

“I Wanted To Be Like Her”: A Study of Eating Behaviors and Attitudes in Television Shows Targeted to Teenage Girls

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Abstract

Diet culture is common among teen girls, creating high risk for eating disorders. According to National Eating Disorder Association, 20 million women will have an eating disorder at some point in their lives. And it is especially common for those going through significant transitional periods – like high school –to develop an eating disorder. While prior studies have examined the link between body image and hours spent viewing television, there is a gap in the literature about what eating behaviors and attitudes are depicted in television programming targeted to teenage girls. A framing analysis was conducted for episodes of three popular television shows on Freeform, a network marketed toward teenagers. The study found that the female characters on the shows were rarely seen eating, exhibited patterns of emotional eating, made references to being fat, and shamed other characters for their unhealthy eating habits. This creates a cause for concern as teen girls may be developing eating habits as portrayed on television.

I. Introduction

The president and CEO of the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA) has noted that “among ‘normal’ dieters, 35 percent will progress to pathological dieting and of those, 20-25 percent progress to full-blown eating disorders” (Hamilton, 2014). According to NEDA, 20 million women will have an eating disorder at some point in their lives (National Eating Disorder Association, 2018). It is especially common for those going through significant transitional periods (i.e., high school to college, college to adulthood) to develop an eating disorder (Ross, 2018).

Eating disorders, however, are not merely caused by being a teenager. Other environmental factors contribute, such as the type of media one consumes. On average, American teenagers spend nine hours a day using entertainment media, excluding time spent in school (Shapiro, 2015). Given this statistic, it can be assumed that during those nine hours teenagers are getting messages, both subtle and explicit, about how the world works and their place in it.

This is especially true in television programming targeted to teenage girls. Within a day of its airing, the series finale of Freeform’s *Pretty Little Liars* became the most tweeted about television episode of 2017 (Elizabeth, 2017). Due to this level of popularity, it is clear that *Pretty Little Liars* and shows like it have an effect on their audiences. The characters become role models and friends for their viewers and their

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behaviors are modeled off screen. However, the viewer hardly ever sees them eat. When they do eat, their behaviors contribute to the prevalence of diet culture and disordered eating. Shedding light on these nuances may help to further discern risk factors for eating disorders and control underlying messages before they cause further damage.

When teen girls are struggling to find their identity in a culture that expects them to have it all, exposure to negative messages about dieting and weight loss can be extremely dangerous. The following research has the goal of identifying and analyzing patterns surrounding eating habits in television shows targeted for teenage girls.

II. Literature Review

During adolescence, the media may shape the thoughts and behavior of viewers. Because of such influence, it is especially important to pay attention to the content of the messages the viewer is receiving. Research has shown that teen girls learn behaviors based on the media figures they identify with or idolize. The women they see on their TV screen become models for how to succeed in the world. Teen girls try to live up to the standards these characters set, particularly in regard to physical appearance. These expectations can lead to negative thoughts and feelings and make teen girls all the more susceptible to disordered eating behaviors. When a teen girl attaches to a character she identifies with, and that character exhibits patterns of disordered eating, the teen girl may be likely to model those same patterns.

Girl Culture and Television Viewing Habits

“Kate Moss was so cool, I wanted to be like her, under control.” This quote comes from a 14-year old girl named Kara. She used a highly regulated diet as a substitute for the control she felt she lost in the constantly changing world of an adolescent teen. By losing weight, Kara felt powerful and superior (Heilman, 1998, p. 193).

This is not an uncommon feature in the life of teenage girls. In fact, in a study of young girls’ appearance management behavior, half of the respondents admitted to managing their appearance somewhat, with the likelihood of this behavior increasing as the girls approached their teen years (Trekels & Eggermont, 2017). Further studies of self-portrayals of teen girls noted that all girls surveyed admitted that managing their bodies was their “primary project” (Meyers, 2007, p. 29).

The hypercritical eye girls have towards their bodies may be attributed to the “Supergirl” construct that has become a trademark of Western womanhood. No longer is it enough to just be beautiful or just be smart – a girl must do it all. A study of British teenage girls and their transition to womanhood showed that they were expected to excel in school and be sexually attractive. In interviews, the girls shared their deep anxieties about themselves in the form of eating disorders and feelings of inadequacy. Today, perfection is deemed to be obtainable, meaning “anything less than perfection is failure” (Michel & Reid-Walsh, 2008, p. 10). The expectation of perfection puts further pressure on girls to look like the women they see on television.

The social climate teen girls live in is even more concerning when coupled with their television consumption habits. Most girls are motivated to watch by having something to talk about with friends (Martinez de Morin, Medrano & Ugalde, 2017). The desire to be a part of a larger cultural conversation also motivates teenagers to binge-watch (Conlin, 2016; Matrix, 2014). Twenty-five percent of English-speaking Canadian households have signed up for the streaming service Netflix. That figure increases to 33 percent for households with teens. As television viewing habits shift from appointment-based live viewing to on-demand, teens watch more television and in larger doses (Matrix, 2014). Research suggests that binge-watching produces stronger reactions to the content on-screen, therefore increasing the likelihood that teen girls will be influenced by the characters on their favorite shows (Conlin, 2016). In fact, when examining tweets containing the hashtags #PrettyLittleLiars, #TheSecretLifeOfTheAmericanTeenager, or #TheBoldType (the series analyzed in this study), it becomes clear that the women watching these shows are often binge-watching, some spending entire days in front of the screen.

With U.S. teens spending such a great deal of time watching television, they are receiving numerous messages about how to function in society. Giles notes that in their teen years viewers search out heroes, idols, and role models (Giles, 2003), who come to be known as secondary attachments (Erickson, 1968).

These are attachments to adults other than one's parents, and they either come in the form of a romantic attachment or an identification attachment. The latter produces concern for adolescent girls who become attached to celebrities that have unrealistic beauty standards. Prior research has indeed shown that girls accept the appearance of women in the media to be a personal standard (Trekels & Eggermont, 2017). This finding shows how teen girls use television as a means to develop into a woman, learning what it is an acceptable body standard and how to behave to be the perfect woman.

Parasocial Relationships and Socialization

Television exhibits such influence on teenage girls due to the sense of intimacy cultivated between character and viewer. Studies have found that viewers develop a level of trust in the television they watch, leading them to endorse or model behaviors they observe (Ragsdale, Bersamin, Schwartz, Zamboanga, Kerrick, & Grube, 2013; Churchill & Moschis, 1979). This phenomenon is especially true for early maturing teen girls. Television becomes a "super-peer" they turn to when they may not feel comfortable confiding in their real-life friends, or when their friends do not have the answers to their questions (Brown, Halpern & L'Engle, 2005, p. 426).

This phenomenon can be attributed in part to the development of a parasocial relationship, which has been defined as a relationship between audience and performer in which the audience member's long-term involvement with a character extends beyond the viewing experience (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rosaen & Dibble, 2015). In other words, the viewer has a one-sided relationship with a character they perceive as real. These relationships stem from cues such as a character's looks, behavior, emotional state, and nonverbal behavior. Most often audience members attach to characters because they identify with one or more of these traits, leading to the adoption of certain attitudes and beliefs (Sun, 2010).

Those most likely to develop parasocial relationships have ritualized viewing habits and are cultivating their own identities (Ryan & Macey, 2013; Theran, Newburg, & Gleason 2010). Prior research indicates that teen girls fit these criteria and are especially likely to develop such feelings towards television characters (Theran, Newburg, & Gleason 2010; Ugalde, Martinez de Morin & Medrano, 2017). One study, in particular, noted that stars such as Angelina Jolie, Reese Witherspoon, and Jennifer Aniston heavily influenced girls. These women were old enough to be the subjects' mothers, thus indicating idol or role model status (Theran, Newburg, & Gleason, 2010).

Once a parasocial relationship is established it manifests in specific ways. Most apparent is its similarity to social relationships based in reality, such as peers, parents, and siblings (Giles, 2003; Nabi & Oliver, 2010). They can result in feelings of love and admiration, but also feelings of loneliness and alienation (Ryan & Macey, 2013; Sun, 2010). Twitter research shows that many fans of the shows analyzed in this study have strong reactions to what the characters are doing, as if the characters are present in their own lives. For example, @AnaTheAwesome tweeted: "Me rn [two crying emojis] because of the season 3 finale #SecretLifeOfTheAmericanTeenager" and @Maddclaire19 tweeted: "If Jacqueline gets fired, I will literally stab every single person alive in this entire world #TheBoldType."

When one develops a parasocial relationship with a character, that character has persuasive influence in the same way one's peers do (Basil & Brown, 1995; Nabbi & Oliver, 2010). In many cases, this results in the adoption of the behaviors of that character. For example, one study participant said of Bill Cosby's character on *The Cosby Show*, "I try very hard to make my own character like him...I feel that Cosby and I share that characteristic of trying to be different" (Giles, 2003, p. 195). Such an attitude indicates how the characters one identifies with influence how they live their lives. The same pattern can take place when teen girls identify with a female character and that character shows patterns of disordered eating.

When a viewer finds identifying characteristics with television characters, that similarity can also serve to affirm beliefs he or she may have (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Eyal & Rubin, 2003). This phenomenon is known as homophily and it can explain why parasocial relationships have such influence, as the viewer accepts the characters thoughts and behaviors as truth. Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT) suggests that parasocial relationships can lead to the viewer taking actions that model the characters they identify with and/or idolize. SCT holds that the characters one finds similarities with, finds physically attractive, or are deemed "socially desirable" are likely to be mimicked in the viewer's own life. Conversely, those actions deemed undesirable become "disincentives" for viewers (Malacane & Martins, 2017, p. 28). Therefore, when a teen girl sees the most popular character on her favorite show skip a meal, or otherwise promote diet culture, she is likely to repeat those behaviors in her own life.

Disordered Eating and the Media

Because of such influence, television programming today can be dangerous. Media depictions of women portray the body as a “malleable entity modifiable by sweat, starvation, surgery, and drugs,” and thinness has become a prerequisite for attractiveness, creating a culture in which those whose bodies do not adhere to this ideal are deemed “problematic” (Ogle & Thornburg, 2003, p. 47). These portrayals have led to an increase in dieting, with 75 percent of female teenagers dieting before the age of 16 (Michel & Willard, 2003). A positive correlation has been found between television consumption and the adoption of weight loss programs and internalization of the thin ideal (Becker, Burwell, Gillman, Herzog, & Hamburg, 2002; Boothroyd, Barton, Booth, Evans, Jamieson, Jucker, Thornborrow, & Tovee, 2016)

Approximately half of U.S. high school students report restricting food intake as a means of controlling weight, most commonly among girls. Some strategies they employ include increasing exercise, eating less, eating food low in calories, and eliminating certain foods from their diets altogether (Bas & Kiziltan, 2007). This behavior falls under the definition of dysfunctional or disordered eating: eating behavior that “is regulated by external and inappropriate internal controls, and seeks to reshape the body or relieve stress” (Berg, 2002, p. 32). It is this restrictive behavior that leads to eating disorders (Bas & Kiziltan, 2007).

Eating Disorders Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS) is the category to which eating disorders are assigned if they fail to fulfill diagnostic criteria for anorexia or bulimia. It comprises a large group of diverse disorders defined by the criteria they do not meet (Norrington & Palmer, 2005). Strict dieting, such as the behaviors seen on television programming, among teen girls may fall into this category (Bas & Kiziltan, 2007). Largely, those who suffer from eating disorders have a skewed perception of their own bodies, which could be attributed to the fact that many teen girls see the body types of women on television as standard. These feelings tend to develop between the ages of 14 and 18, with 85 percent of cases appearing during adolescence (Michel & Willard, 2003). This is especially concerning given the research regarding teen girl culture, viewing habits, and parasocial relationships, as girls may be learning this behavior from those characters they idolize on the screen.

Taken together, teen girls may be at high risk for developing eating disorders due to the significance of the mediated relationships they have with television characters. While previous research has shown that beauty standards portrayed in the media influence girls’ thoughts and feelings about their bodies, there is a gap in the literature in regards to eating habits of television characters. This research seeks to fill that gap by examining the extent to which teen television shows discuss and/or depict dieting and women’s relationship to food.

III. Methods

This study examines how television shows depict girls’ eating behaviors and attitudes toward eating. Specifically, three subcategories were evaluated. First, instances of restrictive eating were examined. As referenced in the literature review, in many cases of EDNOS and anorexia, this is a typical behavior (Bas & Kiziltan, 2007). The next subcategory was body image, since many girls begin dangerous diet regimens due to their negative views of their own bodies and feeling they need to regulate them. The final area this study focused on were instances of disordered eating. This may include negative comments related to food or eating, instances of eating to serve an emotional need, or other eating habits that may stray from what is considered a normal, balanced diet.

A framing analysis was conducted using three television shows on Freeform, a popular channel targeting teens and young adults. A framing analysis identifies the culturally determined definitions of reality and will shed light on how food functions and what it means in the life of teenage girls. When selecting the television shows to study, a stratified sample was used, selecting only shows that aired on Freeform, which ended no more than five years ago, and included a cast of primarily teenagers or young adults. The shows chosen were *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (2008-2013), *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2017), and *The Bold Type* (2017-Present). Every 10th episode from each season was selected in the study. However, since *The Bold Type* has only released two seasons with 10 episodes per season, every 2nd episode was included for that show. A total of 38 episodes were analyzed ($n=38$).

Pretty Little Liars follows the characters Aria, Emily, Hanna, and Spencer as they are terrorized by

a mysterious villain that goes by “A,” reminiscent of their friend Alison, who is missing and assumed dead. The show features the girls solving the mystery surrounding Alison’s disappearance while dealing with boys, college applications, and parents. It is important to note that Hanna and a recurring character, Mona, both developed eating disorders prior to the show’s pilot episode (the time in which these characters were suffering from eating disorders is never featured in the show, but it is alluded to early on). Additionally, the character Spencer exhibits many characteristics of what is considered the “perfect” girl -- a high achieving academic, but still beautiful and popular (Rimer, 2007). When analyzing *Pretty Little Liars* it is important to note that the series is quite dramatic and the circumstances the main characters deal with are far from ordinary. The dramatic plot of the show may explain why food is ignored in some episodes. However, given that the entire series functions in this way, the restrictive eating behavior and attitudes present are nonetheless noteworthy.

The Secret Life of the American Teenager stars Amy, a high school student that becomes pregnant at 15. The show takes place over Amy’s four years of high school and depicts the lives of her friends as well. Stereotypical portrayals of teenage girls appear in several characters. For example, the character Grace is an innocent, religious, and beautiful girl who dates a boy on the football team. The character Adrian, in contrast, is the “bad girl,” sexy and wild, who falls in love with the rebel. Sex and relationships are common themes throughout all five seasons of the show.

The Bold Type tells the story of three young-adult women, Kat, Jane, and Sutton, and their careers at a popular women’s magazine in New York City. It may be important to note that *The Bold Type* is the most recent of the three series and takes on a far more openly progressive voice. The show tackles relevant issues today such as sexual harassment and gun rights. The women navigate their careers and relationships throughout the series. Some themes include friendship, love, and independence.

The visual and spoken elements of the episodes were identified through emergent coding. The frames that appeared consistently across shows were foods being shown or discussed but not eaten, not eating at mealtimes, references to restrictive eating, emotional eating, shame for “bad” eating habits, and references to being fat. Each instance was counted and described. For the purpose of this study, only the eating behaviors of female characters were analyzed, as those are the characters teen girls are most likely to identify with and imitate. Beverages were excluded in this study.

IV. Findings

Within each of the shows analyzed, patterns of restrictive eating, poor body image, and disordered eating behaviors were apparent.

Television Show	Food shown or discussed, but not eaten	Not eating at mealtimes	Reference to restrictive eating	Emotional eating	Shame for “bad” eating habits	Reference to being fat
<i>Pretty Little Liars</i>	20	26	3	1	1	1
<i>The Secret Life of the American Teenager</i>	18	22	2	1	2	1
<i>The Bold Type</i>	19	8	1	3	–	–
Total	57	56	6	5	3	2

Figure 1: Occurrences of disordered eating behaviors/attitudes throughout *Pretty Little Liars*, *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, and *The Bold Type*.

Foods Shown or Discussed, but Not Eaten

As Figure 1 indicates, the most common pattern that occurred across the 38 episodes studied was food being shown or discussed, but not eaten, with 57 instances total. In many cases, characters would express that they had plans to get lunch or dinner, but these meals were never depicted. It may have been assumed that the characters did go out for a meal, however the viewer never sees the characters eating.

The majority of these instances occur in relatively normal settings. In season two, episode eight of *Pretty Little Liars*, Emily is in the hospital after learning she has an ulcer. The doctors have given her the “O.K.” to eat, but even though Emily asks a nurse for dinner, the viewer never sees her eat. Another instance occurs in season one, episode two of *The Bold Type* when Sutton’s coworker suggests they take their lunch break at Shake Shack, though their lunch break is never portrayed. In both scenarios, episodes in which no larger plot occurrence would interfere with the characters ability to eat, meals are referenced, but not shown.

Other instances involved the characters buying or making food, but never actually eating it. This was particularly true in *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*. Several episodes depicted characters making sandwiches or cookies, but none of the female characters ever ate them. For example, in season three, episode 23, Grace becomes obsessed with her new nickname “sweetie” and makes cookies to highlight how sweet she is. While all of the men she offers the cookies to eat them, she does not. Even when characters showed an interest in eating, they sometimes denied themselves. In season two, episode seven, Grace has just returned from Med Camp, a summer camp in for students interested in the medical field. After eating healthy all summer, she scolds her brother Tom for eating ice cream. Later on, Grace shows interest in eating the ice cream, but as soon as she begins to bring the spoon to her mouth her restraint kicks in and she puts it down.

Other episodes depicted characters making snacks, but not eating them. This happened frequently in *Pretty Little Liars* and *The Bold Type*. In season three, episode 23 of *Pretty Little Liars*, Aria and her boyfriend, who happens to be her former English professor, order a pastry to split. Aria feels paranoid about being out in public together, and the scene concludes with neither one eating the pastry. Another instance of snacks not being eaten involved the characters of *The Bold Type*, Jane, Sutton, and Kat, having a movie night with popcorn and pizza. This takes place after a day at the office when the girls are catching up on their lives. In the scene, food was present, but the viewer never sees the girls eat it.

Not Eating At Mealtimes

The second most common pattern that occurred throughout the 38 episodes was food not being eaten at mealtimes. There were 56 instances of this pattern. Skipping meals mostly took form in three ways: making meals, but not eating them; picking at meals, but not eating them; and replacing breakfast with coffee. In season one, episode ten of *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, Amy starts her first day at a new school and does not eat breakfast. In that same episode no one is seen eating during school lunch hour, Amy's sister Ashley does not eat her lasagna at dinner, and Amy does not eat her hamburger at dinner. Of course, this episode reflects a major change in Amy's life -- and creates gossip for her peers-- as she begins a new school to deal with her pregnancy, which may explain erratic eating patterns. Nonetheless, not eating at mealtimes indicates a lack of importance given to nutrition, and if it is a reaction to a such a major change, it creates a pattern of emotional eating.

Additionally, *Pretty Little Liars* often featured characters preparing breakfast, but not eating it. Season one, episode 20 begins with Aria's father and Hanna's boyfriend making the girls breakfast, but the girls never eat it. When meals did make it to the table, they were mostly picked at. In season two, episode 18, Hanna tries to cope with her friends hiding things from her. At dinner she has a salad in front of her, but she just moves it around on her plate, without ever taking a bite.

Also relevant in *Pretty Little Liars* is the pattern of drinking coffee for breakfast. In numerous episodes, the characters did not eat breakfast before leaving for school, but they did have coffee. For example, in season one, episode 20, Hanna's mother, who appears content that Hanna and her boyfriend are getting along well, comes into the kitchen at breakfast time and pours herself a coffee before heading to work, without eating the breakfast that her daughter prepared. While beverage intake was not measured in this study, the importance of this phenomenon will be further elaborated on in the discussion section.

References to Restrictive Eating

There were far fewer instances of references to restrictive eating. Over the 38 episodes, six references to restrictive eating occurred. When characters spoke about restricting eating, their references were casual and received no concern from the other characters. For instance, in season two, episode eight of *Pretty Little Liars*, Emily is concerned about being in shape for college swimming recruiters. She refers to limiting her sugar intake and refuses to drink orange juice. In season three, episode 23, while searching through body bags in a morgue and reflecting on how, despite one's best efforts to be healthy, everyone ends up dying, Hanna mentions the "good" behavior of "not eating that second pudding." A similar attitude was depicted in *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*. When Amy mentions she did not eat breakfast, it is treated casually, and when Grace states she "didn't eat ice cream all summer" because it "wasn't allowed at camp," she is depicted as caring for her health.

Even more extreme references were treated as normal. In *Pretty Little Liars*, Mona, who developed an eating disorder to transform her public persona, mentions that when she was trying to lose weight last summer she only ate three almonds a day and she belittled Hanna for not doing the same. This weight loss tactic was clearly accepted by the other characters and Hanna was admonished for not going to such an extreme.

Emotional Eating

There were five instances of emotional eating within the 38 episodes. In these instances, the characters either were under some sort of emotional distress or were celebrating something. For example, in season five, episode 14 of *Pretty Little Liars*, the viewer sees Hanna eating ice cream after another character's funeral and in season two, episode six of *The Bold Type*, the viewer sees Jane, Sutton, and Kat eating ice cream to celebrate Jane's award. *The Bold Type* also included stress eating in season two, episode two, when Sutton snacks on M&Ms during a high-stakes photoshoot she is in charge of, and drunk eating in season two, episode six, when Sutton eats a Hot Pocket, a brand of microwavable turnovers and pocket sandwiches, after a night out.

Shame for “Bad” Eating Habits

Shame for “bad” eating habits rarely occurred. There were three instances total. In season one, episode ten of *Pretty Little Liars* Mona scolds a girl for eating a cookie at a birthday party. In *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, the shaming took on a more health-related attitude. In season one, episode 20, Amy tries to be healthy for the sake of her baby. She says to her sister Ashley, who was about to eat a waffle for breakfast, “Ashley, yogurt is much healthier than chocolate waffles.” Later on in the episode, Amy also mentions that she wants “to be careful about what [she eats]. [She doesn’t] want to gain weight.”

References to Being Fat

There were two explicit references to being or feeling fat. In *Pretty Little Liars* season one, episode 10, Hanna asks her friends if her face looks fat. In *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, Lauren and Madison both say that they feel fat.

Eating Not Discussed or Depicted At All

Three episodes aired in which food was not discussed or depicted at all. These episodes both took place over the course of an entire day or more, meaning the characters were not seen eating once in a more than a 24-hour period.

V. Discussion

Given the previous research on teen girl culture, parasocial relationships, and socialization, it is clear that girls watching programming such as *Pretty Little Liars*, *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, and *The Bold Type* can form attachments with the female characters they view as similar to themselves, or as role models. Those viewers are more likely to model those characters’ behaviors in the real world (Erickson, 1968; Giles, 2003; Malacane & Martins, 2017). In the especially stressful teen years when girls are learning their place in society, seeing girls on television that they identify with can be a source of comfort and provide answers on how to be what society regards as acceptable (Brown, Halpern, & L’Engle, 2005). However, when the beauty standards of the characters they watch are that of Hollywood, and therefore designed to attract viewers, teen girls can adopt an unrealistic standard of beauty for themselves (Trekels & Eggermont, 2017).

The women that teenage girls see when they watch *Pretty Little Liars*, *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, and *The Bold Type*, do not prioritize eating. Although the characters in these series, particularly in *Pretty Little Liars*, may lead lives that stray from what society considers “normal” and therefore may be influenced to ignore healthy eating habits, they still neglect food and frame eating as unimportant. Rarely are they seen eating meals or even snacks, and when we do see them eat something it might be a result of emotional eating. This teaches girls that eating is acceptable when emotions are in extremes, but not as part of a daily routine. More concerning is the substitution of meals with coffee and alcohol. While beverages were not included in this study, it became clear that grabbing coffee or drinks with a group of girls was a means of regular socialization, while meals were not. This gives the viewer permission to replace food with drinks in social settings.

The concept of food not being a priority is concerning by itself, but it becomes dangerous when coupled with the presences of explicit references to restrictive eating, being fat, and shame for diverting from a “healthy” diet. While there were fewer instances of these patterns, they are much more straightforward. It takes little effort for a teen girl to understand that the way to be like the women they see on the screen is to limit their caloric intake and avoid foods that will make them fat.

Such eating behaviors and attitudes promote a diet culture. Teen television programming sends its viewers the message that regulating food intake is normal and even honorable. This promotion of diet culture is incredibly intriguing for women that struggle with body image (Ross, 2015). While being conscious of one’s diet can be beneficial and aid in maintaining a healthy lifestyle, such behaviors also can turn into disordered eating and eventually full-blown eating disorders (Bas & Kiziltan, 2007; Berg, 2002).

VI. Conclusion

This study sought to fill a gap in the research by examining eating behaviors and attitudes toward eating in television shows targeted to teen girls. Episodes of *Pretty Little Liars*, *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, and *The Bold Type*, television shows with a largely female cast that aired on the teen network Freeform, were examined. A framing analysis brought to light seven patterns regarding eating behaviors and attitudes. There were far more instances of food being depicted than eaten, and of skipping meals, than in most other categories examined; however, these were more subtle than instances in other categories, in which a direct remark is made regarding a character's looks or eating habits.

The lack of eating in the television shows studied creates a cause for concern as teen girls look to the characters in shows to tell them how to behave in society. Teens who identify with these characters are more likely to model such eating behaviors and attitudes in their own lives. By not giving due attention to food consumption and by creating a negative attitude around food and appearance, teen television programming promotes diet culture. Diets often develop into eating disorders. With 20 million women suffering from eating disorders at some point in their lives, teen television only triggers the disease further (Hamilton, 2014).

It is important to note limitations of this study. Examining more television shows across networks over a longer time period would determine whether or not the patterns found are widespread. Additionally, interviews and surveys of teenage girls could be used to determine what programs they watch, how often they watch, and whether or not they feel influenced by the characters on such shows. It may also be important to speak with the producers and directors of teen television shows to examine the choice to not heavily feature food and whether it is an inherent bias reflective of the society. While there is room to deepen the research, this study does bring to light several concerns about what teenage girls are exposed to when they watch television.

To prevent the damage that television can do to the teenage girl's psyche, producers and directors should educate themselves on how the messages they send can be negatively interpreted. The creators of teen television programming must learn what triggers may exist for eating disorders and how to avoid them in their work. Hopefully, such a strategy will lead to programming that portrays more realistic and nutritious eating behaviors and attitudes.

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