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Cycling Through Life: The Bingeing Tendencies of Women

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CYCLING THROUGH LIFE: THE BINGEING TENDENCIES OF WOMEN

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of the Requirements for
Honors in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies

UNION COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

MACGREGOR, DANIELLE

CYCLING THROUGH LIFE: THE BINGEING
TENDENCIES OF WOMEN

The social environment on many college campuses in the United States contains both positive and negative aspects that influence students. Among the various lifestyle changes experienced in college are shared residential living spaces, more frequent social events with peers, a dining meal plan replacing home cooked meals, and an increased sense of independence. These new factors may lead to bingeing behaviors. Determining the connection between binge drinking, binge eating, and binge exercising—a common cycle of behavior that may emerge at the traditional four-year institution—to gender expectations, social group relationships, and self-esteem helps explain the possible catalysts of these behaviors.

Binge drinking, binge eating, and binge exercising are three, independent behaviors that may affect a woman at any time in her life. The scholarly research on each of these three behaviors independent of one another is plentiful. However, this thesis presents these behaviors as a cycle with binge drinking leading to binge eating, which, in turn, leads to binge exercising, with the pattern of engaging in these three bingeing behaviors continuing. The hypothesis predicts that female college students are affected by these behaviors most frequently. Specifically, sorority members are more likely to engage in this cycle of bingeing compared to those women who are not members of a Greek organization. Due to a combination of societal expectations, group behavior patterns, physical environments, and engrained perceptions of femininity in society influencing body image and self-

esteem, these three bingeing behaviors are likely to affect women after college as well, manifesting into a large-scale gender issue.

For this study, all 1,009 female students at Union College were given the opportunity to provide an anonymous opinion regarding their binge drinking, binge eating, and binge exercise tendencies in an original research survey. Samples within this population were women who belong to a PanHellenic Greek organization at Union College and those women who do not, either by choice or due to the academic policy that a first-year student may not join a Greek organization. A total of 416 responses were collected and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences data platform in order to identify correlations between variables. By combining the results from this survey with background literature on similar topics, conclusions imply that college-aged, sorority members may be the most at risk population to engage in this damaging behavior pattern.

Whether affiliated with sororities or not while in college or in their post-college lives, many American women may also suffer from one, two, or all three of the aforementioned bingeing behaviors. These tendencies affect women at various points in life due to societal pressures, influences, and expectations. In explaining why so many women may have difficulty with bingeing in these areas, questions of the gender dichotomy and sex roles arise. Women may face the troubling reality of bingeing behaviors, more so than men, due to the strongly held expectations of femininity, which are constantly reinforced in our society through media and our peers.

Solutions to this cause-and-effect cycle of binge drinking, eating, and exercising are rooted in social change. The psychological construct of self-esteem needs and social needs, as posited by the humanistic psychologist, Abraham Maslow, must be emphasized in younger generations in order to prevent feelings of negative self worth in women as they mature in their adolescence. Self-esteem should be reinforced as women's bodies begin to change and positive self-worth should be encouraged. By promoting self-acceptance in any and all conditions, women may become better equipped to avoid these three bingeing behaviors. The powerful emphasis on success in today's society must also be re-evaluated. Rather than placing so much importance on academic, personal, and professional success for all individuals, there should be an empathic understanding of all experiences and all ways of living. Nobody should be told that what they choose to do or what they want to do in their lives is wrong or undesirable. In eradicating the need for success, women may feel free of the chains linking them to any of the bingeing behaviors. Ultimately, the most radical and effective source of change comes from eliminating expected sex and gender roles. By dismembering the concepts of femininity and masculinity, equality for all genders becomes more likely. A society based on the feminist goal of political, social, and economic freedom for all may allow for the termination of the cycle of bingeing behaviors.

CHAPTER I: Introduction

A Background of Bingeing

College is the time when people try to figure out who they really are. Whether someone discovers that they are a hard worker, a procrastinator, a fan of partying, or an introvert who enjoys their time alone, college is where many habits and tendencies emerge. The social environment that a college campus presents can be both positive and negative. Yes, there are a lot of new people and countless memories to be made, but there is also exposure to peer-pressure, drugs, sleepless nights, and excess stress all related to time management. Among the unintended consequences that college may introduce are weight gain, excessive eating, binge drinking, heightened body image issues, low self-esteem, and possibly an unhealthy relationship with exercise and fitness. While these problems may not affect everyone, they are frequently a part of the college experience. How, then, are these problems repressed or magnified in various situations?

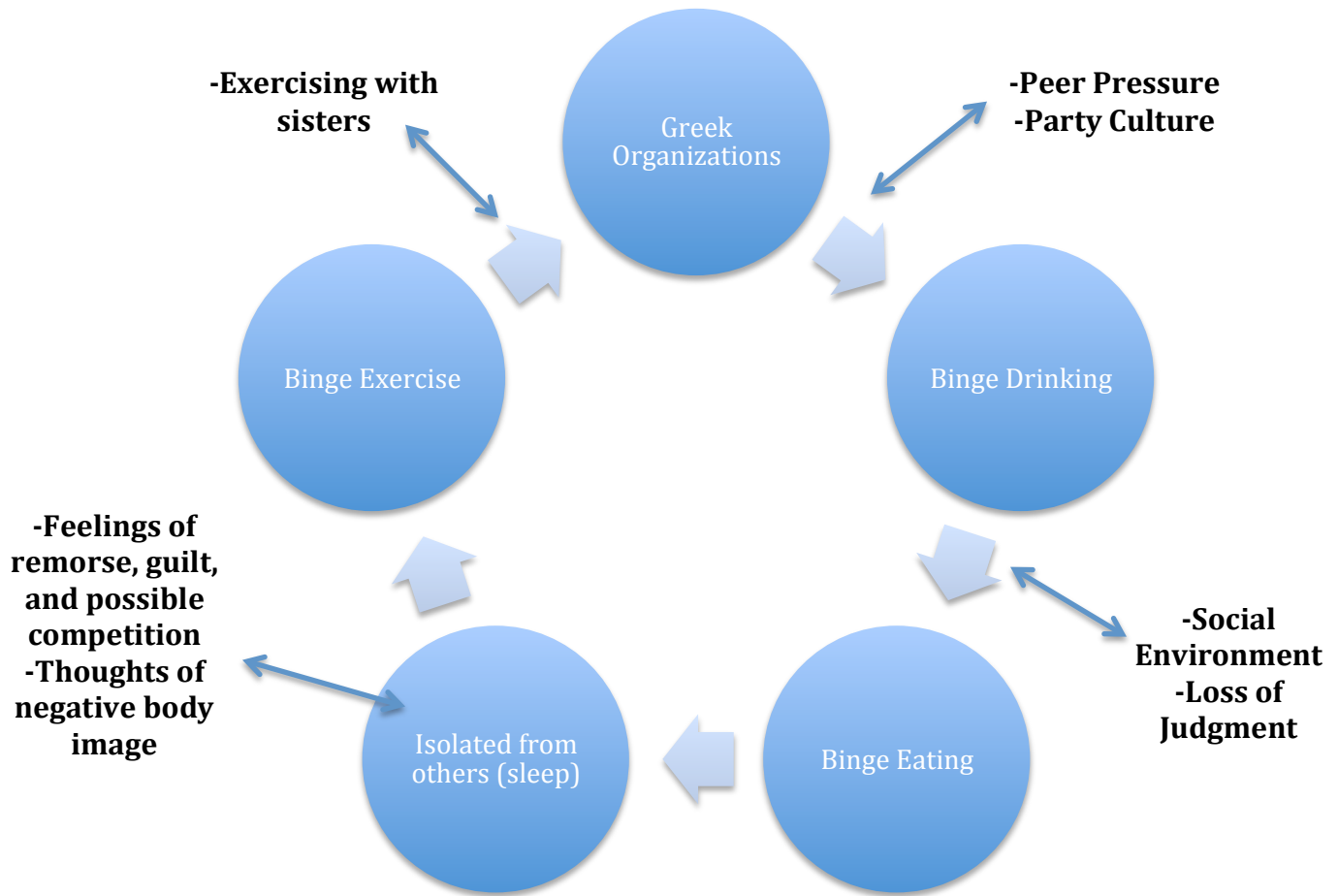
Socializing is a huge part of being in college and the possibilities for engaging in social situations are endless. At small schools like Union College, there tends to be one dominating type of social life—Greek life. In particular, sororities may accelerate the processes of binge exercising, binge drinking, and binge eating because there are at least 120 other girls who are likely to be engaging in these bingeing behaviors as well. It is very hard to avoid eating pizza at 12am when everyone else is doing it, similar to how it is hard to not feel obligated to be in the gym for at least an hour every day among fellow Greek sisters. Both excess eating and excess exercising can be seen as products of excess drinking, which happen on

many college campuses, but is truly notable in Greek organizations.¹ This causal cycle can be illustrated by the situation below.

A group of sorority sisters attends their Greek mixer at the fraternity next door. They drink the alcohol that they have rightfully paid for and do not stop after just three or four drinks, but rather, they drink until they are drunk. After the party, the sisters walk back to their sorority house and someone suggests ordering a pizza. Within minutes the phone call is made and a mere half-hour later, three or four large pizzas are sitting on the floor of the common room. There may be ten or so girls gorging themselves on slice after slice with no viable source of judgment telling them to stop. Once the pizzas have been devoured, all of the girls wander off to sleep. The following morning, however, those same girls are talking about how disgusting they feel about eating all that pizza and making vows to each other to go to the gym, or worse, purge due their lack of control. They promise one another that they will not leave the elliptical machine until they have burned “X” amount of calories as an attempt to burn off all of the calories from the previous night’s binge. Hours later, those sisters are in the gym fulfilling that promise—overworking their alcohol-induced, dehydrated bodies running on the energy that they do not have. This situation and cycle can also be seen in *Figure 1*, below.

¹ Edwards, Erika, & Kelly-Weeder, Susan. (2011). Co-Occuring Binge Eating and Binge Drinking in College Women. *The Journal for Nurse Practitioners*, 7.3, 207-213. Accessed through ProQuest database.

Figure 1: The Cycle of Bingeing Behaviors and Possible Factors Involved



Interesting, isn't it? Based on the prior research and current observations, this cycle is constant *and* it is common. The Greek system, and more specifically, the sorority system, at Union College perpetuate these behaviors because of the modified ideas revolving around close relationships, sisterly bonding, and parties. Binge drinking is defined by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism as "a pattern of drinking that brings blood alcohol concentration (BAC) levels to 0.08g/dL. This typically occurs after 4 drinks for women and 5 drinks for men—in

about 2 hours.”² Compared to the common drinking habits of college students and their attitudes towards drinking, however, there are large disparities of what binge drinking truly means for the students who are engaging.³ Drinking four drinks in a row, whether it be in the form of vodka shots, beers, or wine, for a sorority woman is often considered a pre-game for the actual fraternity party, which is then usually followed up by two or three more drinks at the Greek mixer. Similarly, binge eating is defined as consuming large amounts of food in a short time as compared to normal eating patterns. In a clinical sense, binge eating disorder is defined by the DSM-V as “recurring episodes (more than once weekly for at least 3 months) of consuming a large amount of food in a short time, compared with others. Patients feel a lack of control during a binge and marked distress over their eating. They typically experience shame and guilt among other symptoms, about their bingeing and may conceal these symptoms.”⁴ Although many college-aged women may not be diagnosed with this specific eating disorder, their eating habits may closely resemble this pattern, especially when intoxicated.

In following the previously illustrated cycle, binge exercising comes next. Although this specific term is not defined by a national organization, compulsive exercise or “obligatory exercise” is. “Compulsive exercise is best defined by an

² National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. “Drinking Levels Defined.” Retrieved on 13 October, 2014. <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-your-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/moderate-binge-drinking>

³ Krahn, Dean, Kurth, Candance, Gomberg, Edith, & Drownowski, Adam. (2005) Pathological dieting and alcohol use in college women—a continuum of behaviors. *Eating Behaviors*, 6, 43-52. Accessed through Illiad InterLibrary Loan online database.

⁴ American Psychiatric Association. Binge-eating disorder. In: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. 5th ed. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association; 2013: 350-353. Accessed through Summon database.

exercise addict's frame of mind: He or she no longer chooses to exercise but feels compelled to do so and struggles with guilt and anxiety if he or she does not work out."⁵ So, what distinguishes the everyday gym enthusiast from someone who is addicted to exercise? Hausenblas and Downs identified exercise addiction based on modified criteria from the DSM-IV TR for substance dependence and concluded that tolerance of the amount of exercise, withdrawal when unable to exercise, lack of control in trying to reduce the amount of exercise, time spent exercising, reduction in other activities due to extreme focus on exercise, and continuation of excessive exercise in the face of clear physical and psychological problems are all aspects of compulsive or obligatory exercise.⁶ While many college-aged women may not feel this sense of internal urgency in terms of exercise, some women, especially those in sororities, tend to exercise because of external influences, such as feelings of shame and guilt.

Changes Through Time: Self-Esteem and Disordered Eating

Historically, women have faced body image issues due to cultural and stereotypical expectations of beauty, which led to an increase in disordered eating habits and unhealthy exercise routines. According to Joan Brumberg, a scholar on the history of women's body image issues, "historical forces have made coming of age in a female body a different and more complex experience today than it was a century ago. Although sexual development—the onset of menstruation and the

⁵ Kid's Health. "Compulsive Exercise." *Nemours*. Retrieved on 13 October, 2014.

http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/behavior/compulsive_exercise.html

⁶ Freimuth, Marilyn, Moniz, Sandy, & Kim, Shari. (2011). Clarifying Exercise Addiction: Differential Diagnosis, Co-occurring Disorders, and Phases of Addiction. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 8, 4069-4081. Accessed through Google Scholar database.

appearance of breasts—occurs in every generation, a girl’s experience of these inevitable biological events is shaped by the world in which she lives.”⁷ In the nineteenth century, the “growing pains” of adolescence were diminished by society’s emphasis on spiritual rather than physical matters. However, among the girls in the upper classes, there was concern about the size of certain parts of the body. To be too large was a sign of indelicacy, which reflected lower-class origins. In the twentieth century, the body became a more centralized and personal project of American girls because they believed the body was the ultimate expression of the self. In the 1920’s, for the first time, adolescent women made systematic efforts to lower their weight by food restriction and exercise, as seen in various college news stories and publications. For example, “In 1924, the *Smith College Weekly* printed a letter for students warning them about the newest weight loss craze on campus...” yet, despite the threat of ill health brought on by these intense regimens, college girls in the 1920’s worked hard to become slender.⁸

By 1995, the body projects of middle-class American girls were more habitual and intense than they were in the 1920’s or 1950’s. Society seemed to define perfection as five feet, seven inches tall, and 110 pounds, and many women worked long hours at exercise and body sculpting in order to achieve the body of their dreams. According to Brumberg, at the close of the twentieth century, the female body poses an enormous problem for American girls, and it does so because of the culture in which we live. The process of sexual maturation is more difficult

⁷ Brumberg, Joan Jacobs. (1997). *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (p. xviii). New York: Random House, Inc.

⁸ Brumberg. *The Body Project*, 99.

for girls today than it was a century ago because of a set of historical changes that have resulted in the peculiar mismatch between girls' biology and today's culture. Although girls now mature sexually earlier than ever before, contemporary American society provides fewer social protections for them, a situation that leaves them unsupported in their development and extremely vulnerable to the excesses of popular culture...Girls today make the body into an all-consuming project in ways young women of the past did not.⁹

Throughout history, the preoccupation with dieting has been persistent, and American girls have been constantly on guard about gaining weight. As a result, appetite control was a major feature of the adolescent experience. According to the literature, eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa date back to the 1970's. By 1974, "the starving disease made its first appearance as an independent subject heading" in a journal on contemporary social issues, and, in effect, "anorexia nervosa became the disease of the 1970's."¹⁰ Brumberg theorizes that there are three models of causal factors related to this eating disorder—biomedical, psychological, and cultural. The cultural explanation of anorexia nervosa is popular and widely promoted among scholars. "[The cultural explanation] postulates that anorexia nervosa is generated by a powerful cultural imperative that makes slimness the chief attribute of female beauty...This common wisdom reflects the realities of women's lives in the twentieth century."¹¹ A 1984 study demonstrated this by showing that many college women make weight a central feature of their cognitive

⁹ Brumberg. *The Body Project*, xvii.

¹⁰ Brumberg, Joan Jacobs. (2008). *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa*. New York: Paw Prints.

¹¹ Brumberg. *Fasting Girls*, 31.

schemas. These women are constantly evaluating other women, themselves, and their own achievements in terms of their weight. In the same study, “many women confirm that female self-esteem and happiness are tied to weight, particularly in the young adult years.”¹² Interestingly enough, there was no opposing message or force in the early 1980’s that was trying to dissuade women from behaving this way. Modern dieting patterns reflect the same ideas, yet face consistent resistance from organizations that encourage positive self-talk and promote a healthy body image. Regardless of the backlash that dieting faces in contemporary society, young women still attach themselves to these habits because it is a widely practiced and admired form of cultural expression.

College-aged women in particular have faced these issues in the past and continue to face them in the present. Lynn Peril explains that historian Margaret Lowe was interested in researching these problems across time: “In [Lowe’s] study of body image from 1875 to 1930, she showed how early college girls accepted modest weight gain as a sign of a healthy adjustment to college life, instead of the alarming development it would later become.”¹³ Today, one would be hard-pressed to find a group of college girls who openly admit to their hefty appetites. Clearly, women in the past have had a much different relationship with food than we currently do—one with much less anxiety.

It may be the case that women in college face these issues, even more so today than in the past, because they are blatantly seen as objects of the male gaze,

¹² Brumberg. *Fasting Girls*, 32.

¹³ Peril, Lynn. (2006). *College Girls: Bluestockings, Sex Kittens, and Coeds, Then and Now* (pp. 252-253). New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

especially in a social environment such as a fraternity party. In some senses, a fraternity party can closely resemble a hunting ground, with the older fraternity men as the poachers and seemingly unaware younger female students as the prey. It is an unappealing picture to paint, but it is the culture of many fraternity systems that exist on thousands of college campuses today. In 2011, a documentary titled, *Miss Representation*, emphasized the issues that women face in regards to body image due to the overwhelming pressure of the media in today's society. According to the film, media is the message and the messenger, making it all the more powerful. The narrator explains her own struggles with her body image through adolescence, pointing out that our culture is doing severe damage by telling women and girls to become the most beautiful and to do so by any means necessary. Many of the advertisements used as examples in the documentary motivate transforming into this idealized, beautiful woman for the purpose of finding a man who loves her. This message reiterates that women's self-worth is dependent on the approval of men. The feelings of inadequacy that women take away from the media's representation of women has led to alarming statistics in today's youth. According to the film, 53% of 13-year old girls are unhappy with their body and that number increases to 78% by age 17. The rates of depression among girls and women have doubled between 2000 and 2010, and, unfortunately, 17% of teens engage in cutting and self-injurious behaviors as a result of not meeting the uniform criteria of beauty set forth by the media.¹⁴

¹⁴ *Miss Representation*. Directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom. Girl's Club Entertainment, 2011. DVD.

As noted by previous research in the field, these issues of body image, beauty, and self-esteem may lead to the compulsive behaviors of binge drinking, exercising, and eating.¹⁵ Social contexts will enhance the likelihood of these behaviors because there are generally more people all doing the same thing. In this sense, college-aged women who are members of a Greek organization will be more likely than those women who are not members to engage in these behaviors.

The Socialization Processes of Greek Organizations

It is widely recognized that alcohol use generally increases in adolescence, as this is the time when experimentation tends to occur. This pattern is particularly evident in studies with college student samples. In most research studies on this subject matter, researchers agree that college attendance itself is a risk factor for heavier drinking. Most college students consistently report higher rates of drinking than their non-student peers, and the transition from high school to college is often identified as a high-risk time period.¹⁶

In a 2003 study on the specific risk factors for heavy drinking and its consequences within college student populations, the involvement in a fraternity or a sorority was specifically identified.¹⁷ Relevant background research documents the fact that “Greeks drink more frequently, more heavily, and experience more

¹⁵ Hartley, Cecilia, & Weitz, Rose. (1998). Letting Ourselves Go: Making Room for the Fat Body in Feminist Scholarship. In R. Weitz (Ed.), *The Politics of Women's Bodies* (pp. 247-249). New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁶ Park, Aesoon, Sher, Kenneth, & Krull, Jennifer. (2009). Selection and Socialization of Risky Drinking During the College Transition: The Importance of Microenvironments Associated With Specific Living Units. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors* 23, 404-414. Accessed through PsycInfo database.

¹⁷ Bartholow, Bruce, Sher, Kenneth, & Krull, Jennifer. (2003). Changes in Heavy Drinking Over the Third Decade of Life as a Function of Collegiate Fraternity and Sorority Involvement: A Prospective, Multilevel Analysis. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 22, 616-626. Accessed through Summon database.

alcohol-related problems during college than their non-affiliated peers,” which may speak to the social environment Greek organizations promote.¹⁸ In a subsequent study on the importance of microenvironments on risky drinking behaviors, researchers found differences among the drinking habits of college students as a function of living arrangement.¹⁹ This study revealed that on-campus living is generally more associated with off-campus living, and, among on-campus living types, [such as residence halls, Greek houses, and on-campus apartments], living in Greek houses is associated with a greater level of alcohol use and misuse compared with all other [living situations]. Further, a national study found that over half of Greek house residents, contrasted with one-fourth of residence hall residents, were frequent binge drinkers.” This study also identified that living in Greek houses was the strongest correlate of binge drinking out of all 33 individual differences that were examined. An interesting additional finding suggests that Greek members living in the Greek houses were more likely to engage in frequent binge drinking than non-Greek members, but are also more likely to do so than Greek members who did not live in Greek houses.²⁰ This data may imply that the members currently living in the Greek houses are the most at risk for heavy drinking.

Solutions to this long-standing issue of heavy drinking on college campuses have been explored and contemplated for decades. However, in order to develop intervention strategies for heavy drinking, one must understand the factors that

¹⁸ Bartholow, et al. “Changes in Heavy Drinking,” 620.

¹⁹ Park et al. “Selection and Socialization,” 406-407.

²⁰ Wechsler, Henry, Kuo, Meichun, Lee, Hang, & Dowdall, George. (2000). Environmental correlates of underage alcohol use and related problems of college students. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 19, 24–29. Accessed through Summon Database.

consistently relate to persistent and problematic levels of alcohol use. Across various studies, “findings suggest that the Greek system provides a social environment that facilitates a heavy drinking lifestyle among its members. Greeks are consistently more inclined than non-Greeks to believe that higher levels of alcohol use are normative and that their peers are more supportive of heavy drinking practices such as binge drinking.”²¹

Taken all together, I hypothesize that Greek members, more so than non-Greek members, are more likely to engage in bingeing behavior, such as binge drinking. There is a strong, if not definite, link between binge drinking, followed by binge eating, and, subsequently, binge exercising. Thus, Greek members are more likely than non-Greek members to participate in this cycle of bingeing behaviors.

The Complexity of Combining Men’s and Women’s Issues

Greek members, as referenced in my hypothesis, include both fraternity members and sorority members. The background research on residency as a factor determining binge drinking includes fraternities and sororities. Likewise, body image issues have not only affected women in the past, but men also, as demonstrated by extensive prior research on masculinity.²² Why, then, is the current study only examining Greek women and non-Greek women in regards to these bingeing behaviors? The answer lies in the complexities that arise when trying to combine both genders in relation to these types of behaviors.

²¹ Sher, Kenneth, Bartholow, Bruce, & Nanda, Shivani. (2001). Short- and Long-Term Effects of Fraternity and Sorority Membership on Heavy Drinking: A Social Norms Perspective. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 15, 42-51. Accessed through PsychInfo database.

²² Murnen, Sarah. (2011). Gender and Body Images. In T. Cash & L. Smolak (Eds.), *Body Image: A Handbook of Science, Practice, and Prevention* (pp. 173-178). New York: Guilford Press.

In terms of binge drinking behaviors, previous research relies heavily on male populations to generate significant results and statistically important results. In various studies, the gender differences found in binge eating behaviors are plentiful, with men participating in the compulsive behavior much more than women. Research studies on the risk factors associated with heavy, episodic, or binge drinking have entailed primarily personal characteristics of students and their residences on campus. According to one, "Caucasian students, males, and students aged under 23 years older are more likely to binge drink, as are fraternity or sorority house residents."²³ In a univariate analysis of the findings from this particular study, "male students were more likely to binge drink than female students (50% vs. 41%), and, [further], underage students who live in fraternity or sorority houses are more likely to binge drink than are students who live in single-sex dormitories."²⁴

In a separate study, "overall, 44% of the students were classified as binge drinkers, with 50% of the men drinking five or more drinks in a row and 39% of women drinking four or more drinks in a row at least once in the 2 weeks prior to answering the questionnaire. These findings suggest that a near majority of men and a minority of women qualify as binge drinkers."²⁵ It is surprising how many studies emphasize that men are more likely to binge drink than women. The perception that women do not engage as frequently in binge drinking behaviors must change.

²³ Wechsler, H. "Environmental correlates," 26.

²⁴ Wechsler, H. "Environmental correlates," 27.

²⁵ Wechsler, Henry, Dowdall, George, Davenport, Andrea, & Castillo, Sonia. (1995). Correlates of College Student Binge Drinking. *American Journal of Public Health*, 85, 921-927. Accessed through Summon Database.

Due to the fact this assumption, it is vital that binge-drinking rates in the current research exclusively emphasize female binge drinking tendencies.

As mentioned previously, body image issues have historically been associated with women. Much of the early research on physical attractiveness consisted of studies of males perceiving females, reflecting researchers' implicit assumption that the phenomenon was limited to or most powerful when one of feminine beauty in the eyes of men. Similarly, numerous recent investigations of body image focus on females and exclude males. In part, this may be explained as the result of the growing scientific interest in eating disorder, which are more prevalent among females and have body-image dysfunctions as a central component."²⁶

From a contemporary perspective, there may exist an explicit assumption that body image issues are generally less problematic for men than for women, but this does not discount the relevance of men struggling with such problems. It is possible that researchers assume there are no associations between men and body image-related problems, and thus, no researchers ever conduct those studies. People tend to stick with what they know, or what they assume to be true, which is that masculinity and the concept of being "manly" is not related to physical insecurities. Gender stereotypes are very prominent in our society, which may offer an additional explanation as to why men's body issues are rarely studied. This can be seen in a recent research study where "The findings are clear of gender-based

²⁶ Cash, Thomas. & Brown, Timothy. (1989). Gender and Body Images: Stereotypes and Realities. *Sex Roles*, 21, 361-373. Accessed through PsycInfo.

stereotypes of body image. Regardless of the sex of the perceiver, men and women were assumed to differ extensively on how they think, feel, and act vis-à-vis their bodies...Our subjects' stereotypical view of the sexes maintained that females hold consistently more negative body-image attitudes than do males. Actual sex differences, however, occurred in none of these global evaluative areas."²⁷

Body image is a complex construct that consists of perceptual and attitudinal components. Exploring gender differences in body image is rather complicated because opinions often depend on which body-image parameters are measured. Depending on what type of attractiveness or which area of the body is being assessed, men and women's body images will vary drastically. In one study, males rated themselves as generally more physically attractive than females did."²⁸ Conclusions here suggested that males are more obviously satisfied with their bodies than females. This research also speaks to the popular wisdom that women's body satisfaction has decreased over time, while men's body satisfaction has either remained the same or declined less rapidly.²⁹ In a subsequent study, as expected, female body image was highly correlated with self-esteem, while there was no significant correlation between men and body image with self-esteem.³⁰ Such evidence does not imply that men never suffer from body image-related problems, but it does suggest that social expectations of men in today's society dictate that women's body issues are more complex and more relevant.

²⁷ Cash, T. "Gender and Body Image Issues," 365.

²⁸ Feingold, Alan, & Mazzella, Ronald. (1998). Gender Differences in Body Image are Increasing. *Journal of Psychological Science*, 9, 190-195. Accessed through JSTOR database.

²⁹ Feingold, A. "Gender Differences in Body Image," 191.

³⁰ Furnham, Adrian, Badmin, Nicola, & Sneade, Ian. (2002). Body Image Dissatisfaction: Gender Differences in Eating Attitudes, Self-Esteem, and Reasons for Exercise. *The Journal of Psychology*, 136, 581-596. Accessed through Summon Database.

In terms of the current research, the causal connection that is being explored between three bingeing behaviors is supported by previous research, but only in regard to women. Although there is tentative evidence suggesting the contrary, including men as participants in the current research may disrupt analyzing the cyclical relationship between binge eating, binge drinking, and binge exercising. There have also been gender differences noted in the labeling of behaviors. For example, “men are less likely than women to label the ingestion of a large quantity of food as bingeing,”³¹ which could also impair the findings of the current research because male participants may not consider their tendencies to reflect compulsivity.

To attempt to combine men’s and women’s issues would require copious amounts of initial research on men’s body image issues. Not only would the current research expect a lesser response rate from college males because they presumably are less interested in the subject matter, but it would also detract from identifying the bingeing behaviors that are occurring among college age women.

In a similar category with body image, disordered eating patterns and exercise behaviors are two other areas where combining the findings of men and women would be more complex than beneficial. Eating disorders and their connection to disordered exercise routine are more commonly found among women. In particular, “eating disorders are more prevalent in the Western societies than in other parts of the world because they have more critical standards of

³¹ Furnham, A. “Body Image Dissatisfaction,” 591.

women's attractiveness and beauty."³² Many research studies involving college students aim to find the prevalence of eating disorders, as well as to identify the demographic correlates related to such disorders, such as gender and socio-economic status. One recent study's findings showed significant differences on the basis of gender: "Males reported the symptoms of overeating, while females showed body checking and avoidance, binge eating, fasting, and vomiting."³³

Although most studies reflect gender differences in disordered eating, with women being more significantly affected, prior studies have found that both men and women show concern about their bodies, just in different ways. One study by Cash, Winstead, and Janda (1986) concluded that males felt good about their bodies if they were fit and exercised regularly, while females showed more weight consciousness and were more concerned with aspects of their [aesthetic] appearance."³⁴ It is interesting to speculate if these trends have changed over time, since these findings were reported in the late 1980's. More up-to-date research findings suggest that men and women's reasons for exercising are still different in the sense that "women, in contrast to men, exercise primarily in order to lose weight and that those who exercise for appearance rather than health reasons may also be more at risk for the development of eating disorders."³⁵ The differences in assessing reasons for exercise, body image thoughts, eating patterns, and the definitions of binge drinking and prevalence of previously studied binge drinking habits vary

³² Akram, Bushra, & Javed, Maryam. (2014). Eating Disorders among University Students: Prevalence and Gender Difference. *Asian Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*, 4,6, 66-75. Accessed through Summon database.

³³ Akram, B. "Eating Disorders," 68.

³⁴ Akram, B. "Eating Disorders," 69.

³⁵ Furnham, A. "Body Image Dissatisfaction," 586.

significantly between men and women. These differences make it difficult to discuss men and women's behaviors in the same analytic regard.

Why Is This An Important Issue?

More so than ever, women around the world are experiencing extreme body image issues due to the overwhelming prominence of the media and the constant perpetuation of gender roles. This frequently leads to disordered eating as an attempt to lose weight, over-exercising as an attempt to lose weight, and the use of laxatives and fat loss pills to lose weight.³⁶ More frequently than not, eating disorders and weight loss behaviors are perpetuated and glorified by society. The more weight someone loses, the more people applaud their physique. Even on the edge of dying from a disease such as anorexia or bulimia, society compliments the bodies that have been created through such destructive behaviors.³⁷ As the body adjusts for the lack of proper nutrition, the weight loss and fat loss process actually slows down as an attempt by the body to avoid starvation. This is when individuals tend to turn to exercise to continue and accelerate the process. In terms of over-exercising, society applauds the dedication and determination of those 5am workouts and the three-hour runs. American society views these habits as a form of will power and motivation, not recognizing that those people may be suffering from a disorder called Anorexia Athletica, or a less severe form of that, such as binge

³⁶ Kelly-Weeder, Susan. (2011). Binge drinking and disordered eating in college students. *Journal of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners*, 23, 33-41. Accessed through Summon database.

³⁷ Chernik, Abra. (1995). The Voice of an Anorexic. In B. Findlen (Ed.), *Listen Up: Voices from the Feminist Generation*, pp. 76-81. Accessed through Ms. Magazine database.

exercise.³⁸ Society does not always understand the issues that these people have with their bodies or the low self-esteem that often drives the crash diets and copious exercising.

How, then, does society play a part in the lives of women and the feelings they have about themselves and for their bodies? Popular culture has drastically increased feelings of anxiety over the body. Through excessive advertisements, music videos, exercise tapes, and sexualized imagery around every corner, the female youth who are tuned into pop culture are constantly pressured to have a perfect body, a small waist, large bust, large backside, and minimal body fat in order to be lean and toned.³⁹ The obsession with thinness has a very negative impact on women, but the obsession is generated due to the unrealistic ideals of feminine beauty upheld by society. The perceptions of femininity in our society are so commonly reiterated that women's inferior body images and self-esteem arise because their bodies do not perfectly fit that perception.⁴⁰ In fact, previous literature suggests that body image does not depend solely on one's self-esteem or confidence, but rather, anthropometric measurements, such as body fat percentage, height, waist measurements, and the number on the scale, all relative to those numbers that the ideal woman maintains. Additionally, culture, upbringing,

³⁸ Israel, Diane, Man, Kathleen, and Precht, Carla. *Beauty Mark: Body Image and the Race for Perfection.* She-Art Production, 2009. Videocassette (VHS), 50 min.

³⁹ Dworkin, Shari, & Wachs, Linda Faye. (2009). *Body Panic: Gender, Health, and the Selling of Fitness.* New York and London: New York University Press.

⁴⁰ Gnong, Andrea, Leavy, Patricia, & Ross, Lauren S. (2009). Femininity, Masculinity, and Body Image Issues among College-Age Women: An In-depth and Written Interview Study of the Mind-Body Dichotomy. *The Qualitative Report*, 14.2, 261-292. Accessed through ProQuest database.

professional stature, and ethnicity may be predominant factors behind high or low body image satisfaction.⁴¹

As if the obsession for thinness isn't enough, pop culture has also introduced the behavior of "fat shaming." According to the literature, fat women are commonly stigmatized in today's society, whether it be a fat person being considered lazy, or a fat person having no organizational skills and therefore not being worthy of employment; fat women are frequently looked down upon in today's society.⁴² What most people fail to understand is that fat stigmas can perpetuate unhealthy behaviors even further, rather than encourage weight loss and healthier behaviors. One study suggests that weight concerns are associated with an increased likelihood of binge eating within the following few days. In particular, elevated weight concerns predicted next-day binge eating. The likelihood of binge eating increased on days when participants were under greater stress, maintained a more negative affect, and thought more frequently of weight concerns.⁴³ Fat shaming and the perpetuation of the ideal body are doing far more harm than good, but cultural norms are hard to change. More specifically, gender norms regarding the physical body seem to be set in stone, with women being guided to wither away until their bodies take up no space at all.

⁴¹ Goswami, Shweta, Sachdeva, Sandeep, & Sachdeva Ruchi. (2012). Body image satisfaction among female college students. *Industrial Psychiatry Journal*, 21.2, 168-172. Accessed through ProQuest database.

⁴² Hartley, C. "Letting Ourselves Go," 248.

⁴³ Barker, Erin, Williams, Rebecca, & Galambos, Nancy. (2006). Daily Spillover to and from Binge Eating in First-Year University Females. *Eating Disorders*, 14, 229-242. Accessed through Summon database.

The literature on cultural perpetuation of these unhealthy habits is plentiful, but there is less information on particular age groups who succumb to the pressures of achieving the “perfect body.”⁴⁴ College women seem to be at a particular risk of binge eating, binge exercising, and binge drinking, due to stress levels, a greater need for approval from peers, emotional instability upon leaving home, desire for new friendships, and expectations of heightened sexual activity.⁴⁵ Although these aspects may have dissipated in their importance related to bingeing behaviors since this study was conducted in 1981, it is likely that first-year, female students still experience similar emotions.

Cycles of bingeing behaviors seem to be somewhat self-inducing in the sense that one factor triggers the compulsive behaviors and the end of the cycle then re-introduces the starting factor again. For example, binge drinking and binge eating are two factors that may lead to significant weight gain. Weight gain is the exact thing that college women are trying to avoid in order to have a healthy body image and high levels of self-esteem. Once an individual realizes that they have put on extra body weight, they may be more likely to binge exercise and result to desperate starvation mechanisms. In this situation, the body becomes so famished that upon re-introduction to food, especially after a night of drinking, the binge eating is likely to start all over again. It is important to note that previous findings show these behaviors are not occurring infrequently, but rather, almost every weekend some sort of partying and bingeing takes place on a college campus. These things are

⁴⁴ Gnong, A. “Femininity, Masculinity, and Body Image Issues,” 273.

⁴⁵ Dunn, Patricia K., & Ondercin, Patricia. (1981). Personality Variables Related to Compulsive Eating in College Women. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 37, 43-49. Accessed through Summon database.

demonstrated almost pathologically in college-aged women, which raises concern about overall mental health during the college years and the continuance of these behaviors after college.⁴⁶

These concerns have been addressed in the background literature, particularly in regard to the clinical disorder of binge eating. Researchers have asked if certain characteristics can be linked to binge eaters, and if specific types of personalities succumb to the societal pressures previously mentioned. In college women, certain personality variables have been associated with compulsive eating tendencies, and, although these findings were documented over 30 years ago, it is unlikely that personality-related factors among women have changed from the past to the present. These high-compulsive eaters are characterized by inner tension, high suspiciousness of others, guilt-proneness, lack of self-control, and emotional instability.⁴⁷ These variables suggest that some women are more “at risk” for eating disorders than others, which could lead to healthcare focus on preventive medicine for this particular age and gender population.

Clinical research has been done on the issues of binge eating and the steps that an individual can take to overcome it. This literature suggests that people need to hone in on what triggers a binge for them, the lifestyle consequences it is causing, and to pay attention to what is eaten during a binge episode.⁴⁸ These factors can help identify where the problem is originating and help them to stop. However, in

⁴⁶ Krahn, Dean, Kurth, Candance, Gomberg, Edith, & Drewnowski, Adam. (2005) Pathological dieting and alcohol use in college women—a continuum of behaviors. *Eating Behaviors*, 6, 43-52. Accessed through Illiad InterLibrary Loan online database.

⁴⁷ Dunn, Patricia K. “Personality Variables,” 45.

⁴⁸ American Psychiatric Association. Binge-eating disorder. In: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. 5th ed. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association; 2013: 350-353. Accessed through Summon database.

college women, these factors all depend on the social context. The social situation of drinking can trigger an eating binge, the lifestyle consequences are harder to notice because most people seem to be doing it too, and nothing but unhealthy food is consumed in a social situation because college students have limited funds and the overwhelming majority of people choose to eat junk food.⁴⁹ Although the implications for treatment and self-correction come from a good place, they are not as applicable to the typical college woman or sorority member.

Background information on compulsive exercising reveals that women are over-exercising to compensate for their eating habits, which usually are reinforced by the number of other women who do the same thing. Women often work out for two or more hours while surrounded by some of their closest friends because they feel as if they are in competition to burn off the most calories from the previous night's binge. This idea of competition among college women can apply to various aspects of the bingeing cycles. Both exercising and drinking take place in the view of more than just the other women that are participating—they take place in a public setting where other individuals are likely to see them as well. Binge eating, however, is more likely to occur in a more private setting, perhaps only around the other women that are eating too. It is possible that binge exercising and binge drinking are results of wanting to be noticed by others. These behaviors take place in public gyms and fraternity parties as means of being recognized by others—particularly other men. Since binge eating is not a “feminine” habit, women may partake in binge eating in private because other men are not around to watch

⁴⁹ Fairburn, Christopher. (1995). *Overcoming Binge Eating* (pp. 12-13). New York: The Guilford Press.

them.⁵⁰ The social contexts in which these behaviors tend to be most common may explain when and why bingeing behavior is likely to occur.

Previous research on bingeing behaviors is plentiful. In fact, many studies examine the relationship between binge eating and binge drinking or binge eating and exercise. However, few researchers have studied the relationship between binge drinking, binge eating, and subsequent binge exercise in a population of college-age women. Even fewer studies have been done comparing female students involved in Greek organizations to those who are not in terms of these compulsive behaviors. The current research explores how various social contexts and societal expectations are catalysts for these behaviors and why so many women fall victim to these behaviors. It is clear that body image, self-esteem, cultural expectations of gender and beauty, peer pressure, binge drinking, binge eating, and binge exercising are all related, but how are they related, and why?

Methodology

In order to understand the prevalence of binge eating, binge drinking, and binge exercising in college women, a survey was constructed and sent out to all female students attending Union College, a total of 1,009 female students. Further, subsets of the population of degree-seeking women at Union College are: 260 first-year students, 255 second-year students, 274 third-year students, and 216 fourth-year students. The entire population of women at this school was selected in order to compare the differences between non-Greek affiliated women and Greek

⁵⁰ Mori, DeAnna, Chaiken, Shelly, & Pilner, Patricia. (1987). Eating Lightly and the self-presentation of femininity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53, 693-702. Accessed through PsycInfo.

affiliated women on this campus. In total, as of Fall 2014, 433 women at Union College are affiliated with a sorority, meaning there are 576 non-Greek affiliated women at Union College.⁵¹ The survey was constructed on Zarca Interactive, a website used frequently by the Psychology Department at Union College. The survey asked different questions regarding demographics, body image, exercise habits, and eating habits. Each question was original, written in the form that would best aid in answering the research questions at hand; with the exception of questions 24-28, which are modified versions of questions from the Assessment of Binge Eating Severity Among Obese Persons from the Journal of Addicted Behaviors.⁵² All results from this survey were recorded onto the Zarca website database and then made accessible through Microsoft Excel to view average statistics of responses. This survey was completely anonymous so that there was no opportunity to discover the identity of the respondents.

In terms of delivery, this survey was mailed through the Union College email database from the Dean of Students office. It was only sent to the women of Union College and it requested participation in a survey for Danielle MacGregor's senior thesis paper. The email was personalized by referencing the researcher's name as a way to gain a better response rate. Students may be more likely to fill out surveys sent by the school if they are aware of who and what the results are being used for. This survey was active for participation for two consecutive weeks, from October

⁵¹ Union College. *Fall-Term Enrollment Summary 2014-2015*. The Department of Institutional Studies, Union College. Published September, 2014. Accessed 29 October, 2014.

http://www.union.edu/offices/institutional/_documents/Enrollment%20Summary.pdf

⁵² Gormally, Jim. (1982). The Assessment of Binge Eating Severity Among Obese Persons. *Addictive Behaviors*, 7,47-55.

29th-November 12th in the hopes that more people would respond due to the longer time frame. A reminder email was sent on November 7th and again on November 10th asking those same students who received the original email to take the time to fill out the survey because there was only a certain time remaining to collect all data. This second email hopefully reminded those students who the researcher was, what she was doing, and why she needed them to participate in the survey.

In addition to the secondary sources, this survey will help to analyze the prevalence of these bingeing behaviors among Greek and non-Greek affiliated women at Union College. The data will distinguish between which women are in a sorority and which are not, and will reveal their bingeing tendencies while in college. The goal of this methodology is to reveal the associations between these bingeing behaviors and the external and internal factors that may have an effect on them for both Greek and non-Greek women.

Conclusion

Women's issues have a historical past that cannot be ignored or denied. Social situations, popular culture's influence on body image and self esteem, and the iron bars of femininity as built and maintained by society have long dictated how women think of themselves, and thus, the actions they take in order to gain control of their bodies. Binge drinking, binge eating, and binge exercising are not issues that pertain solely to Greek college women and non-Greek college women. They may

affect women worldwide and, therefore, it is important to recognize them as broader women's issues.⁵³

The smaller subdivision of women in college who may be facing these issues must be brought to the forefront of the conversation. These are the women who could be experiencing the cycle most directly and most intensely. Further, the smaller subdivision of college women in a sorority may be falling victim to bingeing behaviors on a weekly or daily basis.

⁵³ For the purposes of this dissertation, the focus of these issues will be on women. I fully recognize and understand that many men are affected in the same way.

CHAPTER II: Behind the Greek Letters

“Any fool can make a rule. And any fool will mind it.” -Henry David Thoreau

The bingeing cycle may present itself in populations all over the world. Women and men in America may just as easily face these issues as those in other countries, however, groups of college-aged women often undergo repeated exposure to various types of bingeing, which intensifies when joining a sorority.

This chapter will examine the correlations found in the current study between female Greek membership and three bingeing behaviors: binge drinking, binge eating, and binge exercising. Women who are members of a sorority may be more likely to partake in all three of these behaviors; each one triggered by the women’s previous actions, due to their unique social circumstances and contexts. In addition to these correlations, this paper will also examine how environments can influence disordered eating patterns, can trigger low self-esteem and perpetuate negative body image in women—especially women in a sorority. Bingeing behaviors may affect all women; thus they must be discussed through the lenses of Greek college women, non-Greek college women, and women outside of college in order to determine other causal factors and to identify future solutions.

“Let’s Take Some Shots”

The research survey was distributed to all female students at Union College, both Greek members and non-Greek students, by arrangement and permission of the college during the Fall 2014 trimester. The majority of the respondents were non-Greek members (60.6%), and the rest of respondents were Greek members (37.3%). It is important to note that, at Union College, freshman students are not

allowed to join sororities. Membership in a Greek organization is only optional as a second year student. The survey revealed more non-Greek responses than Greek responses, possibly due to the 260 female freshman students that participated. 22.9% of all responses were from female first-years, which signifies a confound of the study because the Greek-specific environment and social contexts mentioned are completely foreign to this first-year age group. They are more unaware of the bingeing patterns on Union's campus, and thus, their responses to the survey may have contributed to less significant results.

A sorority may appear as a popular and favorable social group in the eyes of college women. According to Christian Crandall, a well known researcher in the field of personality and social psychology, "Social groups serve to tell us who we are, what to think, and how to behave. The more we value the social group, the more we are willing to be influenced by it."⁵⁴ In trying to understand the bingeing behaviors of college women, it is vital to recognize that the imitation of a social group's behaviors and actions is common and often desirable.

What first comes to mind when one hears the word "sorority?" Several stereotypical associations that have been reported include, "bitchy, princessy, slutty girls who cared only about themselves and went out with frat boys."⁵⁵ In focusing one's attention past the initial stereotypes, the commonality among most Greek organizations is the partying. In asking the question: who gets the most drunk on

⁵⁴ Crandall, Christian. (1988). Social Contagion of Binge Eating. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 55, 588-598. Accessed through Summon database.

⁵⁵ Robbins, Alexandra. (2004). *Pledged: The Secret Life of Sororities*. New York, New York.

college campuses, the answer is most usually: the Greeks. There are numerous research studies published each year which support the positive correlation between Greek membership and the likelihood of over-drinking, becoming an alcoholic in the post-graduate years, and alcohol-related weight gain. Huchting, et al. examined sorority alcohol consumption as a function of planned behavior and found that intentions to drink mediated what individuals would eat on that day in order to get drunk faster and avoid weight gain.⁵⁶ Similarly, Park, et al. demonstrated the importance of microenvironments in developing excessive drinking habits, with an emphasis on living in a Greek house as a major contributing factor for risky drinking.⁵⁷ Health behaviors have been studied pre- and post-Greek involvement in order to understand how the organization and context of Greek life tends to increase the likelihood of risky health behaviors and poor physical health.⁵⁸ It is not surprising, therefore, that a significant number of the Greek members who participated in this survey reported engaging in binge drinking activities on multiple occasions.

To reiterate the official definition, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism defines binge drinking as “drinking that brings blood alcohol concentration levels to 0.08. This typically occurs after 4 drinks for women and 5

⁵⁶ Huchting, Karen, Lac, Andrew, & LaBrie, Joseph. (2008) An Application of the Theory of Planned Behavior to Sorority Alcohol Consumption. *Journal of Addictive Behaviors*, 33, 538-551. Accessed through ProQuest database.

⁵⁷ Park, Aesoon, Sher, Kenneth, & Krull, Jennifer. (2009). Selection and Socialization of Risky Drinking During the College Transition: The Importance of Microenvironments Associated With Specific Living Units. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors* 23, 404-414. Accessed through PsycInfo database.

⁵⁸ Scott-Sheldon, Lori, Carey, Kate, & Carey, Michael. (2008). Health Behavior and College Students: Does Greek Affiliation Matter? *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 31, 61-70. Accessed through ProQuest database.

drinks for men—in about 2 hours.”⁵⁹ According to the data collected by the current research survey, 30.4% of respondents reported consuming 2-4 drinks in a row while drinking. Meanwhile, 25.5% of participants reported having 4-6 drinks in a row, and the largest percentage of women (31.1%) reported having 0-2 drinks in a row. This left approximately 9.7% of respondents who identified as drinking 6 or more drinks in a row while drinking. Considering that, at Union, the average Greek party lasts from 9pm-11pm and *only* on Friday and Saturday, these frequencies suggest that binge drinking might be happening each weekend at this institution. According to the average survey respondent, participants went “out” for a night of drinking three or four times per week. Taking into account the two days for the weekend, this number indicates that female college students, as a whole, are drinking alcohol in a social situation at least two weeknights, outside of official Greek-sponsored social events. There was a significant, negative correlation found between sorority membership and the number of nights per week consuming alcohol ($r = -.294$, $p = .000$), suggesting that non-Greek members consumed *less* alcohol per week than the Greek members who participated in the survey. Additionally, being a non-Greek female significantly correlated with drinking less drinks in a row when drinking than those women involved in a sorority ($r = -.358$, $p = .000$). Sorority women drank more drinks all at once, as well as more frequently throughout a given week.

⁵⁹ National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. “Drinking Levels Defined.” Retrieved on 13 October, 2014. <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-your-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/moderate-binge-drinking>

Christian Crandall and other researchers would argue that if drinking were one of the main interests of a sorority as a social group, it would follow that its members would participate in said activity. Kenneth Sher and his colleagues examined the short and long-term effects of fraternity and sorority membership on heavy drinking through a social norms perspective. The most important finding to emerge from their analyses was that, although Greeks drank more heavily than non-Greeks during their college years, this difference was no longer apparent 3 years after college.⁶⁰ It is reassuring to note that the drinking patterns practiced by Greek members, including women, may not threaten to become a dangerous addiction post-graduation. However, the four years during college remain a period of concern. Results confirm that “peer alcohol use norms at least partially account for the relation between Greek membership and heavy drinking... and these findings suggest that the Greek system provides a social environment that facilitates a heavy drinking lifestyle among its members.”⁶¹ Sher’s findings suggest that a general environmental factor of college must be intimately considered in causing the binge drinking cycle.

A study by Wechsler, et al., examines a more specific relationship between environment and binge drinking. In this particular study, the strongest predictors of college binge drinking were residence in a fraternity or sorority and the adoption of a party-centered lifestyle.⁶² Status in school can be a major contributing factor to

⁶⁰ Sher, Kenneth, Bartholow, Bruce, & Nanda, Shivani. (2001). Short- and Long-Term Effects of Fraternity and Sorority Membership on Heavy Drinking: A Social Norms Perspective. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 15, 42-51. Accessed through PsychInfo database.

⁶¹ Sher, K. “Short and Long-Term Effects...” (50).

⁶² Wechsler, Henry, et al. (1995). Correlates of College Student Binge Drinking. *American Journal of Public Health*, 85, 921-927. Accessed through Summon Database.

binge drinking, and being a central part of campus social life largely increases the odds of binge drinking. Sorority and fraternity houses are often viewed as the “party centers” of college campuses, especially at a school as small as Union College. Greek houses are where the fun begins—meaning that is where the most drinking happens. Becoming a member of a sorority opens doors to weekends and weeknights full of drinking, and drinking excessively at that. Data from the current research survey supports Wechsler’s claims. A weak, yet significant relationship was found between current grade and number of drinks consumed in a row during a night of drinking ($r = .163$, $p = .001$). This implies that the older (in terms of class year) a student is in, the more they will drink in a given night. Specific to Union, since first-year students cannot join a sorority, this correlation may suggest that, in combination with the desire to appeal to group social norms, binge drinking affects sorority members most notably.

The cyclical nature of bingeing behaviors has to begin somewhere, and binge drinking is often the primary catalyst. Starting with the binge drinking behavior pattern, binge eating often comes next. It is common knowledge that drinking alcohol, especially in excessive rates, lowers one’s inhibitions and judgment abilities. This fact serves as a simple explanation as to why so many people tend to overeat after drinking. They either are not aware of how much they are eating or they simply don’t care. Many researchers argue that there is more to this causal cycle than meets the eye. Susan Kelly-Weeder and her colleague Erika Edwards examined the co-occurring binge eating and binge drinking cycles associated with negative consequences in college-aged women. Through researcher-conducted

interviews, the authors conclude, “Of particular interest is the increase in binge drinking rates and frequency of binge drinking episodes in women who also report binge eating behaviors,” suggesting that elevated binge drinking rates do, in fact, lead to elevated binge eating rates.⁶³

Stuffing Your Face is Commonplace

The data collected in this survey reveals a similar, positive correlation between binge drinking and binge eating. Respondents who reported going out more nights per week were more likely to order food with their friends ($r = .112$, $p = .022$). This may be partially explained by the desire to consume large portions of food after a night of drinking, especially if heavily drinking.⁶⁴ In a sorority, ordering food and eating all together is a very social event. Eating together, even at a ravenous pace and without regard to portion control, is normalized in this situation. The number of nights spent consuming alcohol also correlates positively, although not significantly, with respondents eating until they are uncomfortably full ($r = .088$, $p = .074$). This finding suggests a possible association between drinking and binge eating. Similarly, the number of drinks an individual consumes while out also correlated positively with eating until too full ($r = .086$, $p = .074$). While these correlations are not terribly strong and are not statistically significant, they may help understand how alcohol plays a role in binge eating and how it may be a factor in predicting a future binge eating episode.

⁶³ Edwards, Erika, & Kelly-Weeder, Susan. (2011). Co-Occurring Binge Eating and Binge Drinking in College Women. *The Journal for Nurse Practitioners*, 7.3, 207-213. Accessed through ProQuest database.

⁶⁴ Stacy, Alan, Bentler, Peter, & Flay, Brian. (1994). Attitudes and Health Behavior in Diverse Populations: Drunk Driving, Alcohol Use, Binge Eating, Marijuana Use, and Cigarette Use. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 13, 73-85. Accessed through Google Scholar.

Crandall, the social psychologist mentioned previously, was specifically interested in binge eating behaviors as a result of belonging to a social group. He hypothesized that social pressure in friendship groups are important mechanisms by which binge eating is acquired and spread. If eating, dieting, and losing weight are important to the members of a group, then norms will arise in that group defining the specifics of how much, when, and with whom.⁶⁵ These hypotheses take are generally supported by the data in the current research study, implying that sororities may serve as the important social group that Crandall discusses.

The clinical definition of binge eating refers to recurring episodes of eating large amounts of food in a short amount of time, compared to others.⁶⁶ According to the data, most respondents (39.6%) reported consuming between 1500-2000 calories per day, which in no way indicates a binge eating pattern. Additionally, most food was consumed between 4pm-8pm for respondents, regardless of Greek or non-Greek affiliation. This data suggests that there may *not* be a link between binge drinking and binge eating. However, non-Greek members reported being significantly less likely to overeat, whereas Greek members were more likely to eat until they are uncomfortably full ($r = -.104, p = .035$). Eating until one is uncomfortably full may indicate that the individual has either eaten too much in general or too much too quickly. This relationship suggests that Greek members may be more likely to engage in binge eating behaviors than their non-Greek counterparts. How, then, do the respondents feel about their tendencies to

⁶⁵ Crandall, Christian. "Social Contagion..." (590).

⁶⁶ American Psychiatric Association. Binge-eating disorder. In: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. 5th ed. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association; 2013: 350-353. Accessed through Summon database.

overeate? Is it upsetting for them or is it something they expect to do, or even embrace, as a part of the sorority experience?

According to the survey, respondents reported no particular opinion regarding their eating habits, regardless of Greek or non-Greek membership. Responses were almost equally split, with 47.4% of women indicating that they were satisfied with their eating habits and 44.8% of female students were not satisfied with their own. These results were surprising due to the well-known connection with over-eating and gaining weight. It is expected that women, both in a sorority and not in a sorority, are usually concerned with gaining extra pounds, due to cultural norms and expectations.⁶⁷ However, it is possible that, because the social group favors this behavior, then sorority women are not concerned about the negative consequences of binge eating. Due to results in this study, it is difficult to understand if those who frequently engage in binge eating behaviors are satisfied or not satisfied with their actions. However, and perhaps most importantly to note from the survey, ¼ of participants reported feeling guilty after eating too much, regardless of Greek or non-Greek membership. This high frequency suggests that eating habits and guilt surrounding those eating habits may be a large-scale gender issue related to femininity.

Working It Off

Guilt is an emotion that can strongly influence behavior. For example, after eating too much, the resulting guilt that a woman may feel could cause her to

⁶⁷ Brumberg, Joan Jacobs. (1997). *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*. New York: Random House, Inc.

restrict her caloric intake by a dangerous amount. It may cause feelings of low self-esteem and possibly self-hate. If an individual is particularly concerned with her physical appearance, the feelings brought on by over-eating can contribute to strong perceptions of a negative body image. In the contextual sense of a sorority and sorority house, a woman usually experiences these feelings during a period of social isolation. The isolation period can refer to the time a woman may have to herself after binge eating. There are no peers for her to model her behavior after the mindless eating and no fellow sorority sisters suggesting a way to deal with what she is feeling. This can lead to poor choices to restrict calories and to binge exercise in order to make up for her previous food choices. Conversely, this period alone may lead her to make healthier choices such as exercising comfortably and focusing on eating healthier the following day. However, any healthy decisions made in this period of isolation are usually swayed and ignored upon waking up with fellow sorority sisters who are still making negative comments about their bodies and their eating habits.

Binge exercising, or obligatory exercising, is commonly used to negate low self-esteem and a poor body image. It burns calories and is thought to aid in the weight loss process. Drew Anderson and Kyle Young tested a hypothesis that the tendency to exercise in response to negative affect would moderate the relationship between obligatory exercise and eating and body image psychopathology. In order to clearly define the difference between obligatory exercise from normal exercise, Anderson and Young clarified that, “experiencing guilt after missing a workout, following a strict exercise schedule, and prioritizing exercise over other activities”

constitutes as obligatory exercising as compared to normal exercising.⁶⁸ Results from their study suggest that obligatory exercise is associated with eating disorders and body image concerns only in those people who exercise as a response to a negative affect. Binge eating, therefore, may serve as a catalyst to binge exercising, continuing the cycle of unhealthy behaviors. According to the current research survey, the average response to the number of hours per week spent exercising outside of a varsity sport was 0-2 hours in total. Significantly, out of all respondents, 49.1% gave this answer. The perceived expectation regarding hours spent exercising was significantly higher than 0-2 hours, based on theories of excessive exercise for women of this age.

According to a study by Furnham and colleagues on body image dissatisfaction, self-esteem, and reasons for exercise, women are most likely to associate the concept of self-esteem with body image dissatisfaction and to identify both of these factors as reasons for exercising.⁶⁹ According to the results from the survey, non-Greek members reportedly cared less about what others thought of their bodies as compared to their Greek counterparts ($r = .082$, $p = .094$). Non-Greek members also thought less negatively about their own bodies when they were in social situations, while Greek members thought more negatively about their bodies in such contexts ($r = -.006$, $p = .897$). Although these correlations are not statistically significant, the fact that any correlation was found may suggest that social situations

⁶⁸ Anderson, Drew, & Young, Kyle. (2010). The importance of the function of exercise in the relationship between obligatory exercise and eating and body image concerns. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 11, 62-64. Accessed through Summon database.

⁶⁹ Furnham, Adrian, Badmin, Nicola, & Sneade, Ian. (2002). Body Image Dissatisfaction: Gender Differences in Eating Attitudes, Self-Esteem, and Reasons for Exercise. *The Journal of Psychology*, 136, 581-596. Accessed through Summon Database.

and being around fellow social group members relate to lowered self-esteem and poor body image among Greek-involved women.

Can this sort of negative affect about oneself be the direct result of associating with a social group, such as the members of a sorority? After a night full of alcohol and presumably over-eating on food that has been ordered to the sorority house, how do the members react? Overheard comments such as, “Wow, I look so fat today,” or, “That pizza went straight to my thighs,” may initiate the drive and obsession for exercising excessively, self-hatred among sisters who are listening, and lowered personal self-esteem after hearing the body-hatred of their peers. Since members of a social group are most likely to conform to the behaviors demonstrated by the group, as Crandall argues, then if a large group of girls in the sorority goes to the gym for hours on end after a night of drinking, it follows that most sisters would as well.⁷⁰

According to the data collected by the survey, the older the student is, the more likely this trend is to occur. A significant, positive correlation between class year and frequency of exercising among fellow sorority sisters was found ($r = .113$, $p = .024$), as well as a significant correlation between Greek membership and likelihood of working out with fellow members ($r = -.161$, $p = .001$), suggesting that juniors and seniors in a sorority are more likely to workout together than Greek-affiliated sophomores or non-Greek first-year students. This may be due to the socialized living situation in the sorority house, which is only possible here at Union as a junior. While very few seniors are granted the privilege of living in their

⁷⁰ Crandall, Christian. “Social Contagion...” (595).

sorority house, it is not forbidden. The research on the microenvironment of a sorority or fraternity house is plentiful.⁷¹ By living in the same environment that one's closest peers live in, socialized peer pressure is enhanced. This may explain why older women reported working out more with their sorority sisters than younger female students because approximately two-thirds of all members in a sorority at Union have already gone through the experience of living in their Greek houses.

These correlations may also be due to extended exposure to the social group experienced by older sisters in comparison to newly initiated sisters. The longer time spent with peers, the stronger the relationship may become. By the time a female Greek member is a senior, it is likely that various types of socialized behaviors no longer even require an environmental reinforcement—it may just be “natural.” If the relationships among members are very strong, the imitation of behaviors among the women in a sorority may be more likely. This imitation game is supported by the significant, positive correlation between likelihood of drinking at a party with fellow Greek members and exercising with fellow Greek members ($r = .157, p = .002$). This indicates that those sorority members who drink together then, in turn, exercise together.

⁷¹ Park, Aesoon, et al. Selection and Socialization...p. 409-410; Wechsler, Henry, Kuo, Meichun, Lee, Hang, & Dowdall, George. (2000). Environmental correlates of underage alcohol use and related problems of college students. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 19, 24–29. Accessed through Summon Database.

Obligatory exercise can be initiated by both internal and external factors for sorority and non-sorority women. It is clear that social group behavior and time spent among fellow members can influence binge exercising, and the internal factors, such as negative body image and low self-esteem, can create feelings that motivate binge exercising in non-Greek members as well. According to the survey in the current research, about 90% of all participants indicated either complete self-hatred of their bodies or satisfaction with their bodies but the preference for changing certain things if possible. This is an overwhelming majority of women reporting feelings of imperfectness and unhappiness. Historically speaking, holding a poor body image and having low self-esteem are issues that women have struggled with as a gender.⁷² For a variety of reasons such as the media, the concept and restraints of femininity, and peer influence, women have not overcome many of the issues centered around their bodies. Until these issues are resolved, the bingeing cycle of drinking, eating, and exercising will likely continue, particularly among Greek women. In the following chapter, the prevalence, causes, and effects of bingeing behaviors will be discussed in terms of all women as a way to understand the profound importance of changing these destructive behavioral patterns.

⁷² Brumberg, Joan Jacobs. (1997). *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*. New York: Random House, Inc.

CHAPTER III: A Shared Experience

“Because I am a woman, I must make unusual efforts to succeed. If I fail, no one will say, “She doesn't have what it takes.” They will say, “Women don't have what it takes.” -Clare Boothe Luce

A closer examination of the cycle of bingeing behaviors for Greek and non-Greek college women reveals the intensity of the problems adolescent women may face. In learning how this cycle relates to all women throughout their lives, the magnitude of the problem becomes evident. These behaviors are not specific to the college-age demographic of women, but rather, they apply, either within a cycle or as singular entities, to many women as a result of societal expectations of femininity, popular culture’s influence and reiteration of those feminine traits, and the notion of women serving as objects for the male gaze.

A necessary caveat about the argument made in the current research is its generalizability to the entire population of women. The demographic that was sampled did not completely take into account all components of intersectionality. The sample of women at Union College were not asked to indicate their race, ethnicity, or their economic class status. Therefore, generalizations cannot be made to all women, independent of race, class, and age, from the data collected in this current research study. In referencing women throughout this chapter, it is crucial to understand that there is no evidentiary support to extend the implications of this research to every single woman. The assertions made in this thesis derive from my own, personal theory of the bingeing cycle in relation to societal constructs.

It is also important to recognize that not all women share the same feelings about their bodies as one another. No general claim can be made that all women

suffer from body image issues. However, research has shown that negative feelings about body image are widespread in the United States. For Chapters Three and Four of this study, it is only those women who feel negatively about their bodies that are being considered in the current research.

80-Proof: Numbing Social Anxieties

Binge drinking for the purpose of getting drunk is an activity that occurs most heavily among college-aged women. As mentioned previously, membership in a sorority is highly correlated with binge drinking and other related behaviors. However, the social pressures and social implications of excessive drinking may have relevance outside of the Greek system and after the college years have passed. Drinking alcohol is, more often than not, a social experience: serving as a way to unwind and relax, while spending time with friends, and/or just for the pleasurable taste. However, binge drinking may be a product of societal expectations for women of all ages.

Although the survey data sampled college-aged females, the statistically significant, positive correlation found between going out more nights per week and drinking more drinks in a row may be applicable to women of all ages ($r = .470$, $p = .000$). The tension-reduction hypothesis generated by Conger and colleagues in 1956 assumes that “alcohol consumption reduces tension, and this tension-reducing effect motivates drinking.”⁷³ Additionally, a large body of research produced in the late 1950’s suggests that alcohol decreases anxiety, which may suggest that women

⁷³ Abrams, David, & Wilson, G. Terence. (1979). Effects of Alcohol on Social Anxiety in Women: Cognitive Versus Physiological Processes. *The Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 88, 161-173. Accessed through Summon database.

drink to feel more at ease in social situations.⁷⁴ The underlying question that arises here is why women would feel anxious in the first place? Why do women, as compared to men, report feeling more anxious in social situations, according to the previously cited research? Factors such as body image, self-esteem, and self-doubt may be held responsible.⁷⁵

Today's society perpetuates the theory that women should be strong, yet delicate, tough but feminine, and, a personal favorite, luscious but thin. The contradictions over what a woman should look like are highly confusing for those women who are trying to embody the ideal female image. The evolution of the female figure over the past century has shifted from curvy to stick thin and back from the disappearing woman to the hard bodied weight-lifter.⁷⁶ With such drastic changes in expected body shapes, the high levels of anxiety in women described in prior research makes a lot more sense. In social interactions with men in particular, one can assume that a strong factor why women choose to drink alcohol may be to numb the constant worrying of if the man they are with has a particular physical figure preference. In fact, in the study by Abrams and Wilson (1979), findings reveal that "women who believed that they had consumed alcohol, irrespective of whether their drinks contained alcohol, showed significantly increased levels of physiological arousal compared to those who believed that they drank only tonic water."⁷⁷ It is possible that women drink as means to eradicate their own body image and self-

⁷⁴ Abrams, D., "Effects of Alcohol..." (162).

⁷⁵ *Miss Representation*. Directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom. Girl's Club Entertainment, 2011. DVD. & Cash, Thomas. & Brown, Timothy. (1989). Gender and Body Images: Stereotypes and Realities. *Sex Roles*, 21, 361-373. Accessed through PsycInfo.

⁷⁶ Brumberg, Joan Jacobs. (1997). *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*. New York: Random House, Inc.

⁷⁷ Abrams, D., "Effects of Alcohol..." (170).

esteem issues in order to enjoy their social experiences more, especially those with men.

The idea of “the perfect woman” is one that is misconstrued and tainted by peers, advertisements, musical lyrics, and various films and television programs. Movies such as *The Stepford Wives* (2004), suggest that women are simply objects for a man’s use, created only to tend to man’s sexual pleasures. Interestingly enough, this popular film is based on the 1972 novel by Ira Levin, revealing that the objectification of women in this way has been consistent over the past 30 years. Advertisements during the Super Bowl indicate that the perfect girl can and *should* maintain her perfect figure all while slugging heavy-calorie beers. In an advertisement for the organization Thirsty For Beer, women have the perfect feminine figure, with minimum body fat, they drink a lot of beer, and they are very confident in their sexual interactions as a result.⁷⁸ This expectation was vocalized in the popular novel, *Gone Girl* (2012), written by Gillian Flynn. During an internal monologue, Amy, the main female character humorously explains the concept of the “Cool Girl” that all men expect to find and how she fell victim to embodying that model woman. She says, “Being Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, and dirty jokes, who plays videogame and chugs beer—while remaining a size 2, because cool girls are above all hot.”⁷⁹ These types of displays of women may give the impression that the “perfect woman” is attainable and should be sought after, accompanied by alcohol. It then follows that the heterosexual woman may be drinking more alcohol in social situations as a way to

⁷⁸ *Best Beer Ad Ever: Thirsty for Beer* [Advertisement]. (2010). Australia: Youtube.

⁷⁹ Flynn, Gillian. (2012). *Gone Girl: A novel*. New York: Crown.

appear as the ideal female in attempts to capture the attention of men and the male gaze.

An examination of the male gaze is crucial in understanding why society perpetuates the idea of the female object. Historically, the typical viewer of art was male and the subject, usually female, was constructed in a certain way to please the male patron. As the media progressed, the male gaze began to appear in film. Women are often posited as subjects of sexual desire in popular television and movies—subjects who can drive the male lead to act or behave in certain ways. Females have long been the subjects of objectification in comics as well, where women are little more than window dressing and serve little purpose other than to be objects to be presented for the pleasure of men.⁸⁰ The thinking continues that women may be drinking as a way to increase the confidence they feel regarding their bodies to appeal to a man's desire.

Women long past their adolescent years still partake in the activity of binge drinking. Although the environmental influence of a sorority house may no longer exist for these older women, other social factors are present that replace the previous situation. What happens, though, when the effort of drinking does not suppress the negative self-reflections a woman has for her body? What happens if no man can distract a woman from her low self-esteem and society's expectations for women are too overwhelming? These factors either combined with or as separate instances, may contribute to likelihood of binge eating among women.

⁸⁰ Kaplan, Ann. (1983) *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*. Routledge.

What Will You Be Having?

What we eat has the power to determine how we look, how we feel, and how we behave. But with so many nutritional programs available for purchase, quick fix solutions advertised on television, and the glorification of a thin, female body in the media, how is anybody supposed to know what and how to eat anymore? The behavior of eating has been over-complicated, causing women to restrict, binge, second-guess their approach, and then start all over again. Why should so much attention be given to the foods we eat? Why is obesity America's number one epidemic? Binge eating, especially when intensified in the social contexts of a sorority, is a problem that a large portion of the female population faces, and it is crucial that the factors driving such behavior are recognized.

Weight and food intake are two aspects of a woman's life that are frequently at the forefront of their attention. From a very young age, women are taught that a small frame is valued and that taking up the least amount of space is ideal. In a first hand account of a young woman struggling with anorexia, Abra Chernik references how, as her body shrank, more and more people applauded her physique. As she became more consumed by her illness, more people took note of her "success."⁸¹ This idolized shrinking is also mentioned in a poetry slam competition among college students, where Lily Myers from Wesleyan University criticized the notion that men are encouraged to grow bigger with age while women are encouraged to

⁸¹ Chernik, Abra. (1995). The Voice of an Anorexic. In B. Findlen (Ed.), *Listen Up: Voices from the Feminist Generation*, pp. 76-81. Accessed through Ms. Magazine database.

shrink to the point of disappearance.⁸² Both Chernik and Myers belong to the younger generation of women who may be experiencing these societal pressures for the first time. The transition from being a young girl to a young woman may be a crucially important moment for the development of these bingeing behaviors.

Upon reaching sexual maturity via puberty, a woman's body actually becomes larger. Excess body fat is stored with the evolutionary process of childbirth beginning, female breasts grow bigger, which accounts for some weight gain, and high levels of estrogen rage through the body, often adding to body mass in the form of subcutaneous fat cells.⁸³ With all of these biological factors at work, the process of maintaining a lean and ideal female figure becomes extremely difficult. The physical transformation of a young woman's body may act as a catalyst for bingeing behaviors. Young women may think they can fight this natural occurrence is by controlling their food intake, which is why hardcore dieting and subsequent binge eating become a major issue.

According to previous literature, "restrictive dieting is central to most etiologic and risk models of eating disorders."⁸⁴ As previously mentioned, the conflicting events of what happens to a woman's body with age versus what society believes *should* happen to a woman's body with age is a key factor in predicting restrictive eating patterns. But where and when did society acquire the power to say what a woman's body should look like? The concept of the feminine body can be

⁸² *Shrinking Women* [Video Recording]. (2013). USA: College National Poetry Slam: Barnard College.

⁸³ Brumberg, Joan Jacobs. *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*. Random House, Inc., New York, 1997.

⁸⁴ Brownell, Kelly, & Fairburn, Christopher. (1995). *Eating disorders and obesity: a comprehensive handbook*. Guilford Press: New York.

traced back to the mind-body dichotomy in ancient Greece. According to Aristotle, women were mutilated males, who were emotional and passive prisoners of their body functions.⁸⁵ Here in 2000 AD, entertaining the concept of the mind-body split, women still might not feel at peace with their own bodies. Women still allow their bodies to determine their self-worth. They struggle with the pre-conceived expectation of what they are supposed to look like according to society. Cecilia Hartley writes, “the tyranny of slenderness has created a culture in which as many as 60 percent of women experience some type of difficulty in eating,” and she argues that this tyranny of slenderness is the result of women wanting to appeal to the male gaze.⁸⁶ This struggle, in part, explains why the cycle of restrictive eating and binge eating is common.

Binge eating as a form of emotional comfort for women is commonplace in today’s society. Any sort of traumatic situation, ranging from a bad break up to the weeks surrounding a woman’s period, is used to justify unhealthy and excessive food indulgences. How does over-eating actually correlate with feelings of happiness? Not positively. In fact, according to the survey of women at Union College, after eating too much food and feeling guilty about said behavior, caloric intake became smaller and smaller, as seen in the significant correlation of these behaviors($r = -.259, p = .000$). In addition, after eating too much and feeling guilty about what they ate, women reported exercising significantly more hours per week

⁸⁵ Barnes, Jonathan (Ed.). (1984). *The complete works of Aristotle: The revised Oxford translation*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

⁸⁶ Hartley, Cecilia, & Weitz, Rose. (1998). Letting Ourselves Go: Making Room for the Fat Body in Feminist Scholarship. In R. Weitz (Ed.), *The Politics of Women’s Bodies* (pp. 247-249). New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

($r = .220$, $p = .000$). It is clear that lower caloric intake and more exercise do not provide feelings of happiness that many popular opinions claim overeating can produce. The perceived sense of comfort from food may last momentarily, but in fact, one of the main issues with binge eating disorder is the fact that individuals involved in the behavior are oblivious to the taste and texture of the food. They are more often than not just mindlessly eating. Their immediate feelings of guilt after the binge come long before any supposed feelings of comfort.⁸⁷

With various aspects and expectations of today's society constantly pressuring women, it is likely that stress levels among women are very high. If women are constantly concerned about their body image and wrapped up in their physical appearance, then there will always be something that needs "work." In achieving the ideal figure, a woman can always do something more or better in order to obtain that body. By restricting caloric intake and losing weight, women believe they are on the right path to achieving that body. However, it is this exact behavior that leads to binge eating, which subsequently leads to fat gain instead of fat loss.

According to the survey of women at Union College, an individual's satisfaction with their eating habits was significant and positively correlated with skipping meals entirely ($r = .188$, $p = .000$). This correlation may imply that when women restrict their caloric intake with the intention of losing weight, they become less satisfied with how and what they are eating, which may lead to an increase in

⁸⁷ American Psychiatric Association. Binge-eating disorder. In: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. 5th ed. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association; 2013:350-353. Accessed through Summon database

stress levels. Similarly, results from the survey reveal a correlation between skipping meals and eating a less balanced diet. The correlation suggests that, although calories are being restricted, the food choices that women do make and then consume are relatively unhealthy and not nutritionally balanced ($r = .250, p = .000$).

According to a paper on the relationship between stress, eating behavior and obesity, “chronic life stress seems to be associated with a greater preference for energy and nutrient dense foods, namely those that are high in sugar and fat.”⁸⁸ Taken all together, this information might suggest that women, both in the college environment, the sorority environment, and post-college years, who restrict calories as an attempt to obtain the perfect female figure are going to be less satisfied with their eating habits. These lowered levels of satisfaction may lead to increased levels of stress surrounding their eating habits and an increased likelihood to select healthier foods to consume. This cycle contributes to fat gain, more than the original goal of fat loss, due to the higher caloric intake that is likely to occur.

It is important to recognize the suboptimal, mental outcomes that may also be a result of food intake choices. According to the survey data at Union College, lower satisfaction with one’s eating habits correlates positively and significantly with feeling more regretful and guilty after over-eating ($r = .298, p = .000$). This relationship is key in understanding the process of over-eating and impaired body image. The increase in feeling guilty about over-eating also correlated strongly and

⁸⁸ Torres, Susan, & Nowson, Caryl. (2011). Relationship between stress, eating behavior and obesity. *Nutrition*, 23, 887-894. Accessed through ProQuest database.

significantly with feeling more self-conscious about one's body ($r = .467, p = .000$). The guilt from eating too much creates a mental construct of feeling inadequate and less confident in one's own physical body. By affecting one's self-consciousness regarding their body, self-esteem is negatively impacted.

This behavior affects women all over the planet due to the social constructs women are presented as they grow up, the stereotypes they face in how to look and behave in the eyes of a man, and the effects of stress on their bodies that food choices and food intake have. Since binge eating is occurring among a variety of women of all ages, the "healthy" behaviors that supposedly negate this massive food intake are also extremely common. Binge exercising, or obligatory exercising, is a method used by many women outside of college. It is often a third factor in the cyclical nature of binge drinking and binge eating, but women who do not partake in either of the previous behaviors may participate in binge exercise on its own.

Sweating Away the Misery—Aren't We?

Similar to the constant availability of nutrition advice, the constant recommendations for exercise techniques, length, intensities, etc., may prove to be overwhelming for many women. As nutrition and a healthy diet are frequently tied together as two, co-occurring necessities, the relationship between an unhealthy diet and poor physical health is frequently studied in the field.⁸⁹ While these pairs have been the focus of numerous research studies, the connection of these negative health behaviors to binge drinking in the general female population has not been

⁸⁹ Pate, Russel, Heath, Gregory, Dowda, Marsha, & Trost, Stewart. (1996). Associations between physical activity and other health behaviors in a representative sample of US adolescents. *The American Public Health Association, 86*, 1577-1581. Accessed through Summon database.

studied to the same extent. In considering the cyclical nature of these three bingeing behaviors, caloric intake and desirable caloric “burn,” fat loss myths, body image disorders, peer pressure, and the effects of today’s cultural expectations of female exercise habits all need to be considered as contributing factors.

The cultural obsession with thinness in the United States and its associations with femininity suggest that women may be exercising rampantly in order to obtain to the ideal figure. As the media has begun to play more and more of a vital role in today’s society, women have been flooded with messages suggesting to lose weight. One look at search results from “fat loss” on the Google search engine supports the notion of low-effort, immediate results that all women supposedly want. If working out and improving one’s health is as simple as taking a pill, it is reasonable to question why both men and women do not fall victim to these constant advertisements. This is where the concept of femininity, as opposed to masculinity, may play such a vital role. Heavy weight lifting, although clinically proven to be the best method for fat loss, is typically associated with the masculine, hard-bodied man.⁹⁰ Shari Dworkin expanded the theory of the glass ceiling in the professional environment to the glass ceiling of the fitness environment. She writes that women “may find their bodily agency limited not by biology but by ideologies of emphasized femininity that structure the upper limit on women’s success,” and her research shows that nonlifters and moderate lifters uniquely negotiate the glass ceiling by

⁹⁰ Trapp, EG, Chisholm, DJ, Freund, J, & Boutcher, SH. (2008). The effects of high-intensity intermittent exercise training on fat loss and fasting insulin levels of young women. *International Journal of Obesity*, 32, 684-691. Accessed through Google Scholar database.

avoiding, holding back, or changing up their weight workouts.⁹¹ The common and expected work out for a woman consists of countless hours on an elliptical machine or treadmill as a way to enhance caloric burn,⁹² which may be related to the frailty and delicate essence of femininity. The function of exercise is predominantly to improve one's physical health. However, in today's society, many women often fixate only on losing weight.

According to the data collected in the survey of Union College women, as the number of drinks a woman has while drinking increased, the likelihood of the number of hours spent working out also increased significantly ($r = .111$, $p = .025$). Drinking, especially with heavier beers or hard alcohol, can add up to a large amount of calories in a short period of time. The positive correlation found in the survey may suggest that women are exercising more as a way to enhance caloric burn due to their high-calorie intake of alcoholic drinks. This points to the cyclical nature of binge drinking, or general calorie intake, and binge exercising.

As a part of enhancing the motivation of working out, the notion of a lot of exercise creating a lot of fat loss has been perpetually reinforced for both men and women.⁹³ This popular idea is rooted in myth. More exercise does not mean more fat loss—in fact, more exercise may actually lead to fat gain. According to a scientific research study on excess aerobic activity and fat gain, insulin resistance

⁹¹ Dworkin, Shari. (2001). Holding Back: Negotiating a Glass Ceiling on Women's Muscular Strength. *Journal of Sociological Perspectives*, 44, 333-350. Accessed through JSTOR database.

⁹² Dowling, Colette. (2000). *The frailty myth: women approaching physical equality*. New York: Random House.

⁹³ Schifter, Deborah, & Icek, Ajzen. (1985). Intention, perceived control, and weight loss: An application of the theory of planned behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 49, 843-851. Accessed through Google Scholar database.

leads to more fat storing, and insulin resistance is a result of excess cardio exercise.⁹⁴ This misleading theory of “more is better” may serve as an explanation for why over-exercising has become so common in women today.

Obligatory exercise may also be driven by the desire to do what everyone else is doing. More importantly, though, is the concept of doing what all of one’s *friends* are doing. Peer pressure is a powerful tool in dictating behavior, especially among women.⁹⁵ As seen in the survey of Union College women, following the social group norms of behavior may be extremely important to many female students, especially those in sororities. The theory of “if she’s doing it, so should I,” may be very common for women beyond the college years and for women who do not belong to a sorority because they have social groups as well. This belief may also be due to feeling insecure about one’s body when around others. According to the data collected by this survey, females who indicated that they were more insecure about their body around other people also reported working out significantly more hours in a given week ($r = .112, p = .024$). Similarly, the more a female indicated that she cared about what other people thought about her body, the more exercise she reported doing ($r = -.114, p = .021$). These theories may be applicable for women outside of the college realm due to an ingrained competitive nature in the human species.

⁹⁴ Trapp, EG. “The effects of high-intensity intermittent exercise...” 688-689. Accessed through Google Scholar database.

⁹⁵ Stice, Eric, Maxfield, Jennifer, & Wells, Tony. (2003). Adverse Effects of Social Pressure to be Thin on Young Women: An Experimental Investigation of the Effects of “Fat Talk.” *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 34, 108-117. Accessed through PsycInfo database.

According to research by Puts et al., it is the nature of all mammals that may explain why women exhibit extraordinarily intense competition for male investment. Evolutionary psychologists suggest, "To a woman competing for male investment, attractive, sexually interested and available women are potential threats worth monitoring."⁹⁶ Various ecological reviews on female-female aggressive behavior try to understand the evolutionary mechanism that support and promote intrasexual competition.⁹⁷ This competitive nature of women may suggest that women compete in the realm of exercise as means of "winning over" the perfect mate. Whichever female obtains the ideal figure first, which is ultimately determined by the man and his preferences, may be the most sexually desirable. Obligatory exercise may serve as a way for women to become more attractive than other women, which is a concept that dates back through history with the use of the corset and the elongation of certain body parts, such as the neck. Obligatory exercise may be a modernized version of those behaviors that extends from the same motivation of attracting the male gaze.

If a woman were to lose this competition with another woman, how would she feel? Would her self-esteem plummet and her self-hatred increase? Would she hate her body so much as to work it out even *harder* at a higher level of intensity in order to negate her feelings of inferiority? Having low self-esteem and a negative

⁹⁶ Puts, David, Barndt, Julia, Welling, Lisa, Dawood, Khytam, & Burriss, Robert. (2010). Intrasexual competition among women: Vocal femininity affects perceptions of attractiveness and flirtatiousness. *Journal of Personality and Individual Differences*, 50, 111-115. Accessed through Summon database.

⁹⁷ Rosvall, Kimberly. (2010). Intrasexual competition in females: evidence for sexual selection? *Behavioral Ecology*, 22, 1131-1140. Accessed through Summon database.

body image may be two very common reasons for obligatory exercising among women.

There is no proven evidence as to why women suffer from feelings of low self-esteem and negative body image. According to research by Morry and Staska (2001), the constant exposure to advertisements containing slim models affected women's estimations of their own body size, decreased body satisfaction, and lowered self-esteem.⁹⁸ This research is supported by a multitude of personal accounts, including that of Diane Israel, discussed in her documentary, *Beauty Mark: Body Image and the Race for Perfection* (2009). In this film, the personal story of Ms. Israel, a psychotherapist, includes her struggle with compulsive exercising and compulsive dieting. She mentions how distorted her mindset was at the time of her suffering and provides insight as to why she believed she developed these issues—including the health industry and its effect on her thought process.⁹⁹ Media and popular culture may serve as a motivator for obligatory exercise based on the ways it can alter a woman's self-perception.

What Comes Next?

Due to the results of the survey at Union College as well as prior research in similar fields, it may be concluded that these bingeing behaviors are highly problematic for women today. With the identification of a persistent issue comes the need for a solution. One single solution for stopping these behaviors is not likely

⁹⁸ Morry, Marian, & Staska, Sandra. (2001). Magazine exposure: Internalization, self-objectification, eating attitudes, and body satisfaction in male and female university students. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science*, 33, 269-279. Accessed through Summon database.

⁹⁹ Israel, Diane, Man, Kathleen, & Precht, Carla. *Beauty Mark: Body Image and the Race for Perfection*. She-Art Production, 2009. Videocassette (VHS), 50 min.

for helping all women. There are a variety of opinions in the field of how to eradicate binge drinking, binge eating, and binge exercising. However, there are few suggestions in solving the previously described cause and effect cycle.

CHAPTER IV: Moving Forward

“A problem well stated is a problem half-solved.” –Charles Kettering

The cycle of bingeing behaviors that affect women is a destructive and self-perpetuating set of systematic events. Sociocultural influences have served to encourage the behaviors across many generations and may be so entrenched in modern society that it is difficult to escape the cycle. While the complete eradication of bingeing behaviors may not be possible, by becoming more aware of the value of social self-esteem, the complexity of human relationships, the stress that our drive for status and success brings, and the reconfiguring of sex roles in today's society, more progressive solutions may become viable.

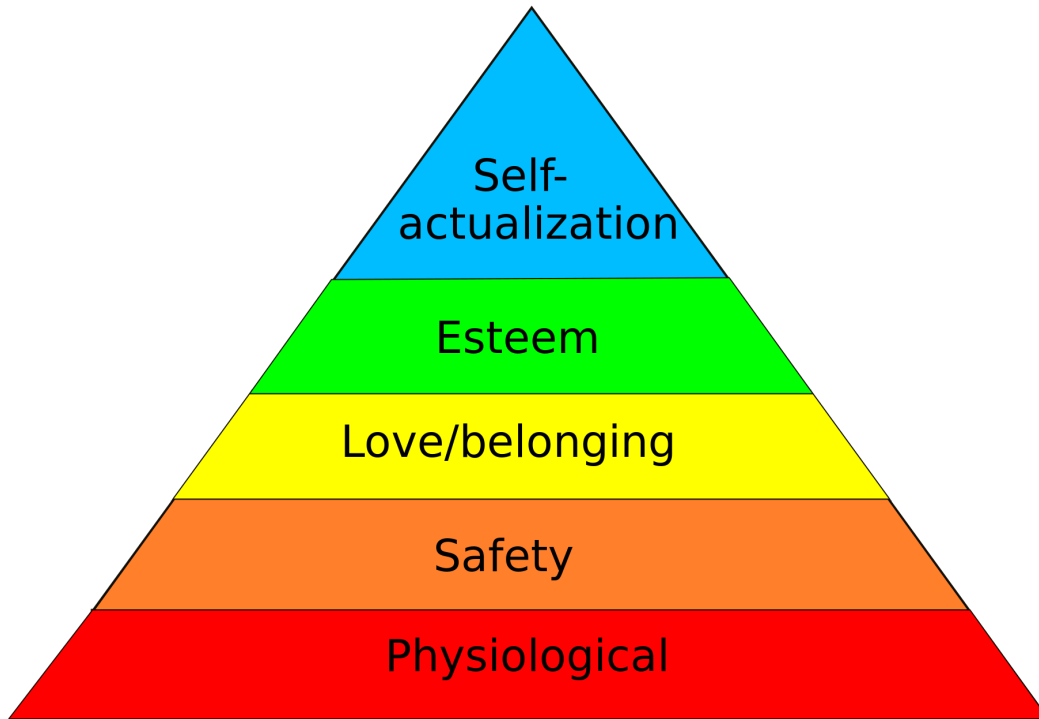
A Psychological Standpoint

The importance of human relationships has been studied for as long as philosophers have considered the psyche. In more ancient philosophy, Aristotle in particular “considered the role of human relationships in general and friendship in particular as a vital element in the good life.” One of his most endearing beliefs states, “For without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods.”¹⁰⁰ This deep need for humans to relate closely with other humans is also recognized as a central concept in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, established in a major psychological paper in 1943. His theory posits that the way to understand personality is through the studying of human motivation. As a result, Maslow developed his hierarchal pyramid consisting of different stages of needs

¹⁰⁰ Liu, Irene. (2011). Love Life: Aristotle on Living Together with Friends. *Inquiry*, 53, 579-601. Accessed through Google Scholar.

that must be met in order for an individual to be considered healthy and whole person (See Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Beyond meeting all physiological and safety needs, such as breathing, eating, and having shelter, the need for love and belonging is required.¹⁰¹ This stage suggests that all humans seek long and enduring relationships, to love others, and to be loved by others. The following stage is characterized by esteem needs. The esteem phase reflects a human's desire to establish their own self-worth, in their own minds and

¹⁰¹ Maslow, Abraham. (1943). A Theory of Human Motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50, 370-396. Accessed through Summon database.

in the estimation of others. In other words, in order to feel good about oneself, one needs to develop a good reputation.¹⁰²

Maslow's stage of love and belonging may help explain another factor in the cycle of binge drinking, binge eating, and binge exercising. In the search for love and belonging, drinking may serve as a pathway to meeting other people. As discussed in Chapter 3, drinking may serve to inhibit anxiety, self-consciousness, and shyness. Social drinking, both in college students and others, may occur frequently, especially as a way to find and maintain enduring human relationships. In a similar sense, the quest for comfort and belonging may manifest itself in binge eating. Eating may serve as a sense of individual comfort in the world if it replaces the comfort experienced in human relationships. Finally, overeating is often documented as a way to relieve stress and distract from loneliness.¹⁰³ If a woman does not belong to a social group or a personal relationship, food may be utilized as a replacement. Binge exercising can also be understood in terms of the need for love by exercising to improve the physique of our bodies for other people, sometimes at the cost of their own health or happiness. Women may constantly try to shape their bodies to appear attractive to a partner, and hopefully eventually enjoy a loving relationship as a result.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Maslow, A. (1943). "A Theory of..." 383-384.

¹⁰³ American Psychiatric Association. Binge-eating disorder. In: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. 5th ed. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association; 2013:350-353. Accessed through Summon database.

¹⁰⁴ Lundy, D., Tan, J., and Cunningham, M. (1998). "Heterosexual romantic preferences: The importance of humor and physical attractiveness for different types of relationships." *Personal Relationships*, 5, 311-325. Accessed through EbscoHost database.

Maslow's esteem needs may also serve as an explanation for the bingeing cycle in women generally. Esteem, he says, depends largely on our self-judgment, our perceived "self-worth," and the way other people judge us in categories like popular reputation.¹⁰⁵ Binge drinking may also be a result of the desire to feel like a fun and social person. It may contribute to positive self-judgment rather than negative self-judgment, especially as we approach inebriation. In examining alcohol as a drug, it's interesting to note that it is a depressant. In analyzing the clinical terms of the substance, maybe the depressive nature of the drug serves to depress critical self-evaluation. Binge eating may be another tool to numb feelings of low self-worth or to forget about self-judgment, at least for a while. Additionally, social eating may be a way for a woman to directly contribute to her reputation as a "fun" or "cool" girl, particularly if her body size meets the societal expectation of thinness through a healthy diet and strong exercise routine.¹⁰⁶ Lastly, binge exercising may be a way for women to feel self-worthy. They tell themselves they are putting in the work, and, therefore they are inherently good and healthy people. Or, over-exercising may be a way for women to avoid negative judgment from others. If a woman does not exercise enough, she may be called "lazy" or "unmotivated"—a cause of guilt. Therefore, a reputation and combination of being an avid exerciser, an extremely healthy eater, as well as a woman who drinks freely can be considered a positive and desirable one, at least in our society. These behaviors may appear to

¹⁰⁵ Maslow, A. (1943). "A Theory..." 385.

¹⁰⁶ Flynn, Gillian. (2012). *Gone Girl: A novel*. New York: Crown.

mask the obsessive drives that fuel them behind the image of a healthy and fun woman.

If Maslow's theory of human motivation accurately addresses the reasons and proposes a remedy for women who engage in these behaviors, it offers hope that the problem may be solvable. What if women could feel fulfilled and maintain the sense of not needing anything? What if all of their immediate needs, including those of love and esteem, could be understood by a society that chooses not to shame or to label an individual as "not good enough?" If self-confidence were taught starting at birth and reinforced in our day-to-day living, then women might not need overwhelming confirmation of their self-worth. Interestingly, this approach to positive measurement is a key to the psychological, person-centered therapy. Developed by Carl Rogers and known as Rogerian therapy, the emphasis is on unconditional positive regard, empathy, genuineness, and openness by the therapist. By assuring a client that anything he or she says is completely acceptable, the client learns to open up more and to lose their feelings of worry. They no longer feel as if they are going to be judged, and this opens the doors for uncensored self-exploration.¹⁰⁷ If Rogerian therapy were readily available to everyone for no cost, for instance, or, better yet, if Rogerian therapeutic techniques were entirely embraced by society-at-large through popular institutions such as schools, it might contribute to deterring women from the need to engage in any one of these three bingeing behaviors. While the concepts of completely changing the ways in which

¹⁰⁷ Cepeda, Lisa, & Davenport, Donna. (2006). Person-centered therapy and solution-focused brief therapy: An integration of present and future awareness. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 43, 1-12. Accessed through PsycArticles database.

human beings talk to and support one another may be considered unlikely, individuals can use the ideas at the core of the theory and be highly effective. This might mean no more expectations of perfection or denials of imperfection. It would simply involve accepting someone for exactly who they are—something every person can do that, all together, would contribute to a large-scale social change. As John Steinbeck once wrote, “And now that you don’t have to be perfect, you can be good.”¹⁰⁸

The Fear of Disappointment

In today’s society, one of the most important social goals is to achieve is success. According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, success is “the fact of getting or achieving wealth, respect, or fame; the correct or desired result of an attempt.”¹⁰⁹ If an individual is never “successful,” is it possible that they never feel worthy, or valuable? What is worse in today’s society than being a failure or failing at a task and giving up? In one particular research paper, psychologists asked why success is so highly valued today. In looking at the etymological roots of this word as it appears in British, French, and German literature, they discovered that “success” is often used, and has been used throughout history, in the context of war, religion, and medicine.¹¹⁰ These origins carried through to modern society as it stresses some form of success for all healthy individuals. It begins with parent models at home, followed by elementary schooling, often through college and

¹⁰⁸ Steinbeck, J. (2002). *East of Eden* (John Steinbeck centennial ed.). New York: Penguin Books.

¹⁰⁹ Merriam Webster (n.d.). Retrieved February 27, 2015, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/success>

¹¹⁰ Peterson, Nora, & Martin, Peter. (2013). Tracing the Origins of Success: Implications for Successful Aging. *The Gerontological Society of America*, 55, 5-13. Accessed through Summon database.

longer, as it continues with one's professional career. It creeps into personal lives as we marry, buy houses, bear and raise children, or whatever other choices we make.

The constant stress that accompanies the expectation of success may lead to taking unnecessary measures, especially when facing the notion of failure. We see it often portrayed in films where the individual loses something important to them, such as a dream job. In the hit television Series, *The Office*, the first aired episode involves this exact dilemma. The first thing the character does is drink away his sorrows with his friends.¹¹¹ How better to illustrate the cycle of binge drinking as a response to experiencing failure? When failure is posited as the worst thing that can happen, binge drinking is frequently used to numb the pain or get over the trauma. One study by Robert Crosnoe on the connection between academic failure and binge drinking reveals that it is socially expected for young people who struggle in school to begin drinking heavily. Drinking, then, becomes a new method for coping and an alternative form of social achievement.¹¹² A similar response to the stress of failure can also include binge eating.

Food may serve to console an individual when they face failure, but equally, it can be that it is first thing on someone's mind after a success. A study on the development of eating behaviors in children suggests that creating the concept of a "forbidden food" for children is counterproductive because of the positive social situations where those types of foods are most commonly found. Celebrations, holidays, and parties are often characterized by over-eating, particularly with

¹¹¹ Kwapis, Ken. (2005). "Pilot." [Television series episode]. In *The Office*.NBC.

¹¹² Crosnoe, Robert. (2006). The Connection Between Academic Failure and Adolescent Drinking in Secondary School. *Sociological Education*, 79, 44-60. Accessed through Summon database.

unhealthy food.¹¹³ If a promotion is given at work, it is likely that, in order to celebrate, a dinner is planned and organized. Eating is a highly socialized process and people may often feel that way to celebrate successes or mourn failures is over-indulging or binge eating.

Success does not always come in the form of a career promotion or a family holiday. Success, on a personal level, might be viewed by some as attaining an ideal figure. There are some individuals who dedicate their entire lives outside of their jobs to the sport of bodybuilding, for instance, and some people body build *as* their primary job and source of income.¹¹⁴ Away from the professional realm of exercise, we find people feel that they can only achieve success once they are happy with the look of their bodies. But the idea that happiness is only obtainable when an ideal physical shape is achieved is not entirely true.¹¹⁵ This mindset may also lead to binge exercising, in part due to the belief that, in achieving the “perfect” exterior, success in all other areas of life will follow. Success in life is often sought after through physical gratification with one’s own body. When this idea is fixated on, binge exercising to the point of becoming unhealthy may be more likely, as seen in Diane Israel’s account of running long distances and losing weight.¹¹⁶ Success as the ultimate goal, in any realm of one’s personal life, could be the ultimate problem.

¹¹³ Birch, Leann, & Fisher, Jennifer. (1998). Development of Eating Behaviors Among Children and Adolescents. *Pediatrics*, 101, 539-549. Accessed through ProQuest database.

¹¹⁴ Boyle, Lex. (2005). “Flexing the Tensions of Female Muscularity: How Female Bodybuilders Negotiate Normative Femininity in Competitive Bodybuilding.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 33, 134-149. Accessed through Google Scholar database.

¹¹⁵ Luo, Lu, and Shih, Jian. (1997). “Sources of happiness: A qualitative approach.” *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 137.2, 181-187. Accessed through PsycArticles database.

¹¹⁶ Israel, Diane, Man, Kathleen, & Precht, Carla. *Beauty Mark: Body Image and the Race for Perfection*.” She-Art Production, 2009. Videocassette (VHS), 50 min.

Is it possible to change the ways in which our society has conditioned us? Is it possible to eradicate the relentless emphasis on success? Or is it a built-in part of human nature to always strive to be the best version of yourself, regardless of how many times failure intervenes?¹¹⁷ Achieving any ultimate success may be an engrained part of the human species' fight or flight mechanism,¹¹⁸ but what if people were able to accept that they were good enough exactly as they are? Here is another instance where Rogerian theory may point to a solution. The unconditional, positive regard of a Rogerian therapist allows for the client to feel comfortable and ready to explore the issues they are facing. In understanding that everything they feel is acceptable, they feel at ease in discussing their lives. If people are consistently assured that they are perfect exactly as they are, the fear of failure may dissipate. With that fear out of the way, the habits of binge drinking, binge eating, and binge exercising may become less common and occur less frequently.

Feminine and Masculine Roles

Formally introduced in 1981, the gender schema theory proposed by Sandra Bem explains how individuals become gendered by society and how personality characteristics are coded and maintained with specific reference to one sex or the other. The process by which a society classifies males and females as masculine and

¹¹⁷ Baumeister, Roy, et al. (2001). Bad is stronger than good. *Review of General Psychology*, 5, 323-370. Accessed through PsycArticles database.

¹¹⁸ Goldstein, David, & Kopin, Irwin. (2007). Evolution of concepts of stress. *The International Journal on the Biology of Stress*, 10, 109-120. Accessed through EbscoHost Union College database.

feminine is known as sex typing.¹¹⁹ Bem speculates in her theory that gender-based attributions are due, in part, to society's insistence on the gender binary—that is, maintaining one male gender and one female gender. The theory may help to explain the processes and perceptions by which gender stereotypes have become so engrained in society. Bem also introduces her theory that adolescents, in particular, are guided by gender schemas when making individual choices in various situations. These schemas serve to identify behaviors that may ultimately lead to the societal definitions of what it means to be masculine or feminine.¹²⁰ This construct may be held partially responsible for the engagement of women in the bingeing cycle.

Focusing specifically on femininity and its' perpetuation in the media, which then leads to individual expectations depending on interpretation, it is crucial to examine the “foundations” of what femininity means. Looking back to 1380 when Chaucer first recorded the words “femininity” and “womanhood,” many scholars point out that traits like passivity and tenderness belong to woman, while aggression and intelligence were applied to men.¹²¹ Other stereotypical traits associated with women or femininity are gentleness, sensitivity, sweetness, compassion, and nurturance.¹²² The major issue today may be that women in today's society are still trying to embody these traits in order to be the “ideal” woman.

¹¹⁹ Bem, Sandra. (1981). Gender Schema Theory: A Cognitive Account of Sex Typing. *Psychological Review*, 88, 354-364. Accessed through Google Scholar database.

¹²⁰ Bem, S. “Gender Schema Theory.” 356-357.

¹²¹ Hollows, Joane. (2000). *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture* (pp. 10-12). United Kingdom: Manchester University Press.

¹²² Murray, Thomas. (2000). *Recent Theories of Human Development* (p.248). Sage Publications.

Binge drinking is the least related to femininity in the sense that women may not be expected to act out of control, aggressive, sloppy, or loud. In fact, these are traits more often associated with masculinity.¹²³ In short, drinking too much alcohol is not conducive to being a feminine woman, by definition. Once again, however, if we look closely at Simone de Beauvoir's feminist text, *The Second Sex*, we see strong cultural pressures to be both the responsible wife and the fun-loving cool companion. A woman must be both the housewife and the prostitute with her husband, according to Beauvoir.¹²⁴ Although this text is somewhat dated, this concept is still prevalent in our society. If women are drinking to engage in social situations, by being both the cool girl and potential wife as defined by her femininity, the woman could expect to capture the attention and desire of many men—a strong motivation.

A similar contradiction to maintaining femininity is found in binge eating. For instance, in the media, it may be typical of the “ideal” woman to be small. A woman with much to contribute and minimal needs is optimal according to society. While eating may help with stress management for women who are so desperately trying to become the idealized version of themselves, binge eating, which increased a woman's size, runs counter to the ideal model and takes women further away from their physical goals. The cycle of binge eating may then be perpetuated, as

¹²³ Martin, Hale, & Finn, Stephen. (2010). *Masculinity and Femininity in the MMPI-2 and MMPI-A* (pp. 310-311). Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press.

¹²⁴ De Beauvoir, Simone. (2010). *The Second Sex: The Married Woman*, 439-523. New York: Knopf.

illustrated by the restrict-binge model of many diet trends.¹²⁵ A pattern of binge eating may begin out of female desperation to be feminine, which includes physiology as a criteria.

Binge exercising is the only behavior in the bingeing cycle that could be interpreted as serving the direct purpose of reaching the ideal physical, feminine state. However, as supported earlier by scientific evidence, too much exercise may lead to fat gain rather than fat loss.¹²⁶ Yet, regardless of this possible reverse-effect, the intention behind excessive exercise may often be to lose weight—to shrink in physical size as a way of achieving a more feminine appearance. Another problem arises when over exercising is driven by poor body image. If a woman feels badly about her body, it is likely that she may be more inclined to improve it. The ideal feminine physique may serve as a motivation for binge exercising for many women.

The gender schema theory is a devastating motivation behind the bingeing cycle of these three behaviors. As one of the most engrained aspects of modern society, it is almost too unrealistic to suggest fail-proof solutions. While the most ideal answer would be to eradicate the gender schema theory and all notions of a gender dichotomy, this is likely impossible. Binaries exist in a so many dimensions in society. In the most basic form of polarities, the entire concept of *two* things opposing one another reflects a binary. It may be that there is a shared satisfaction in only having two options—two sexes, followed by two sets of behaviors that

¹²⁵ Kirkpatrick, Jim, and Caldwell, Paul. *Eating Disorders: Everything You Need To Know*, 64-66. Buffalo, NY: Gürze Books, 2001. Kirkpatrick, Jim, & Caldwell, Paul. (2001). *Eating Disorders: Everything You Need To Know* (pp. 64-66). Buffalo, New York: Gürze Books.

¹²⁶ Trapp, EG, Chisholm, DJ, Freund, J, & Boutcher, SH. (2008). The effects of high-intensity intermittent exercise training on fat loss and fasting insulin levels of young women. *International Journal of Obesity*, 32, 684-691. Accessed through Google Scholar database.

accompany each one. However, as with many pair-relationships, one is often implied as superior to the other.

With sex and gender, the patriarchal, male, or the masculine is often touted as the superior sex. In arenas such as employment, athletics, and the family, men are positioned above woman, and this advantageous arrangement dates back through history.¹²⁷ The superiority of the male gender is a stubborn concept to change in today's society. A social and slightly radical feminist movement, which found strength in its American roots over 150 years ago, aims to create fundamental changes in modern society's structure.¹²⁸ This form of feminism serves as an attainable beacon. Among the broad definitions of feminism, this form of feminism "promises a transformed life for both men and women, and vows that human beings can be more than present circumstances allow."¹²⁹ Equality of the sexes may be a possible way to reduce the bingeing cycle of binge drinking, binge eating, and binge exercising experienced by women. If there was no hierarchy of the superior man versus the inferior woman, it is likely that women would not feel compelled to impress men, would not have deal with related stress because it no longer exists, and they would not need to obsess with trying to achieve the perfect body for a man who already values her in her whole being.

¹²⁷ Hartmann, Heidi. (1976). Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation by Sex. *Signs*, 1, 137-169. Accessed through JSTOR database.

¹²⁸ Marso, Lori. (2015). "Feminism." In M. Gibbons (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought, First Edition*, (pp. 1-14). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

¹²⁹ Marso, L. "Feminism," 1-2.

Conclusion

While changing the behaviors of large groups of people certainly is not easy, the bingeing cycle experienced by so many women must be minimized in order to promote both a mentally and physically healthy population of women and girls. By promoting complete acceptance of all individuals, by placing less emphasis on success in all realms of today's society, and by living by the basic principle of gender equality that socialist feminism supports, these three bingeing behaviors may become significantly less common in both the general population of females as well as the population of all female college students, particularly those in Greek organizations.

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