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## **At War with Their Bodies or At War with Their Minds? A Glimpse into the Lives and Minds of Female Yo-Yo Dieters – The Curtain has Lifted in U.K.?<sup>1</sup>**

By Huda Iqbal Ahmed Qazi<sup>2</sup> and Harshad Keval<sup>3</sup>

### **Abstract**

Yo-yo dieting is a common phenomenon yet little interdisciplinary research has been carried out on dieting, food and nutrition in the social context. This study investigated the effects of yo-yo dieting on social and psychological well-being using qualitative methods. Data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with women who yo-yo diet. A total of 9 participants, 20-51 years old, were recruited by purposive and snowball sampling techniques from the University of Roehampton, London, U.K., where the first author was a student at the time of the study. Thematic analysis derived four major themes: the physical and/or mental impact of yo-yo dieting, the similarity of reported symptoms with those associated with eating disorders, familial and sociocultural pressure for initiating diets and the struggle for control and/or identity. Furthermore, there appears to be a link between yo-yo dieting and interviewees' references to depressive mood episodes. The implications of these findings for the risks of developing eating disorders are discussed.

*Keywords:* weight cycling, yo-yo dieting, disordered eating behaviors, body image, identity crisis, qualitative methodology.

### **Introduction**

Weight cycling/yo-yo dieting is a common phenomenon yet little interdisciplinary research has been carried out on dieting, food and nutrition in the social context (Germov & Williams, 1996). Weight lost and then regained can be described as a single weight cycle (Kensinger et al., 1998; Lahti-Koski et al., 2005; Venditti et al., 1996). Nevertheless, the number of cycles required to satisfy the criteria of weight cycling varies across studies which in turn makes it difficult to determine the prevalence of yo-yo dieting (Kensinger et al., 1998; Lahti-Koski et al., 2005). Muls et al. (1995) state in

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their review that, as there is yet no precise definition of weight cycling, different methods have been used in several studies such as: (1) Calculating self-reported losses and regains of weight of less than or equal to 4-5 kg, 3-9 kg, less than or equal to 9 kg or less than or equal to 10 kg, (2) Weight loss during the lifetime, (3) Difference between the highest and lowest weight over the past year, or as an adult, (4) The average rate of fluctuations in weight per year, and (5) Frequency of weight cycling and the amount of weight loss achieved. However, according to Friedman et al. (1998), three different methods have been used to measure and assess weight cycling: (1) Recollected history of weight loss and regain over time, (2) Weight regained following weight loss during a treatment program, and (3) Subjective assessment of a person's capability to maintain weight loss. A very general definition of yo-yo dieting is: Going on and off a diet at various times which consequently causes the weight to be lost and regained (Brownell & Rodin, 1994; Muls et al., 1995; National Task Force on the Prevention and Treatment of Obesity, (U.S.A) (1994) and this is the definition that has been used in this study carried out in London to recruit participants as there is yet no precise definition.

### ***Dietary/Physiological Studies on Yo-yo Dieting***

While some studies indicate physiological alterations such as the lowering of Basal Metabolic Rate (BMR) occurring in the body and/or weight gain due to going on and off diets repeatedly (Field et al., 2004; French et al., 1994; Pasman et al., 1999) others have concluded that no lasting physiological impairment occurs due to weight cycling (Jebb et al., 1991; Prentice et al., 1992; Wadden et al., 1992). Furthermore, although several previous studies (Blair et al., 1993; Lee & Paffenbarger, 1992; Lissner et al., 1991) suggested that yo-yo dieting is associated with increased health risks, other studies (Lissner et al., 1990) revealed inconsistent results. Hence, one of the aims of the current study were to determine whether yo-yo dieting has a negative impact on health physiologically as well as psychologically.

### ***Socio-Cultural Pressure and Influence***

Previous literature has highlighted the negative impact of being exposed to the thin ideal (in U.S.A.) as portrayed by the media on women and has revealed that exposure to media's portrayal of body shape ideals is associated with dissatisfaction of body image, concerns with weight, and disordered eating behavior (Bessenoff, 2006, Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). The food and cosmetic industries advertise and encourage an extremely thin beauty ideal that in turn instigates disordered eating and eating disorders (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). Diet and fitness industries assisted by the media are constantly sending messages that it is the responsibility of women to attain the idealistic ultra thin body (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). Some researchers have proposed that the media are the most powerful and persistent source of communication of sociocultural standards (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999).

### ***Psychological Impact of Yo-Yo dieting***

A review of the literature also reveals controversy existing regarding psychological impact of yo-yo dieting. For instance, while Bartlett et al. (1996); Foster *et al.* (1996); Simkin-Silverman et al. (1998) and Venditti et al. (1996) concluded that there was no evidence of lasting psychological impact of yo-yo dieting on women who go on and off diets repeatedly. Brownell & Rodin (1994) and Foreyt et al. (1995) determined that yo-yo dieting does indeed have a negative psychological impact on health.

Furthermore, a study carried out by Friedman et al. (1998) on 14, 555 people in U.S.A revealed that the history and experience scales of yo-yo dieting was significantly associated with lower self-esteem, life dissatisfaction, and a higher body dissatisfaction in a large number of dieters. They also stated that their study results suggested that the experience of being a yo-yo dieter rather than the actual

number of pounds lost or regained may have a negative impact on psychological health. As the above stated study did not provide insight into the experiences of yo-yo dieters, the present study aimed at investigating and exploring the experiences of female yo-yo dieters.

Moreover, the National Task Force on the Prevention and Treatment of Obesity of U.S.A. (1994), Muls et al. (1995) and Wing (1993) have noted that there is a scarcity of research evaluating the consequences of yo-yo dieting on psychological health. In fact, from the literature review, it appears that the experiences of yo-yo dieters are so far a neglected area of research. Furthermore, nearly all the above stated studies have used the quantitative approach in determining and examining the psychological and/or physiological impact of yo-yo dieting on females. Thus, this study has explored and analyzed the experiences and impact of yo-yo dieting on females using qualitative methodology.

### ***Aims***

- To comprehend and analyze the experiences of women who can be characterized as yo-yo dieters
- To investigate the effects of yo-yo dieting on social and psychological well-being in females
- To identify perceived causes and influences which lead to yo-yo dieting

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

Nine adult females were recruited for this study.<sup>4</sup>

The age range was from 20-51 years.<sup>5</sup> All participants, except for 1, were living in London, with 7 of them attending university at the time of the study. (Please refer to Table 1 for demographic information of study participants). Participants were recruited by carrying out purposive and snowballing sampling techniques and by putting up posters regarding the study at the University of Roehampton, London, U.K. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants to protect their identity and to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

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<sup>4</sup> Although men also engage in dieting (Souza & Ciclitira, 2005), this study focused on female yo-yo dieters.

<sup>5</sup> To our knowledge, the prevalence of yo-yo dieting in a particular age group has not yet been established. Although epidemiological data indicates that the prevalence of eating disorders is highest in adolescent and young adult females (Hudson et al., 2007); whether the same prevalence applies to yo-yo dieting necessitates further investigation.

**Table I: Demographic Information of Study Participants**

Age	Name	Location	Occupation	Marital Status	Duration of stay in UK	Course (at time of study)	Duration of Yo-Yo Dieting	Ethnicity
28	Florence	South-West London	Nanny & Receptionist	Single	3 years	-	4 years	Filipino
34	Ann	South-West London	Student	Divorced	6 months	Associate Student	18 years	Portuguese
22	Rose	South-West London	Student	Single	Since birth	Science of Sport & Exercise (2nd Year)	2 years	Pakistani
29	Jenny	Berkshire	Nurse	Single	Since birth	MSc Clinical Nutrition	2 years	English
28	Nancy	South-West London	Procurement Manager	Single	2 years	-	6 years	Egyptian
20	Sally	North London	Student	Single	15 years	Biomedical Science (1st year)	3 years	African
21	Sue	North-West London	Student	Single	5 years	Health Studies (1st year)	6 years	Somali
22	Veronica	Ealing	Student	Single	5 years	MSc Clinical Nutrition	8 years	Greek
51	Eliza	South-West London	Student	Single	30 years	Health & Social Sciences (2nd Year)	15 years	African

***Eligibility Criteria***

- Females who were yo-yo dieters were included in this study.
- Participants were screened by being asked to define yo-yo dieting and the frequency of their dieting episodes. For instance, a female who had dieted only twice in the past 10 years was not considered a yo-yo dieter. Although there is yet no precise definition of yo-yo dieting, those that had been on and off a diet frequently (for instance, more than once a month) were eligible to participate in the study.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

This study was approved through the Ethics procedures as part of the Health Sciences MSc Team within the University of Roehampton, where the first author was a student at the time of the study.

The researcher (first author) was careful when interviewing the participants as the nature of the study was a sensitive one. Telephone numbers and contact details of counselors were kept at hand, in case a participant hinted at requiring help or assistance but no such incident occurred.

### ***Procedure***

A pilot study was carried out initially on 2 participants to test and refine the topics and questions and the data generated were included as part of the study. In the pilot study, participants were asked about the details of their dieting episodes, the impact yo-yo dieting had on them and factors influencing them to go on diets repeatedly.

All participants were interviewed by the first author, a female in her early twenties. Out of the 9 participants, 7 were interviewed on the University premises in a private lounge face to face and 2 participants were interviewed at a student dormitory. Participants were initially provided with an information sheet which provided details and procedure of the study. Participants were also informed that the purpose of the study was to explore their experiences of going on and off diets and to analyze the impact of this behavior on them. Next, they were provided with a consent form to demonstrate their willingness to participate and were informed that they were at liberty to withdraw at their own will without accounting for their withdrawal. Participants were assured that the data collected would be kept confidential and treated anonymously. Following that, participants were interviewed through a semi-structured interview ranging from 30 minutes-1 hour and the interviews were tape recorded. A topic guide prepared by the first author was used to keep the interview on track (Please refer to Appendix 1 for a summarized version of the topic guide). In the interview, participants were asked the duration of their yo-yo dieting and their experiences with different kinds of diets, factors influencing them to go on diets frequently and the impact yo-yo dieting had on them physically and/or mentally. Following the conclusion of the interviews, participants were thanked for their time and cooperation and were invited to ask questions about the research. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim and the data were stored in a locked PC and the tapes were stored in a locked drawer.

### ***Data Analysis***

This research made use of thematic analysis to analyze and interpret the data. In thematic analysis, the data is first coded and then themes are developed from the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Foss & Waters, 2003). Next, a theoretical scheme is developed from the data which helps in answering the research question(s) (Foss & Waters, 2003). Thematic analysis organizes and analyzes the data in elaborate detail and commonly interprets several aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis involves exploring the data set to determine repeated themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final step is organizing the analysis and writing it up (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Foss & Waters, 2003).

Data were analyzed in the following way:

The recorded interviews of the participants were first transcribed. Next, all the interview extracts were coded systematically. Themes were developed by clustering the coded labels under different titles. Next, compelling extracts of the participants were selected to represent the experiences of the study participants. As an example, one of the themes that emerged in the findings of this study was that study participants faced social pressure to go on diets frequently. This theme emerged by coding the extracts

of the participants that indicated social pressure to go on diets repeatedly. The coded extracts incorporated pressure from family, media, opposite sex, and childhood experiences. Hence, under this theme, sub-themes emerged such as pressure from family, media's influence and pressure and opposite sex's influence and pressure. Thus, those extracts of the participants that best described the pressure they had to face were selected and inserted under the respective themes and sub-themes.

## **Results and Discussion**

Findings from this study suggest that although yo-yo dieting had a significant negative impact on most women in this study, yet there are complex psychosocial factors involved in prompting women in this study to go on and off diets repeatedly. The four major themes that have been derived from the data are explored and analyzed below:

### **1. Impact of Yo-Yo Dieting**

All participants, save for 1, asserted that yo-yo dieting had an impact on them in some way. For some it was physical impact, for others mental/ psychological, while for some it was a combination of factors.

For instance, Sally confided:

‘Stress is one of...the impacts...when you’ve got so many problems going on and a lot of things getting to you, that puts yo-yo dieting on...for me, it’s just stress and when I am thinking about my body and the way my body is and that has a really big impact on me. These negative emotions cause me to yo-yo diet.’

An intriguing finding of this study is that negative emotions triggered the onset of yo-yo dieting in women in this study. It can be speculated that yo-yo dieting is a kind of behavior which many women have adopted to vent out their frustration, or distract themselves from stresses, thus suggesting an element of anxiety to be involved in this phenomenon. Perhaps the way the women resort to dieting when stressed or anxious appears to suggest that yo-yo dieting is a form of coping strategy that they have adopted to cope with their stresses. Ball & Lee (2000) concluded in their review that majority of previous studies have demonstrated that higher levels of stress predict onset of disordered eating. However, yo-yo dieting also appeared to induce negative emotions in these women. Some previous studies suggest that eating disorders may precipitate higher levels of stress (e.g Roesen et al., 1990, Rosen et al., 1993). Whether similar impact is experienced by those with disordered eating behaviors such as yo-yo dieting merits further research. This phenomenon portrays a vicious cycle which appears to be extremely difficult to extricate from, except if this behavior is completely abandoned.

Jenny, meanwhile disclosed:

‘I get very low about myself sometimes...I shout, get angry sometimes, because I am not actually sticking to something (dieting) and then my man will say, ‘‘Oh, you’re not sticking to it (dieting) again’’ I do get really depressed. Sometimes, I sort of hit myself body-image wise...That’s another reason why I go on diets. I try to get my mind off it, throw myself into the diet.’

Sue, on the other hand, painted the picture of depression being like stuck in a vicious cycle when persisting with yo-yo dieting:

‘I think you are depressed as you’re doing the yo-yo dieting as you’re desperate to do anything just to lose that weight quickly and you get even more depressed because... you falsely raised hope to yourself and there was no quick result there so you tend to get depressed and...start blaming yourself.’

To date, it is ambiguous whether frequent dieting causes depression or whether depression results in yo-yo dieting. Although Stice et al. (2000) proposed that depression is an outcome of dieting, on the other hand, Abraham (2008) has affirmed that though a lot of women who have been diagnosed with eating disorders demonstrate symptoms of clinical depression, it is not apparent whether the latter contributed to the former or vice versa. The possibility that the same principle may apply to yo-yo dieters warrants further investigation and research.

51 year old Eliza, meanwhile, elucidated the physical impact of yo-yo dieting by divulging:

‘Physically, you feel horrible and you find that your body is not heeding (to dieting) so you find that you are getting exhausted because the impact is really bad because of going on and off (yo-yo dieting).’

From the present study, 6 (66.6%) of the participants admitted regaining weight and having difficulty in achieving further weight loss. The finding that long-term dieting may contribute to permanent alterations in the body metabolically as well as physiologically thus promoting weight gain and making ensuing weight loss more difficult is consistent with previous findings such as the ones by Field et al. (2004); French et al. (1994) and Paman et al. (1999). Furthermore, Van Wye et al. (2007) reported that their study results suggest that episodes of repeated dieting could result in weight gain among women. However, this finding is discrepant with the findings of Jebb et al., 1991; Prentice et al. (1992) and Wadden et al. (1992) who concluded from their study that yo-yo dieting does not affect body composition and/or result in an altered state of BMR.

## ***2. Eating Disorders Symptomatology***

An interesting finding of this study consistent with some previous research (e.g. Patton et al., 1999; Patton et al., 1990) is that many yo-yo dieters in this study manifested symptoms and behaviors which are characteristic of females diagnosed with eating disorders. Some of the typical symptoms demonstrated by the women in the present study were constant preoccupation with food, cravings, use of laxatives, episodes of bingeing and a generally negative perception of body image. In fact, some of the participants candidly acknowledged being aware that they were exhibiting these symptoms and Veronica, one of the participants who at the time of the study was studying to be a nutritionist, also admitted that she feared that she might one day cross the line and go onto develop anorexia nervosa:

‘I think it is a kind of eating disorder behavior, to be honest...mine could be anorectic behavior...I just hope that I won’t go further than this point...It’s sort of obsession. I just don’t want to put on weight and it’s constantly on my mind.’

In addition, Ann also demonstrated one of the classic symptoms that is normally identified in those diagnosed with eating disorders i.e. body dysmorphia (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) when she confided:

‘...I was definitely not fat. But I felt fat and I would look at myself in the mirror and see myself as fat and that’s when my dieting started.’

It is interesting to note that students majoring in Clinical Nutrition in particular and Health Sciences reported symptoms characteristic of those with eating disorders. This finding is consistent with previous studies such as the one conducted by Drake (1989) on students majoring in dietetics. She found out that 24% of them exhibited symptoms of anorexia nervosa. A study conducted by Kinzler et al. (1999) on Austrian dietitians demonstrated that 6.6% of them were underweight, more than 40% reported to have problematic eating behavior and 7.5% of the dietitians appeared to be at risk of developing eating disorders or had already developed eating disorders. Furthermore, Worobey & Shoenfeld (1999) also carried out a study comparing dietetic major students with other majors to determine their attitude towards food and their eating behavior. Their findings revealed that dietetic students in particular expressed concern regarding their attitude towards food and weight loss including eating/purging behaviors and excessive exercising. Their conclusion was that students majoring in dietetics may be at an increased risk for developing eating disorders.

### ***3. Familial & SocioCultural Pressure***

Findings from this study confirmed that familial and sociocultural (societal and media) influences also play a major role in inducing most women in this study to commence diets frequently. However, it is interesting to note that these women faced (and sometimes perceived) conflicting sociocultural pressure and influence confusing them and this culminated into yo-yo dieting. Discussed below are three detailed accounts of study participants that depict the extent of confusion they experienced from their social environment.

#### **1. Ann:**

Ann’s discussion about her childhood reveals the struggle she faced when bombarded by conflicting messages regarding her weight from her family and her social environment:

#### ***Familial Pressure/Influence:***

‘My mom...is really...thin...really elegant. I don’t think she even takes that great a pleasure in food because she is like, “No, this is how much I am supposed to eat” and that’s it. She won’t exceed it...she’ll even leave food on her plate...and she raised me to eat every single thing on my plate... . So there’s a reason why she is always thin and elegant... . When I was a kid, I was really skinny and...she (mom) would cry because I would not eat. ..And at that time, it was 1974 or 1975; the doctors started giving me vitamins that would open appetite...basically she (mom) gave me a lot because I wouldn’t eat...so after that, until I was like maybe 10 or 11, I was always taking these vitamins to open up my appetite... . And then after my puberty, I started eating like normal...and when I started gaining a little bit of weight...I was definitely not overweight, I was still below the average but then my other sister would joke with me... because I had a bigger butt, so, “Look

at your butt”...and I just started maturing really early... everything started coming out and so she would joke with that. And that for me was an issue. So I thought, “Ok, if I get thin, everything goes”...and when I look at pictures of me then, I am like so thin because I am like weighing 48-49 kilos, and I was already 160 (cm) ... . But I felt fat...and that’s when my dieting started and then I did already like to eat, then... I would gain more than I would lose and after that I haven’t stopped until I ballooned in 2006...to 90.7 kilos.’

An important point to be noted is that although Ann did not specify whether her mother had disordered eating, it appears from her statement that her mother did have some disordered eating behaviors and this in turn influenced Ann to develop disordered eating (yo-yo dieting). Previous studies have highlighted the influence of disordered eating mothers on their daughters (e.g. Benedikt et al., 1998; Lowes & Tigemann, 2003; Pike & Rodin, 1991; Ruther & Richman, 1993; Smolak et al., 1999; Wertheim et al., 1999). Moreover, Levine et al. (1994) and Lowes & Tigemann (2003) reported that comments on the child’s weight and figure by parents and society may be internalized by young girls and culminate into dieting as these youngsters possess awareness that dieting is a means of achieving this goal.

### ***Societal Pressure/Influence:***

Anne then elaborated how on the one hand, people in her community constantly compared her with her mom and sisters while on the contrary; her friends and the men in her life were not bothered by her weight or figure:

‘I had...pressure because my sisters were...really thin. I was not fat (before) but I was bigger than they were and I had a really...thin mom and so I was easily compared even in the community...people talk about each other and compare and daughters are always compared. And I was definitely...picked on. People would comment and I would hear those comments and obviously I didn’t like them...’

‘What would get to them (boyfriends) was my dieting... they would go like “It’s ok you know you are chubby, just accept it and live with it, it doesn’t bother, it’s not an issue”, not for them, it was never an issue... . But...still it hasn’t got to do with them, it’s got to do with (me)...and also it’s a social thing because I notice... there is a pressure from the media...there is a social pressure; for me it’s a social thing...friends don’t care. My friends don’t care at all.’

She then went on to talk about how the media played a role in instigating her to initiate dieting:

‘Definitely pressure from the media, because otherwise, why would we want to look thin? I mean there’s a reason why my mom is also thin because...media wise, she does like those “Glamour” magazines, she looks at them, there is an influence there, and obviously she doesn’t want us to be fat because people come up to her and say, “Oh your daughter is getting chubby” ...and for her it’s a problem because she knows that socially there is a social thing going on and people expect women to be thinner, they don’t expect us to be fat. Fat is ugly in

our society...and in the western world, fat is even looked down upon... . For instance you're chubby and you want that job; if there's another girl that's thinner, better-looking, she'll get it, most likely, you're probably be more qualified, but there is just this thing, you know that they will go for the thinner...'

Ann's statement reflects findings of previous research (e.g. Phul & Brownell, 2001). They documented that fat people are discriminated against in workplace, healthcare settings, as well as in schools and colleges.

## 2. Sue

Sue disclosed her confusion as she faced conflicting sociocultural pressure regarding her body weight and shape. While on the one hand, some of her family members considered her underweight, on the other hand, some other family members and other people considered her overweight while her friends were neutral about the body weight issue. The conflicting messages regarding her body weight fueled her pursuit for thinness.

### *Societal Pressure/Influence*

'When I was younger, I used to get food in a lot...I was going to a white school...Boys would see a young girl who's already shaped and then make fun of my weight because I had curves at a very young age. At a young age, I could never understand why boys were bullying me, girls in my class would not hang around with me because I was different from them... . Everyone, the whole school would point a finger at me and say, "She's the fat one" so when I started sensing those things, I started concealing myself a lot...It did affect me. (Later) I went to a fashion school...it was strange because I wanted to become a fashion designer but I was in a world full of people that looked like models. People that were skinny...and if people would come up to me and take my measurements for e.g. for an item that we were designing, I would feel embarrassed because I would think, "Ok, I have got the biggest hips here, I've got a large chest that you could fall over" and I would hide myself away. So that affected the way I think. It affected my self-esteem.'

'My friends are fantastic. I think my friends are one group that doesn't put me into a box, doesn't say that I am fat, that I am not skinny, but just normal, which is me...it's like whenever I am with them, I am like one of them, nobody talks about our figure, about our size, about anything like that.'

### *Familial Pressure/Influence*

'I've got a sister who would think that I am underweight according to her...and I would think, "She's like the only person that sees some goodness"... My brother is the one that's concerned most...He now feels the need every time to come to me and tell me, "You've lost weight, you can't do this, you have to eat food, how many times a day have you eaten food today?"...He makes me feel like I am anorexic...'

‘But then again, for e.g. I’ve got an uncle... . When he sees me, he says to me, “Oh, you should go to a trainer, you should go and lose some weight... a girl like you should not look like that, you should be skinny. No man wants to marry a girl who has that amount of weight on her” those kind of things. It’s me and my weight that seems to be a problem... . He’s like another person that you can add to the list that thinks that I am fat. It’s not only him. It’s a lot of other women because the women in my family are really skinny and tall... They’re tall, they’re skinny... I am different from them. So when they see me, they’re like, “Child! What have you been doing?! You’ve been eating food!” And it will make me feel like, “Am I some kind of pig or something?” “Have I been munching so much food that you can see it?”...’

Sue specified that her ethnicity is African. Although it has been proposed that cultural expectations of African beauty standards comprising of a more curvaceous figure, shield them from developing eating disordered behaviors (Rucker & Cash, 2006); yet others have argued that some African women settled in Western societies are influenced by the dominant message of thinness and consequently develop disordered eating (Mulholland & Mintz, 2001; O’Neill, 2003 and Perez & Joiner, 2003). Many researchers also consider that non-white women attending college internalize the white beauty standard of thinness and therefore increasingly develop disordered eating than other non-white women (see Gard & Freeman, 1996, for review).

Sue, meanwhile, vehemently articulated her opinion on how the media incites her and other women to commence diets frequently. Furthermore, her statement implies that the conflicting messages broadcasted by the media cause many women to be confused and uncertain of their identities:

‘I think the media plays a big role... programs such as the “American Idol” are all basically saying... you have to be skinny.... So then again if you watch programs like that... that’s the message that you’re getting unconsciously the whole time and whenever you look at yourself in the mirror, you see something completely different from what you’ve been seeing on the T.V. ... . Then again, if you see a newspaper, and you see a naked woman, you think, “Oh, that’s not what an everyday woman should look like” and again unconsciously, you think, “Is this the way we’re supposed to look like? Am I supposed to look like this?”... . Those kind of things... somewhere in the back of your mind, you think, “Is this the way you should be to be accepted? By the opposite sex or maybe your social environment...’

The above extract clearly illustrates the confusion many women in this study faced when they are bombarded with images of skinny models and celebrities. From the data collected for this study, it appears that many women may feel self-conscious of their body size after viewing the media’s depiction of the ‘ideal’ female figure. This results in women resorting to desperate measures to achieve the ‘ideal’ figure and hence they commence diets frequently. Perhaps these women feel that their body size is not acceptable by the society and that they will only be accepted if they conform to society’s expectations which in turn have been molded by the media, by possessing a smaller body size and thinner body figure.

The finding that the media influences women to adopt unrealistic dieting behaviors in order to lose weight and feel better about themselves is consistent with previous findings. For example, Anderson & DiDomenico (1992); Malkin et al. (1999) and Nemeroff et al. (1994) surveyed a number of men and women's magazines and found out that women's magazines comprised of significantly more body related articles and adverts and articles promoting weight loss than men's magazines.

Another study carried out by Stice et al. (1994) on 238 female undergraduates to assess the link with media exposure and eating disorder symptoms revealed that exposure to media was directly related to eating disordered symptomatology.

### 3. Veronica

Veronica meanwhile avowed that her childhood experiences including being pressured by her athletics coach and ballet teacher to lose weight resulted in her developing disordered eating patterns. She then confided that though her parents on the one hand implemented a strict dietary regime due to her father's illness; on the other hand, they would be displeased with her frequent dieting episodes. All these conflicting sociocultural pressures including her peers culminated into yo-yo dieting.

#### *Societal Pressure/Influence*

'It was just the athletics and the combination of the ballet, I had to be lighter. I had a very bad coach. He was really strict with us... . One day he said, "Look, another competition's coming up and I want you to lose 5 kilograms...that or you just don't enter the competition. And then it was my ballet teacher who was quite strict as well. She was going around with a tape measure. Going like, "oh girls, you are all fat!" we weren't fat. We were normal. But it was just not good enough. So it was never good enough.'

'But my friends were like, "I don't understand why you're doing this. You're fine." My friends have always have been like that. They never criticize me.'

Previous studies echo this finding regarding facing pressure from family members, coaches and others to pursue thinness. Hesse-Biber (1996) stated that women are likely to develop disordered eating behaviors in trying to achieve the desired level of thinness where the necessity of being thin is not only considered essential by several young females but is also stressed upon by family members, peers, school and workplace. Thompson & Heinberg (1999) reported that these messages do not originate just from media sources, but also from family, coaches, peers, teachers and others who enhance this acculturation of women.

#### *Familial Pressure/Influence:*

'And then again...my father, who like, for example, when I come here (London) and then I go home (Greece), the first thing that he will say, the first thing; "You lost weight" or "You put on weight... . Whenever I'd see him, it would be that. ...So I think it's from my childhood years and because he was ill as well. He had to follow a certain diabetic, nutrition plan. So we were following it with him, whether we liked it or not... . So there were no sweets in the house, no ice-

creams... . So it's always been like that. So I think it started growing in me to be this way.'

Following that, she discussed how her family sent out conflicting messages by discouraging her from dieting:

'My parents hate it. They don't really like it. Every time I go back home, they find me thinner. And it's just crazy. They go, "You lost weight again" I don't (lose weight)." ...that's just the parent thing.'

She concluded by how the people in her life are inconsistent with regards to her body weight and hence she will never stop yo-yo dieting:

'Some people like it, some people hate it. Some guys might like it, some guys might not. Usually my family does not like it... . No, I don't think I'll ever stop (yo-yo dieting).'

Previous research such as the qualitative study by Wertheim et al. (1997) reported similar findings regarding sociocultural pressure to pursue thinness. Their study participants comprising of adolescent girls disclosed that they perceived pressure from the media to be thin and this was reinforced by their social surroundings. Current fashion trends also played a role in influencing them to strive to be thinner. Factors such as verbal teasing and comments, wanting to fit in, familial influences etc. were reported similar to the present study. Another similar finding was that these girls did not perceive direct pressure from their peers to be thin.

#### **4. Struggle For Control and/or Identity**

Some of the behavior exhibited by these women is suggestive of an unconscious power struggle with themselves and the people around them; they might perceive dieting as the only way to establish control over their body as well as on those with whom they have daily interactions and/or establish their identity in this manner. This might not necessarily be intentional; nevertheless it had a significant impact on their social behavior and environment.

Sue highlighted this by elaborating that by trying to establish her identity in society, she ironically alienated herself even more by her dieting behavior:

'I think you bring your social environment down as well as you're fixating on something while...your friends will think, it will never be good enough whatever they say... . I think yo-yo diets are one of those things that are causing a lot of people to think differently from the way we're supposed to be acting in our social environments and we are secluding ourselves from the rest of society where we are the ones that tried to be part of society by yo-yo dieting.'

A very interesting factor is brought into focus here by Sue which is the sociocultural paradox. What Sue is stating is that, in order to fit in with the society's contemporary ideals of the desirable female body figure, many women start going on diets. After a while, when they are weary of the diet either because it is not working or results are not that apparent/quick or simply because they cannot continue with the diet, they revert back to their old eating habits. This, however, results in them

regaining weight. This makes them feel that they are not fitting in with the society at all, thus, resulting in these women trying to control their dietary intake by resorting to dieting even more frequently in order to fit in. Unfortunately, they are unable to attain their goal, thus making it a vicious cycle of trying to achieve something which is often not achievable.

On the other hand, Veronica elaborated how her mother disapproved of her frequent dieting episodes which in turn led her to resent her mother and she rebelled against this by trying to exert some control:

‘My mom will be cooking, “Have that, it’s good for you”...and I am like, “No, I don’t want it!” Or she cooks at night as well which I hate. And I am like, “I am not eating that” and she’s like, “But I cooked it!” and I say, “But I told you not to cook it!”’

The theme of ‘the struggle for control and/or identity’ that emerged from the data highlights an important aspect of many yo-yo dieters that it is not just the weight issue that incites women to go on diets repeatedly; rather other emotions and psychological factors can trigger episodes of dieting. Lawrence (1995) observes that it appears that certain women develop eating disorders in order to gain some control in their lives and that the need for having control of the body appears to be to make up for lack of control in other aspects of their lives. It is quite startling though that this quality of yo-yo dieters should be so strikingly similar to control issues exhibited by those that have been diagnosed with eating disorders particularly anorexia nervosa. Orbach (1993) contends that many women go onto develop eating disorders because that is the only way they can express themselves. It is an ‘unconscious solution’ to all problems (Orbach, 1993: XV) that cannot be consciously expressed. In other words, disordered eating patterns and eating disorders are a smokescreen underneath which lie complex emotional and psychological problems that women are unable to express and articulate thus resulting in them developing these disorders in order to lend voice to their underlying pain and problems (Orbach, 1993). Eichenbaum & Orbach (1986) extrapolate that women with these disorders are attempting to transform the shape of their lives by attempting to transform the shape of their bodies.

Chernin (1985) has asserted that behind the façade of eating disorders is a woman struggling to determine or establish her identity in society. ‘Eating disorders express our uncertainties, our buried anguish, our unconfessed confusion of identity.’ (Chernin, 1985: 36). Contemporary research (e.g. Polivy & Herman, 2002) confirms this statement. From the present study, Sue’s statement reflects this:

‘...I was trying to be something that other people wanted me to be or how I wanted to be seen in other people’s eyes...’

Identity can be defined as a form of social expression that controls the relationship of an individual with his/her social surroundings (Chryssochoou, 2003). To quote Chryssochoou (2003:225) ‘Individuals construct a set of knowledge about the world and themselves: their identity. To protect from, provoke or respond to changes to this knowledge people act in the name of identity.’ Based on the data from this study, confusion of identity may be one of the many reasons for bringing about these behaviors and/or disorders. Though it appears that Chernin’s (1985) statement is echoed to an extent by many women who have disordered eating patterns and eating disorders, it has to be argued based on the findings from this study that it is not always a lack of identity. At times, it is a *perceived* confusion of identity on part of some women that can contribute to the development of disordered eating and eating disorders.

In order to comprehend underlying factors that influence many women to attain a certain body size, feminist theorists provide insight into some of the factors that instigates women to strive for the body figure that is often not achievable. According to Mckinley (2002), associating females with the body while associating men with the mind has resulted in defining women as objects to be appraised and evaluated with regards to how their bodies satisfy cultural expectations. Females learn from an early age that they are assessed and evaluated based on their appearance (Mckinley, 2002). Hence, when it is taken into account that women are defined as objects to be evaluated based on their physical appearance and are expected to possess a body that is often not attainable, the reason for so many women possessing a negative perception of body image is then comprehensible (Mckinley, 2002). As Orbach (2006:17) emphatically averred, 'The message is loud and clear - the woman's body is not her own.'

A noteworthy aspect is that despite the diversity of race and ethnicity of the study participants, they were engaging in a behavior which was previously presumed to be restricted to industrialized societies. Data collected for this study reveal that majority of these women were yo-yo dieting even before they immigrated to the U.K. Hence, the present study reinforces the findings of several previous studies (Becker et al., 2002; Becker et al., 2007; Oyewumi & Kazarian, 1992; Pate et al., 1992) that since the past few decades, the media and other sociocultural influences are so pervasive across different cultures that there is an increase of body dissatisfaction in the world. Nevertheless, it should be noted that it is not being implied that all yo-yo dieters will eventually develop eating disorders. Although most of the yo-yo dieters in the present study reported symptoms that are observed in those diagnosed with eating disorders, all of them are not bound to cross the threshold and develop these disorders. Nonetheless, this is a significant issue that needs to be addressed and investigated more in-depth in order that interdisciplinary healthcare professionals can collaborate to intervene and tackle the major issue of body image dissatisfaction and thus prevent or at least reduce the incidences of eating disorders in the community.

Admittedly some limitations of this study are that due to the small sample of this study, the findings of this study cannot be generalized. Secondly, the target population of this study is not representative of the general population because of their advanced level of education and awareness regarding health and nutrition. Thirdly, this study was cross-sectional and hence limited conclusions can be drawn regarding the long-term effects and impact of yo-yo dieting. Nevertheless, the qualitative findings of this study yielded rich data which contributes to current research. Despite the given limitations, to be noted is that unlike the present study, the vast majority of previous studies made use of quantitative measures which, although facilitated measuring the frequency of weight cycling or assessing depression, did not explore or examine the experiences of yo-yo dieters or factors prompting women to resort to yo-yo dieting. In addition, no recent study has investigated the experiences of yo-yo dieters. Hence, this study may make a unique contribution as it has integrated dietary as well as psychosocial aspects and explored and analyzed them through qualitative methodology.

### ***Implications for Future Research***

Future research needs to be carried out on a larger scale, on a more diverse population and in developing countries as well, to investigate whether women living in such societies experience similar influences for engaging in this behavior as their Western counterparts. In addition, a study comprising of both qualitative and quantitative methods will generate very beneficial information as it can aid in measuring depression, stress and anxiety, thus making it more objective and hence more accurate rather than simply relying on self-reported measures.

## **Conclusion**

It is thus discernible that losing weight is not the sole issue for many females engaging in yo-yo dieting; rather various factors are responsible for instigating them to adopt this behavior. As stated above, for some, it is the social pressure that expects women to be a particular size/figure, for some, it is the need for control and/or as an expression of establishing their identity, while for some it is just the complicated messages propagated by the media that make them self-conscious of their body size and figure. Although it cannot be generalized, yet in certain cases it appears that disordered eating behaviors including yo-yo dieting can be classified as a syndrome that is a manifestation of inner turmoil and/or confusion of identity experienced by some women. Hence, Orbach's eloquent argument two decades ago still rings true today and sums up the essence of this research perfectly:

‘As long as aesthetic standards are preposterous and capricious as those with which we continue to apply, and as long as such aesthetics are manipulated in the pursuit of profit on the one hand and control on the other, women will have the most enormous difficulty in finding a lasting personal solution to body-image problems. As long as bodies are by proxy the standard for women's self-evaluation and the evaluation of others, women will have difficulty with their food and with their body-image. As we extend the scope of women's lives and avenues of self-expression and transform the social arrangements that have produced our current circumstances, we can anticipate a change in the way that daughters are raised and valued in our society.’

(Orbach, 1993:174)

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## APPENDIX 1

### Topic Guide

#### **SCREENING QUESTIONS**

1. What you think yo-yo dieting is?
2. How often do you go on diets?

#### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

Demographic information:

1. Name
2. Age
3. Occupation
4. Ethnicity
5. Location
6. Marital Status
7. Children/dependents?
8. Study Major?
9. Duration of stay in U.K?

1. How long have you been yo-yo dieting for?
2. Can you tell me about your last experience with dieting? What sort of a diet was it?
3. How long was this diet for?
4. How did the diet come to an end?
5. Why did you start the diet? What were you trying to achieve with it?
6. What were the benefits of the diet (if any)?
7. What did you not like about your diet (if anything)?
8. Did you talk to others about your diet?
9. Was it difficult to stick with your diet? How was it difficult?
10. How did you overcome moments of weakness?
11. Did you feel those diets were successful? If so, in what way?
12. What other diets have you been on?
13. Can you tell me how you feel about going on and off diets repeatedly?
14. Do you worry about this phenomenon about going on and off diets repeatedly?
15. What kind of impact do you think yo-yo dieting has had on you?
16. Are you in a relationship?
17. Does the subject of dieting ever come up when you are talking to your partner/boyfriend/ family/friends?
18. How do they feel about you going on a diet?
19. How do they respond or react to you going on a diet?
20. How do they react/ respond when you lose weight on a diet?
21. How do they react/ respond after you regain the weight that you had lost?
22. Do you have any pressure from your family/ friends/ partner/ boyfriend for going on a diet? If so, can you describe the kind of pressure you face?
23. What factors influence you to go on diets repeatedly?

24. Why do you come off diets that you go on?
25. Where do you get your information from to try different diets?
26. How do you feel on completion of a diet? (if response negative), then what makes you carry on dieting?
27. Have you been successful in keeping off the weight that you lose when you diet?
28. Do you perceive yourself as overweight?
29. What factors would stop you from going on and off a diet?