, leading them to often garner opinions and behaviours that do not necessarily reflect their feelings and personal beliefs. The literature indicates that emerging adults are in the process of developing the self, which consists of two aspects: the self-concept and the self-presentation (Heiman & Zafir, 2024). These concepts contribute to what individuals think of themselves and aspects about themselves that they make available to the public (Heiman & Zafir, 2024).

This may lead to low confidence and a high need for external validation, further complicating efforts to reach a stable and coherent sense of self. An unstable identity may result in emerging adults who do not have developed personal values and self-concepts, making them more impressionable and open to forces such as media representations of ideal body standards, while standards in the idealised presentations of images are often far from reality, further causing dissatisfaction with one's body and harm-bearing behaviours for striving to live by the ideals set in such images (Thompson & Stice, 2001).

The participants reported that the need or desire to appear like media personae creates feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with their looks and that the desire to achieve ideal beauty often exposed them to body-damaging conditions such as extreme dieting, excessive

exercising, or even desiring cosmetic surgery. Attempting to imitate what they saw in the media paralysed their self-esteem and mental health, making it difficult to acknowledge their uniqueness and negatively influencing their self-image. The media greatly impacts emerging adults' self-development process because media content has often become their point of reference in exploring their identity (Bjorsen, 2018). The literature further revealed that people with an underdeveloped identity make significantly more social comparisons, particularly with idealised images in mass media. Continuous comparisons of themselves with celebrities, media personalities, or even peers on social media can lead to a negative body image and unhealthy eating practices (Fardouly et al., 2015).

An unstable identity may result in emerging adults being more easily influenced by peer pressure. Media, especially social media, shapes peer norms and behaviours. If peers endorse dieting or extreme exercise routines the media are promoting, those with unstable identities can feel the pressure and risk of developing eating disorders as found by Einsenberg et al. (2011). Participants also stated that they wished to change their physical attributes to be more like their friends after feeling that their friends' attributes in a social context were more desirable or social. This might indicate that copying the looks of their friends might come from an insecurity inside them that causes them to believe that by changing their looks, they will get better acceptance and recognition in their social groups. Therefore, this urge for change may hinder self-acceptance and add to an endless comparison and self-doubt syndrome. This further links with the sociocultural model which posits that the existing pursuit of slenderness has been society-imposed, peer-pressure-induced, and influenced by family dynamics, creating unattainable standards for young people to achieve (Fitzsimmons-Craft, 2011; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). The role of two key mechanisms in this process is: First, the pursuit and internalisation of unattainable appearance standards, which are socially imposed (Thompson

et al., 1999); second, individuals evaluate themselves against others or their images as depicted on social media, referred to as appearance comparison (Shaefer & Thompson, 2014).

Some respondents shared how they depend on trends and fashion senses shown in the media whenever they need to look special and attend special events, at which they spent much time tracking possible outfit ideas that are mostly published on media platforms. They believed there is a need for belonging and feeling valued associated with media “adherence”, subsequently adopting these choices from the media. They felt that embracing these fashions would most likely improve their confidence and social status. In this regard, the literature showed that young people with undeveloped identities cannot challenge the media or have the self-confidence to dispute the negative messages. They are more likely to internalise the notion that if someone achieves that make-believe body shape propagated by the media, one is assured to be contented and happy—this only promotes unhealthy eating habits (Grabe et al., 2008).

Underdevelopment in one’s identity is often a factor related to psychological issues, including an anxious mood and depression. The media often equates happiness with thinness, physical attractiveness and looking beautiful (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). As some participants have described, they would be able to derive happiness if they could present the appearance of someone beautiful and good-looking whom they have seen in the media, assuming that this look would generate greater social acceptance and personal satisfaction. Additionally, it seems they feel that the same level of beauty and good looks would lead to heightened self-worth, improvements in self-respect, and much better socialisation. This might indicate an aspiration that points to their belief that physical looks are a key determinant of a happy and successful life. Therefore, the media images of beauty may affect the perception and emotional well-being of the participants.

Participants also pointed out that the images they strive to look like are sometimes photo-shopped and edited, thus not entirely authentic. They admitted that such manipulated images set an unattainable standard for beauty and create a false reality which considerably enhances their shortcomings. Despite this consciousness, the collective effect of these idealised images keeps fuelling their desires, pushing them into a never-ending and often desperate attempt to replicate the ideal, which is not present. All this leads to mixed disappointment and disillusion as they try to cope with the reality of the influence of artificial standards on their self-image and mental health. These individuals are most likely to have a low level of critical media literacy in which one deconstructs and questions the unrealistic representations of bodies in the media. This aligns with the view of Levine and Piran (2004), who stated that without a sceptical perspective, people tend to accept the representations of the body as normal or ideal; with that, there is an increase in body dissatisfaction and, thus, disordered eating behaviour.

Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat are platforms on which the emphasis is usually more on the visual content, lately edited and filtered to suit the visual appeal of the posted content (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Disorganised identity statuses in young emerging adults can be subject to high exposure to these platforms, both of which they tend to be heavily active on and passively consumed and internalised by those idealised images, further fuelling body image dissatisfaction and being a trigger for it (Perloff, 2014). Web-based entertainment stages are deemed the most persuasive in conveying the message of magnificence norms and what is considered “beautiful”. The inescapable idea of these stages, combined with their capacity to quickly scatter pictures and recordings, shapes public insights and individual standards more significantly than customary media (Perloff, 2014). Social media influencers often shape ideals of what a body is to look like among their followers. Consequently, it is not unusual for such emerging adults with unstable identities to view them as role models in terms of imitation in

appearance and lifestyle, where unhealthy behaviours might be prevalent with extreme dieting and exercise routines (Cohen et al., 2017).

Festinger (1954) introduced the social comparison theory, stating that to know one's own social and personal worth, one determines it in reference to how one compares with the rest of the people. This comparison can be upward (comparing oneself with those perceived to be better) or downward (comparing to those perceived to be worse). Unlike childhood and adolescence, during emerging adulthood, where identity formation is said to be the focus, media offers innumerable other people to compare with, resulting in poor self-evaluation and body dissatisfaction.

Participants constantly referred to engaging in social comparison, especially comparing themselves with people who are famous and whom they look up to, which is a clear indication of upward comparison. Upward social comparison is the comparison to another person who is thought to possess superiority in most, if not all, characteristics; the media generally idealises thoughts or images on beauty and fitness, creating high norms that are almost unrealistic to reach (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). As a result, compared to this perfect image of the media, an emerging adult induces feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction regarding his/her body, further stimulating unhealthy behaviours in pursuit of those unrealistic norms (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

Social comparison allows the process of internalisation of media ideals. Thus, frequent comparisons with media images might lead emerging adults to start perceiving that one should look in a given way to be valued or accepted. Furthermore, internalisation drives disordered eating behaviours as individuals strive to meet these often unrealistic standards (Thompson & Stice, 2001). Many young adults today aspire to imitate individuals they come across in the

media on social media platforms. This strong desire is often triggered by chosen and idealised images shared on these platforms, which promote standards of beauty and amplify feelings of insecurity and diminished self-worth. Striving to conform to these expected norms can negatively impact well-being, leading to conditions like anxiety, depression and struggles with body image as youths endeavour to match their selves with the perfected images they view online (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022). Negative affect regarding a poor social comparison could lead to maladaptive coping responses, one of which could be disordered eating. This behaviour could also be considered an exertion of control or a way to realise the ideal body image. It relieves negative emotions momentarily but continues the unhealthy cycle (Stice & Shaw, 2002).

5.8 Media Perpetuation of Eating Disorders and Weight Loss

Mass media, in all its various forms, plays a significant role in shaping societal perceptions and behaviours. One of the alarming influences is how the media is currently perpetuating pathological eating disorders and unhealthy measures to lose weight (Jiotsa et al., 2021). Various media, such as digital and print, often present a glamorised body image that an ordinary person can rarely achieve. This content mainly contains rail-thin and perfect bodies, imposing on consumers standards of beauty that are almost impossible to achieve (Mills et al., 2017). A study conducted by Grabe et al. (2008) revealed a direct association between media exposure and a heightened negative body image. The urge to be slender is regarded as a major contributor to the development of pathological eating disorders. Furthermore, Tiggemann and Slater (2014) found that media outlets such as social media, where consumers are always barraged with images of impossibly perfect bodies, aggravate such issues.

Previous studies in pursuit of determining the specific role of the media in eating disorders have identified a trend of weight reduction in models and actresses (Spettigue & Henderson, 2004). This notion was supported by the subliminal content that is made available for consumption on media platforms such as magazines, television shows and advertisements, which could have a significant contribution to the possible development of pathological eating behaviours (Spettigue & Mazzella, 2004). Previous research results demonstrated that there has been a significant increase in advertisements for diet foods and diet products (Spettigue et al., 2015).

Personal narratives of emerging adults have depicted changes in their eating behaviours on exposure to looks-focused media content. With an increased level of body dissatisfaction and desire to have physically impossible standards, the media has a negative impact. This can manifest in damaging behaviours such as significantly reducing their calorie intake, consuming non-nutritious foods, or even eating just one meal a day to lose weight quickly. Instead, some have begun to develop maladaptive eating behaviours, such as skipping meals or following harmful diets that guarantee fast outcomes without nutritional balance. The frequent exposure to images of perfect bodies can lead to a warped self-image and perpetuate eating disorders. This reiterates the cycle of negative sociological and psychological feedback individuals experience on every post they make, receiving almost Pavlovian social reinforcement through likes and comments encouraging these sorts of unhealthy habits (Mallaram et al., 2023). This, in turn, causes damage to the mental and physical health of these young adults, leading to malnourishment, weakened immunity and triggering mental disorders such as anxiety and depression (Mallaram et al., 2023). According to Bryant and Oliver (2009), three main reasons solidify the hypothesis, stating that mass media content consumption is related to distortions in body image and the development of eating disorders. Firstly, mass media is filled with subtle

and raw messages about physical appearance and beauty. The media further emphasises these characteristics and closely relates them to happiness, health and pleasure (Bryant & Oliver, 2009). Secondly, mass media has gained much hype in the past years, allowing its content easy and quick permeability. Lastly, it is through the influence of the media that body weight concerns, body dissatisfaction and the fixation on physical appearance are influential and viral (Bryant & Oliver, 2009).

5.9 The General Perception of Body Image of Emerging Adults

Beauty is difficult to define due to its subjective and personal nature. Scientists worldwide have failed to search for a single element that defines beauty and fully portrays a beautiful creature that could be applied to every species in the world (Corbett, 2009). It has been argued that cultural teachings and values deeply influence beauty and are therefore regarded as a uniform and objective concept (Juli, 2019). Contrary to this logic, beauty has been found to denote a personal social experience (Little et al., 2011). It was clear from the analysed data that emerging adults felt a specific idea of beauty is being projected onto them, which they regard as unrealistic as pointed out by Kaziga et al. (2021). Furthermore, Juli (2019) emphasised that due to the differing perspectives and perceptions of what encompasses beauty, platforms that feed individuals standards of beauty will always place them as passive spectators who are to follow what is being taught about aesthetics.

Through the findings of this study, emerging adults have expressed how certain body types are celebrated and glorified more than others, which has led them to experience a sense of inadequacy in their own skin. It emerged that thinness is the main body type regarded as beautiful and to be achieved. The media is not only responsible for its emphasis on thinness

but also the importance thereof (Stein et al., 2023). Furthermore, these projected ideals of beauty demoralise women, making them prisoners shackled to unrealistic and unachievable physical appearances and causing them to have negative perceptual-emotional conclusions (Spettigue & Henderson, 2004). Galimberti et al. (2002) stated that for as long as the demarcation of physical appearance determines beauty, most individuals might never feel happy and beautiful enough.

It is indicative from the results that emerging adults feel pressured by the high standards of beauty created by the media; they also shared the unworthiness and rejection they experience when unable to reach and achieve these ideals. Evaluating the general perceptions of participants regarding their body image as emerging adults, it is worth noting that there is a strong leaning on what the media publishes. This becomes their point of reference regarding the looks the participants pursue. In addition, these participants seem to be more prone and vulnerable to the influence of media on the body and its prescribed standards of beauty.

5.10 Acculturation

Some of the responses from participants centred around abandonment of their culture, particularly in terms of physical appearance, as they felt persuaded to conform to a different culture that prescribes different and respective standards of beauty. This shift normally entails adopting the social fabric of another culture, including its food culture, comprising the practices, customs and traditions that revolve around how the food is prepared and the portions they eat (Akinola et al., 2020). Some participants stated that they eventually acculturated because of their exposure to different cultures and social fabrics in media, especially their food culture. Media platforms such as television, magazines, and social media constantly expose

individuals to different ways of living, traditions as well as culinary practices, potentially leading to the subscribing of new cultural norms and facets of another culture (Tirasawasdichai et al., 2022).

There are many causes of the development of eating disorders, such as genetic, environmental and psychological forces and among these is acculturation, which is one of the strongest forces behind the onset of eating pathologies, mainly when it is directed by the influence of media (Mitchison & Hay, 2014). For a long time, the media has underscored the rail-thin figure and outward appearance as major indicators that prove success in an individual's life and self-worth. This frame of thought was traced back to Western culture, which can reach anywhere on the globe (Serna, 2018). Such exposure is not passive in nature but can mould individuals' perceptions of self and conduct (Serna, 2018).

The influence of the media plays a vital role in the development of eating disorders. The content that the media promotes, such as the thin body ideal and unrealistic standards of beauty, places a tremendous amount of pressure on its consumers to the point where they internalise these ideals, leading to the development of acculturative stress, further heightening the possibilities of eating disorders (Mills et al., 2017). For example, individuals who belong to cultures that embrace fuller body types may develop a sense of discrepancy and inadequacy that may lead them to believe that they do not match the Western media-prescribed standards, which are mostly rail-thin body types (Galfano & Swami, 2013). This discrepancy creates an internal conflict that may push the individual to conform to foreign standards, which may include excessive exercise, unhealthy diets, and other irrational and extreme practices for weight control (Galfano & Swami, 2013).

The media has influenced many young people, which is evident in how they constantly feel the need to conform to new ways of being and doing things they see on media platforms. Some of the participants stated how sharp and penetrative the influence of the media is when recounting their experiences of being immersed in the cultures of Western celebrities promoted on media that they eventually subscribed to these cultures, even to the point of following celebrities' diets and other facets of their social fabric. Individuals who undergo acculturation, and provoking media content may lead them to conform and adhere to the predominant standards of beauty portrayed. Immigrants and minority groups may experience an intensified urge to acculturate to gain social acceptance by compromising their own cultural norms and beauty standards to fit in their newly found culture (Kuo, 2014). When individuals are under so much duress, they are more prone to feel overwhelmed, which may lead to pathological eating habits so that they can achieve the "glorified" body ideals (Sam & Berry, 2010).

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUDING CHAPTER

6.1 Introduction

Chapter 6 provides a brief overview of the research findings of this study. This is followed by a reflection on the limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research are proposed. The chapter concludes with the value of the study and a final concluding section.

6.2 Brief Overview of the Research Findings

This study aimed to explore the media's influence on the body image of emerging adults and the possible development of eating disorders by exploring emerging adults' experiences and perceptions of the media's influence on body image and the development of eating disorders. Emerging adults have expressed the undeniable and boundless influence of the media and how it affects them.

The findings indicate that media plays a significant role in influencing the body image perceptions of emerging adults, and they develop a desire to change their physical appearance to suit or match what is being sold or aired on media. Due to trends in the media in terms of physical appearance, emerging adults indicated that they often take heed to such, which results in them ending up being unhappy with how they look as it might not be what is currently trending or socially prescribed. It was also conveyed that how body types are presented in the media has a significant influence on how emerging adults view themselves, and whether

negatively or positively, it would result in the desire to act to either enhance or completely change their outward appearance.

Furthermore, the study found that certain aspects of emerging adults such as an unstable sense of identity and social comparison greatly lead to a disturbed body image, especially when emerging adults engage in or consume biased media coverage. The media continues to perpetuate the desire for leanness among consumers by selling coverage that depicts high volumes of a bias towards a lean and thin appearance.

6.3. Limitations of the Study

Three limitations to this study have been identified. Firstly, most of the studies conducted on this subject area are cross-sectional, capturing the data at a single point in time. This might be limiting because this kind of research design is beneficial in discovering relationships or associations between phenomena, but cannot identify causality between concepts. Therefore, it is difficult to predict whether a certain phenomenon causes another phenomenon. It is difficult to distinguish if exposure to media is the main causal factor in the development of body image issues and pathological eating disorders or whether it is individuals who are already at risk, with distorted concepts of self and negative body image, who are more prone to the development of eating disorders. Cross-sectional studies, which have a single round of collecting data, fail to identify or establish the causality between variables, whereas longitudinal studies, which provide an opportunity to assess individuals over a longer period of time, are more suitable for examining causality (Grabe et al., 2008). The data collected in studies that only assess phenomena for a specific moment in time fails to account for changes

or alterations that occur over time, meaning it is challenging to ensure temporal variability (Fedak et al., 2015).

Secondly, the generalisability of the study is limited due to the limited size of the sample that participated. The study primarily focused on university students and not on general emerging adults, which makes it challenging to generalise assumptions based on the data collected that is not representative of the broader population of emerging adults. Qualitative research studies usually involve smaller sample sizes, primarily to afford thorough and comprehensive exploration and examination of individual experiences, as this way of doing produces rich and condensed data but compromises generalisability in the process (Mason, 2010).

Lastly, initially, the data for the study was to be collected through the use of face-to-face semi-structured interviews. However, since the data collection process took place during the peak of COVID-19, with national lockdown restrictions, the researcher could not conduct face-to-face interviews. Instead, the researcher opted to conduct telephonic interviews, and to a certain degree, this method might have influenced the process. For future research, it would be advisable to conduct face-to-face interviews because one can observe factors such as non-verbal communication, which can provide insights concerning an individual's reactions and attitudes and minimise the risk of misunderstandings.

6.4. Recommendations for Future Research

For future research studies, a longitudinal approach will assist in comprehending how the perceptions and experiences of emerging adults change over time. This will further provide insight into the long-term impact of emerging adults' exposure to media platforms on their

body image and eating disorders. Given the data collected, it is evident that emerging adults need to be studied for a longer time period mainly because of the fleeting nature and changes in media trends and other dynamics that affect them.

Future studies can also include more than one method of data gathering. In addition to individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews, focus groups can be added to fully explore the media's impact on emerging adults' body image.

It is also recommended that future studies involve a larger and more heterogeneous sample, as this will ensure greater generalisability of the research findings. In addition, this will also allow for wider inclusion criteria, such as including individuals from different cultural and locational contexts as well as all genders for a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of the phenomena.

6.5. Value of the Study

Executing a study that focuses on emerging adults' experiences and perceptions of the media's role on body image and the development of eating disorders has allowed for a greater understanding of emerging adults' view on this. This has also underscored the gullibility and vulnerability of this age group regarding the media's portrayal of body image. This study has also uncovered some of the risks emerging adults constantly have to handle during this transitional period. This study revealed how emerging adults are influenced by the mass media and its portrayal of body image. Certain detrimental patterns were identified, like the desire to follow the portrayal of leanness and the changing of their body appearance, placing them at risk for developing disordered eating behaviours, which may ultimately lead to the development of eating disorders.

Since the participants were all African females, a further unique contribution of the study was to shed light on the perceptions of the role of the media on body image and the development of eating disorders for the so-called “born-free” cohort of post-apartheid South Africa. As it was previously believed that the “bigger” body type was acceptable amongst Africans, the participants’ responses indicated the change in this perception as they became more connected globally through the media. This might caution against the “false” perception that African females might not be vulnerable to the development of eating disorders.

The study of the different ways in which the media influences the body image of emerging adults has provided an overview of an expressed need for media literacy. Media literacy may assist emerging adults and other age groups to avoid and mitigate negative influences instigated through media content. Emerging adults can be educated to be selective in terms of the media content they consume. Furthermore, the inclusion of media literacy could have a positive impact on the development of therapeutic approaches in the treatment of emerging adults who are sufferers of eating disorders.

This study also carries the ability and potential to raise awareness of the undeniable power of mass media and how when this platform is misused, it may corrupt or taint the perceptions of those on the receiving end of it. The study highlighted the pervasiveness of eating disorders among emerging adults, which will hopefully cue communities and societies to seek ways to combat this issue.

6.6. Conclusion

In summary, the permeating influence of the media has been shown to negatively influence emerging adults in terms of how they view their bodies and the effect it creates on

their body image. The general influence of how emerging adults are subject to media-induced content is not passive but almost always provokes certain behaviours and habits amongst individuals. With the significant influence mass media has on the body image of emerging adults, it is evident that as a result of these negative habits, pathological eating behaviours are developed, which may further mature into fully-fledged eating disorders. Emerging adults are, therefore, more at risk of developing eating disorders due to exposure to inaccurately represented body types in media, which leads to body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem, developing into maladaptive eating disorders.

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APPENDIX A: Participant information sheet and consent form



RESEARCH STUDY INFORMATION LEAFLET AND CONSENT FORM

DATE

August 2020 – February 2021

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Emerging adults' experiences and perceptions of the media's role on body image and the development of eating disorders.

PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR / RESEARCHER(S) NAME(S) AND CONTACT NUMBER(S):

Keamogetse Senoge

2013189572

072 832 5669

FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT:

Faculty of the Humanities

Department of Psychology

STUDY LEADER(S) NAME AND CONTACT NUMBER:

Mr. Henry Taylor

051 401 9322

taylorhw@ufs.ac.za

WHAT IS THE AIM / PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The aim of the study is to explore emerging adults' experiences and perceptions of the role of the media on body image and how this role that the media plays on body image might lead to the possible development of pathological eating behaviours and eating disorders.

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

This study is done by me, Keamogetse Senoge, as part of my research-based Master's degree in Psychology in the Department of Psychology of the University of the Free State. Additionally, the data obtained from this study may be published in the form of journal articles and/or conference presentations.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?

This study has received approval from the General Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Free State. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher.

Approval number: *UFS-HSD2020/1293/261*

WHY ARE YOU INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

Should you decide to participate in the study you will be one of approximately eight individuals who are between the ages of 18 and 29, of any gender or racial group and studying at the University of the Free State with an interest in eating disorders, as you will then form part of the population of interest of this research study. Your role as a participant in the study is to participate in a face-to-face semi-structured interview which will take place in a private and interactive setting, in which you will be asked about your experiences and perceptions on the media's role on body image and how this might lead to the development of eating disorders. As you form part of the emerging adult generation, you are kindly approached to take part in the study. A pseudonym will be assigned to you to protect your identity and to maintain your confidentiality.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

I am interested in investigating the role of the media on body image and how this role might lead to eating disorders. Participation in the study will require you to attend one face-to-face semi-structured interview session and a possible focus group which will be recorded by me. Your role as a participant is to provide answers to the questions that you will be asked by the researcher as truthfully and honestly as possible. The interviews will take approximately between 45 and 60 minutes. A pseudonym will be assigned to you to protect your identity and although the sessions are recorded, all information gathered will be kept confidential.

CAN THE PARTICIPANT WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?

Participation in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. Since participation in this study is voluntary there will be no penalty or loss of benefit for non-participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to read and sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time

without providing a reason and will not suffer any loss due to your decision to withdraw from participating in the study. If the interview session with you were already recorded or transcribed and you want your contribution to be withdrawn, all information you provided will be withdrawn from the study and will be deleted and/or destroyed.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

This study does not involve monetary, material or any direct benefits. However, the data obtained from this study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the field of psychology on the role of the media on body image and the development of eating disorders. Should you request feedback on the results of the study, you may benefit in terms of gaining new knowledge on the role the media play on your body image as an emerging adult and how this might lead to possible pathological eating behavior and eating disorders. As the researcher, I will ensure that your participation in the study will be kept confidential.

WHAT IS THE ANTICIPATED INCONVENIENCE OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

Your participation requires you to take part in an interview that will last between approximately 45 to 60 minutes. However, this duration is subject to change in case you have some questions that you would like to ask me as the researcher and to also allow you all the time you need to answer and elaborate on the questions. I, as the researcher do not foresee any physical or emotional harm due to taking part in the study. However, should you suffer any emotional harm or distress or personal and/or cultural embarrassment during the process of participating in this study, you will be referred to the Adult Practice of the Department of Psychology of the University of the Free State for psychological counselling. Mr. Taylor, the coordinator, 051 401 9322 may be contacted for 2-3 sessions as deemed necessary at the initial consultation and the service will be provided free of charge to you. You can also contact MobieG, an online counselling platform which also renders their services free of charge by sending a WhatsApp to 0637043030 or an email to ops@mobieg.co.za. There will be no indemnity or insurance coverage for participants in this study.

WILL WHAT I SAY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

The data obtained in this study will be treated with the utmost levels of confidentiality. Your name will be kept separately from information collected and a pseudonym will be assigned to you so that no one will be able to link you to the information provided. Your answers will be assigned a fictitious code number and you will be referred to in this way in the data, as well as the Master's dissertation or other research reporting methods such as publications or conference proceedings. All the information that will be provided by you as participants in this study will be kept private and confidential. Further, your answers may be reviewed by the research auditor, as well as members of the Research Ethics Committee, who are responsible for ensuring that the research is conducted in a sound manner. These individuals will also not have access to any of your identifying details and will sign a confidentiality agreement in order to ensure that any information that you share is protected. Your anonymous data may be used for the purposes of a Master's dissertation, journal articles, or conference presentations.

HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?

As the researcher, I will ensure safekeeping of electronic data collected by using a password (only known by the researcher) protected computer to store the data and a safe will be used to keep all the hard copies and audio-recordings that contain information concerning you as a participant. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Faculty Research Ethics Committee review and approval, if applicable. All information will be permanently deleted from electronic and audio devices and all hard copies will be destroyed (shredded) after five years to prevent unauthorised access to confidential information.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

There will be no payment or reward offered for involvement, nor will any force be used to recruit you to take part in this study. The feedback of the research findings will be provided to you on request, and this might benefit you in terms of increased knowledge and insight on the role the media play on emerging adults' body image and the possible development of pathological eating behaviour and eating disorders. You will also be provided with information sheets on the development of a positive body image and healthy eating habits. There are no foreseeable risks of unauthorised individuals identifying you as a participant in this study. Further, there is no foreseeable risks of responses being linked to participants. Only the researcher and research supervisor will have access to the data collected.

HOW WILL THE PARTICIPANT BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS / RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

If you are interested in and would like to be informed of the final research findings of the study, you are welcome to please contact me, Keamogetse Senoge on 072 832 5669 or email KeaSenoge@gmail.com. The findings will be accessible to you as a participant should a request for a final copy of the document be received from you. Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact the administrator of the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee, Mrs. Charné Vercueil on VercueilCC@ufs.ac.za or 0514017083.

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, _____ (participant name), confirm that the researcher, Keamogetse Senoge, asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

I agree to the *audio recording of the interview*

☐

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Full Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B: Interview guide



Interview Schedule

The researcher will verify whether the information sheet is understood and if the consent form has been signed.

“Good day and thank you for meeting with me today for your interview. I am going to ask you a few questions about your experiences and perceptions of the role of the media on body image and the possible development of eating disorders based on your own experience as an emerging adult (that is the age group between 18 and 29 years). If you are unsure of any of the questions, please do not hesitate to ask me to clarify. If there are any questions that you do not wish to answer, please also let me know.”

- From your perspective how do you think emerging adults generally perceive their body image?
- Do you think when emerging adults like you, look at their body image, they are happy with what they see or is there something that they would like to change? If so, what measures do you think they would follow in order to get the body shape or size that they want?
- Tell me from your perspective how the media portrays the ideal body.
- Do you think this portrayal (the ideal, a slender, a muscular, body image, depending on the answer) has an influence on how emerging adults perceive their body image?
- Currently there are brands that are promoting the “plus size” body type, what perceptions do you think the media is trying to create with this kind of trend?
- What effect do you think the media has on the body image of emerging adults in South Africa?
- Would you say that emerging adults are a vulnerable group to get influenced by media content? And why is that so?
- From your perspective do you think the media has an influence on disordered eating behaviour patterns amongst emerging adults?

- What is your perception of the media's role in the development of eating disorders? How serious do you think this influence is?
- Do you think if the media's portrayal of body image was controlled or limited, the obsession and pressure on young adults to have the glorified "ideal" body image would be less?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with me in terms of the media's influence on body image and the development of eating disorders?

"Thank you so much for your time and contribution to my research study. I appreciate it."

APPENDIX C: General/Human Research Ethics Committee Approval Letter



GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

02-Feb-2021

Dear Ms Keamogetse Senoge

Application Approved

Research Project Title:

Emerging adults' experiences and perceptions of the media's role on body image and the development of eating disorders.

Ethical Clearance number:

UFS-HSD2020/1293/261

We are pleased to inform you that your application for ethical clearance has been approved. Your ethical clearance is valid for twelve (12) months from the date of issue. We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your study/research project be submitted to the ethics office to ensure ethical transparency. Furthermore, you are requested to submit the final report of your study/research project to the ethics office. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension. Thank you for submitting your proposal for ethical clearance; we wish you the best of luck and success with your research.

Yours sincerely

Dr Adri Du Plessis

Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee

Adri Du Plessis

205 Nelson Mandela
Drive
Park West
Bloemfontein 9301
South Africa

P.O. Box 339
Bloemfontein 9300
Tel: +27 (0)51 401
9337
duplessisA@ufs.ac.za
www.ufs.ac.za



APPENDIX D: Plagiarism Report

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ORIGINALITY REPORT

10%	4%	8%	3%
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

1	Submitted to University of the Free State Student Paper	2%
2	"Encyclopedia of Feeding and Eating Disorders", Springer Science and Business Media LLC, 2017 Publication	<1%
3	Mokotedi, Kenyafetse Maipelo. "The Relationship Between Clothing Advertisements, Body Image and Self-Esteem of Adolescent Girls", University of Pretoria (South Africa), 2023 Publication	<1%
4	Maine, Pulane Jane. "The Experiences of Young Adults' Use of Social Media for Health-Related Information", University of Pretoria (South Africa), 2023 Publication	<1%
5	irep.ntu.ac.uk Internet Source	<1%
6	"The Wiley Handbook of Eating Disorders", Wiley, 2015	<1%