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## Abstract

**Objective:** to explore the relationship between eating patterns and body image perception in two different cultural adolescent groups, one from Colombia and the other one from Dutch. **Methods:** this is a qualitative study, participants were teenager women recruited, eight from Medellín nine from Amsterdam; the data was collected in both groups, a survey was applied first to focal groups and then to individuals willing to talk about their eating patterns and other practices related to their body image perception. **Results:** Netherlands and Colombia could be considered Western countries but there are some differences, in the way that adolescent girls perceive the body image and how they have to deal with the social pressure on them to get the ideal body. The body ideal image promoted by publicity media in both countries is almost the same; but in Colombia, adolescents use their bodies as a manner to get power and control and their families and peers put more pressure on them than in the Netherlands. **Conclusions:** teenagers perceive the ideal body as a symbol to have power and control and to get identity. Studying the same issue in two different cultures, allow to social health programs get the real idea about adolescent behaviors in order to make changes accord to the cultural settings.

**Key words:** body image, food habits, cross-cultural comparison, mass media, power (psychology), interpersonal relations, adolescent.

# Imagen corporal: diferencias y similitudes entre adolescentes colombianas y holandesas

## Resumen

**Objetivo:** se recolectó información en dos grupos de mujeres adolescentes los cuales se compararon con el objetivo de explorar la relación existente entre las prácticas alimentarias y la imagen corporal en dos escenarios culturales diferentes.

**Métodos:** las investigaciones se realizaron con ocho mujeres adolescentes de Medellín y nueve de Ámsterdam que estuvieran dispuestas a hablar de sus patrones alimentarios y otras prácticas relacionadas con el cuerpo, primero en grupos focales y luego en entrevistas individuales. Los datos se recogieron utilizando un enfoque cualitativo y etnográfico en las entrevistas y observación participante. **Discusión:** aunque tanto Colombia como Holanda son considerados países occidentales, hay diferencias en la forma en que las adolescentes perciben sus cuerpos y cómo enfrentan la presión social por adquirir un ideal estético. Aunque el ideal corporal promovido por los medios de comunicación es muy similar en ambos países, en Colombia, más que en Holanda el cuerpo representa para las adolescentes un medio para conseguir poder y control en la sociedad. Las familias y pares de las adolescentes colombianas ejercen una mayor presión para alcanzar el ideal estético que en Holanda. **Conclusiones:** en la adolescencia el cuerpo es el vehículo por medio del cual se construye una identidad; además simboliza poder y control. El estudio de un mismo fenómeno en escenarios culturales diferentes permite que se aborde una misma problemática desde diversas perspectivas. Es justamente la diferencia entre culturas, la que permite obtener una mayor comprensión del por qué los adolescentes de determinada población se comportan de cierta manera. Lo anterior puede derivar en acciones en salud, que a veces fallan porque se hacen generalizaciones y se crean estereotipos que no son adecuados en todos los escenarios culturales.

**Palabras clave:** imagen corporal, conducta alimentaria, comparación transcultural, medios de comunicación, poder (psicología), relaciones interpersonales, adolescentes

## INTRODUCTION

During the transition from childhood to adulthood (adolescence) the body of an adolescent is, as Foucault points out, a field of power and resistance. Puberty implies the assumption of a changing body, not only because of physiological changes that follow puberty, but also because of the cultural issues that converge in the adolescent's body. As Van Dongen points out, in Western society "The body is a central focus in the adolescent-culture. It is the main vehicle for identity" (1). Therefore, eating practices are closely related to the image of the body because the shape of the body depends

to a great extent on the quality and quantity of food that is ingested.

In reviewing English literature about perceptions and eating patterns among young girls in the Netherlands, some quantitative data that shows that as in the rest of Western society, the issue of the body is an area full of contradictions and conflicts.

In 1997, McElhone et al. (2) did a study on body image in the European Union. The figures in the Netherlands are very similar to the ones presented in the fifteen countries in the European Union. The study showed that 44% of the people wanted to be lighter, 10% considerably lighter, 39% were

satisfied with their weight and 7% wanted to be heavier.

Another study conducted by Jansen et al. (3) in the Netherlands, was related to the perception of the parts of the body that are more problematic for women. The data showed a decreased focus on their own 'beautiful' body parts (the ones they considered beautiful) in highly eating symptomatic participants. In contrast, they presented an increasing focus on what they considered their 'ugly' parts. In the normal control group, the opposite occurred, these participants focused more on their 'beautiful' body parts rather than on their 'ugly' body parts. When viewing other bodies, high eating symptom participants allocated their attention to the beautiful parts of other bodies, whereas normal controls concentrated on the ugly parts of the other bodies.

In Medellín, Ramirez et al. (4) carried out a study in a representative sample of 475 female students enrolled from sixth to eleventh grade in the city. They found a probability of 33% having an eating disorder, a total prevalence of 17,7%, the prevalence of anorexia was 0,8%, the prevalence of bulimia was 2,3% and the prevalence of partial eating disorders was 14,6%. This study led to a great preventive program to reduce the prevalence of anorexia and bulimia in Medellín.

Uribe (5) conducted another study among adolescent girls in Medellín and found out that the social pressure to have an ideal body increased the cases of anorexia and bulimia and discussed how this pressure is related to social and economic factors.

Cortes et al. (6) carried out a descriptive study in 196 first and second year female college students in four programs in one college in Medellín. They found out that the mass media was a great influence in many of the healthy cases as well as in more than 50% of the anorexics. Academic distress was associated with bulimia in 75% of the cases and

more than half of those interviewed had felt family pressure to lose weight.

In Medellín, López et al. (7) conducted a multidisciplinary study and they found out that weight dissatisfaction was more predominant in girls (43,9%) than in boys (17,8%). They also found, that 60% of the girls had guilty feelings when they exceeded their food consumption and 38% of them expressed they felt guilty because eating more than needed increases weight.

These last studies show that being thin is the body ideal for female adolescents in Medellín, as in Amsterdam, but the way adolescent girls deal with this pressure and handle their bodies varies. To understand the latter, it is important to study the lived experience of teenagers and their feelings about their eating patterns, because, even though many studies report a 'dieting epidemic' among adolescent females, research has barely "...given voice to those afflicted. Specifically, the meaning of weight control to adolescent females has not been explored from the perspective of their lived experience" (8).

In the two studies compared in this article the ethnographic perspective was used because it allows the teenagers to express the reasons they feel that they have to eat or not in a certain way and how is it related to the perception of their bodies.

In 2000, one of the studies was conducted in Medellín, Colombia about the body perception and eating patterns in female adolescents (9). The findings showed the way teenagers perceive their bodies and give meaning to the messages they receive from parents, peers, and media. However, mass media promotes very similar ideals almost everywhere in the Western world and it therefore it made interesting to know the way adolescents understand these messages, and the way mass media influences young people, may differ in various cultural settings. In Colombia we are frequently told that one of the

reasons why our teenagers want to be extremely skinny is because they want to fit into American and European beauty patterns. The latter motivated to know how European girls perceive their bodies and how they deal with the ideal body image in the West and it led me to a second study, where I collected data regarding the perception of the body and eating patterns among Dutch teenagers. The objective of this study was to contrast Dutch findings related to food, eating and the body against the background of the findings of my previous research among girls in Colombia because I wanted to highlight the cultural aspect of eating and the body. The comparison of these two cultural settings showed that the image of the body and eating patterns are closely related and are shaped by culture. In the analysis of this data the main topics are eating patterns, how the body is perceived among teenagers, and how social relationships shape the image of the body. The greatest influence was ascribed to peers, parents, and mass media. The comparison of both studies led to interesting conclusions. Although the Netherlands and Colombia are Western countries there are differences in the way teenagers eat, the perception about their bodies, and the way they handle their bodies.

The bibliography used to analyze the data was taken from the perspective of medical anthropology because this point of view allows studying "the interaction among the mind/body and the individual, social and body politic in the production and expression of health and illness" (10). Therefore, the way teenagers perceive the body and eating habits surpasses the biological and individual reasons, but even though these concepts are important and have to be taken into account, the medical anthropology perspective permits us to analyze these concepts, broaden and relate them to social and cultural perspectives.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The two studies conducted were qualitative studies. While there exists a great deal of research about the topic of eating patterns and perceptions of the body, I did not find a qualitative study that focuses on how adolescents in Colombia and the Netherlands experienced and perceived eating and body images. The data was collected by using the methodology of ethnographic interviewing and participant observation.

### **Sample**

Participants were Dutch and Colombian adolescent females, between the ages of 13 and 16 that resided in or around Amsterdam-Netherlands and in Medellín-Colombia, respectively. Both populations were upper-middle class.

Colombian teenagers were approached in one school in Medellín, and eight of them were interested in participating in the study. Four focus group discussions and ten girls were interviewed during the lunch break. In the Netherlands, adolescents were contacted first by getting in touch with the director of one Lyceum in Amsterdam who put in me contact with two teachers in charge of the english courses. The entire group participated in three focus group discussion and nine girls participated in the interviews. Both data collection techniques were done during the course hours.

### **Ethical considerations**

The participants were interviewed without any obligations and with respect. All data collected was treated as confidential. Pseudonyms were used, instead of the real name of the participants. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants who were informed about the objectives of the research and they agreed to be included in the study.

## RESULTS

**Difference in the perception of eating patterns among Dutch and Colombian girls:** eating patterns is an issue that is connected with many other topics such as, food as part of identity, food as a vehicle of health, food that reflects status, food related to the shape of the body, etc. (11).

In the Netherlands, Dutch girls who participated in the study claimed that being thin is the ideal and that, depending on how you eat you will be thin or not.

Js: girls want to be skinny, nobody wants to be fat for sure.

They are aware which foods are 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' and which ones are considered to cause weight increase. However, the act of dieting is not well established and clear. Many girls admit that they reduce or control the amount of food they eat but they do not call it dieting.

G: I know someone that doesn't eat dinner and breakfast. She skips. (Dutch girl)

P: I tried to eat healthy and not with too much sugar, but that is it. (Dutch girl)

It seems teenagers associated dieting with very little or no food intake, illness or anorexia and bulimia, or with something that is 'not good' because teenagers are growing:

J: If I spend like a day eating unhealthy food I eat less the rest of the day because I don't want to gain weight, but is not like I am throwing up is just that if eat a lot the next meal will be smaller. (Dutch girl)

G: (Girl) I know a girl that stopped eating and she were too ill to study, she is still too ill. (Dutch girl)

The perceptions of healthy eating patterns include a particular way of eating that suggests that were some norms for the teenagers. When asked if they

dieted or knew someone that dieted they brought up the topic of anorexia and bulimia. There seemed to be a strong association with dieting and eating disorders, perhaps because mass media and medical institutions send messages about the danger of diets that goes out of control (12):

J: Of course, there are girls that do extreme girls like anorexia or bulimia but that is not common. (Dutch girl)

G: We know about anorexia because the Magazines. (Dutch girl)

Girls explained the causes of eating disorders:

G: it happens more in girls than in boys because the model and movie stars... (Dutch girl)

G: Girls are anorexic because they want to be thin and beautiful. (Dutch girl)

It can be argued that health is something "that oscillates precariously between bodily control and corporeal 'transgression'" (13). On the one hand, being fat is unhealthy:

M: "People don't like being fat because it is unhealthy". (Dutch girl)

According to girls, dieting is also potentially bad for health and is associated with illness. Being healthy is something that parents want their children to be (14, 15) and in that sense, for a child, eating well means that they are being a good girl or a boy and it has a moral significance. However, a supervised diet by a nutritionist is not something common among teenagers, they say:

J: I think when you get in a very unhealthy state like when your weight is really endangered your life like for your heart or something then you go to a nutritionist, but for example when you walk in the band thing it shows you how many calories you burn.

According to the girls, the word 'diet' is associated with negative behavior by Dutch teenagers, mostly

the girls. Being healthy is eating well and it will lead to an attractive / healthy body shape. Being fat or too thin is unhealthy and is seen as undesirable. In the results among Colombian teenagers, there is a very different view of dieting. In contrast to the Dutch teenagers, the Colombian girls in the previous study referred to dieting a great deal and they accepted that they were dieting all the time. They even explained in detail how they diet:

A: Thin girls of the classroom go to the gym and diet. They don't eat sweets or fat or starch. Some of them diet without professional guidance. They drink a lot of water. They eat dietetic things (Colombian girl)

The reasons they gave for dieting, were related to social acceptance, to gender relations and increasing sexual awareness (16):

J: We diet although we are in age of growth, because one feels better. Being the stage of the growth also it is the stage in which we are more sociable, is the stage of the boyfriends... (Colombian girl)

E: If this was a society of fat people I would eat normal, but it is a society of skinny people, then I must eat less. (Colombian girl)

Among Colombian teenagers, following a supervised diet is not something out of the ordinary. Moreover, it is done habitually and considered healthy.

J: I diet and exercise. I have a supervised diet by a nutritionist. (Colombian girl)

F: A friend of my mother that is nutritionist was going to put me on a diet to me, but she has not called, I think I will follow the diet she sends me or I will continue with the one I am doing now. (Colombian girl)

It seems that for the adolescent girls in Colombia being healthy involves dieting, as long as the diet is supervised by a professional. This makes eating a much medicalized issue (17) in Colombian culture.

Unlike Dutch girls, Colombian teenagers do not see dieting as something bad or associated with bad health. It is accepted as something necessary since it enables a girl to have a thin body. Being fat is seen as something ugly and as an obstacle to having a relationship with a male. Accordingly, girls seem to learn quite early that their bodies are objects to be remade in a way that will attract males, relationships, and status.

**Body dissatisfaction:** in the study, this category strongly related to what girls think is the ideal girl (mostly in body shape and appearance) for boys, mass media and other peers.

The girls in Colombia and in the Netherlands agree that they are concerned about their bodies. The main reason given is that in adolescence it is very important to be beautiful because it brings acceptance (18):

Js: I think at this age we are really insecure and I think a lot of children want to be skinny because everybody that is skinny is thought to be beautiful. (Dutch girl)

J: It is important to lose weight so you can have a beautiful body, because on this age it is very important what other people say about you. (Colombian girl)

In puberty, it is very important the way teenagers feel they are perceived by others because, "To most adolescents, an important boundary (or symbolic skin) of their sense of self is that of their peer group, and thus exclusion of it can be very traumatic for them" (19). Being beautiful and popular is seen as a way to acquire acceptance.

Another aspect, related to the satisfaction with the body concerns what boys think and what they consider a beautiful girl to be. Nevertheless, it seems that Dutch girls are more influenced by the mass media than by peers:

T: I don't think is probably not because what boys think of them because we personally have a hard

time to getting that kind of appreciation from guys  
(Dutch girl)

The points of reference for the girls are pop stars rather than models. Pop stars are shown in video clips:

J: I don't know why (the fashion is having big boobs) ...you can see the silicones coz they are round nobody has boobs like that and they just you know like the guys see eminem like idols so they see the videos and they say that is the perfect girl for me. (Dutch girl)

Among Colombian girls, the desire of becoming a model was not explicit, although the most of girls tried to look like models. They were frustrated, because the kind of model that is broadcast in Colombia is blonde, tall, with light eyes, not the 'real' prototype of the Colombian woman. As a result of their ancestral origin, Colombian women are dark haired, brown eyed, and are shorter than European women are. It is important to note that the modeling industry in Medellín is strong because most of the fabrics for clothing designers are produced in the country. Therefore, the fashion industry is very important there. The models in Medellín are a strong point of reference for the girls who want to look like them and dress like them (4):

J: The fashion is made for thin girls. (Colombian girl)

In contrast to the girls in Amsterdam, girls in Medellín admitted to be very concerned about what boys think about them:

F: I think is the fashion and the culture men have nowadays, they like only the women with good body, nice boobs and bottoms. (Colombian girl)

Not only do boys of the same age-group generally prefer thin girls, Colombian girls say their brothers also opine about the shape of their sister's bodies.

J: My brother is always making me feel inferior saying to me that I am fat. (Colombian girl)

It seems Dutch girls are less worried about their bodies and the way they look in comparison with Colombian girls:

T: Most of the girls that I know are satisfied with their bodies but I think there are very few people who aren't. (Dutch girl)

In contrast, Colombian teenagers are more concerned about parts of the body that they want to change. Most of them want to have bigger breasts, a thin abdomen, big and firm buttocks and legs. Consequently, these girls use methods that are not always healthy or exercise to get the body they want to have:

J: There are girls who buy reducing creams, tablets, laxatives, injections. (Colombian girl)

J: I want to have a beautiful body and therefore I go to the gym three times per week and I do aerobics, I work out a bit too. (Colombian girl)

Colombian society is very patriarchal and men frequently objectify women. As Arboleda et al. point out: "Even today when we speak of gender equality, there are still barriers to dialogue at the same level that affect women and men". In Medellín "there are still segregating behaviors that put women in a position of disadvantage of having the same opportunities as men" (20).

In the Netherlands, women have more equality of rights and are treated more equally. That might explain why the concern about the body prevails in both cultures but with different manifestations. In the Netherlands girls want to be admired, important and beautiful and this can be achieved for example, by becoming a model. This is a profession in which women may have status and even power. In Colombia, girls want to have a boyfriend and to feel admired and desired by men. This can be reached by looking

like a model. As Seppä points out “In a patriarchal culture, women learn to look at themselves through the heterosexual male perspective” (21) and that is the case in Colombia.

Girls in the Netherlands recognize that in some cultures women are looked at as somehow being “less” important. A Dutch girl tells why she thinks in other cultures men objectify women:

S: only the pretty girls are selected by the boys... like in MTV a little bit? (asking if it is like that in Colombia) The girlfriend has to be very pretty high and nice legs, pretty face, nice smile so they have something to be proud of, and that also shows you might be in mafia, very ugly old guy with a very pretty young woman... (Dutch girl)

Another important issue that may shed light into why girls give importance to boys is individualism. In Colombia, the family and social bonds are very close, and girls learn to play the role ascribed to them as females and to respond to expectations of them in this regard. A Colombian teenager expressed this issue the following way:

H: There are groups where you can see all the girls are very pretty: I don't know what would happen if an ugly girl tried to be friend of them. I think they would reject her.

In the Netherlands, young people are apparently raised to be more individualistic. However, the preoccupation with the body is present in both cultural settings but is expressed in different ways. Whether the reference point is to the peers, pop stars or models, the concern about the body is present. Media models and celebrities as well as the proximal appearance culture of same-sex peers at school are both relevant sources for judging the self and gathering information especially about physical attractiveness attributes (22).

In Colombia, girls want to fit into the ideal of feeling valued mostly by the boys but also want to be ac-

cepted by other girls. In the Netherlands, it seems that being accepted is also important. However, the main concern is about being important and finding an identity.

**Body ideal:** after looking in depth at the reasons that girls give for having a preoccupation with their bodies, it is necessary to consider the ideal body type in both cultures. For Dutch girls, being thin is important and being fat is something that is not wanted:

Js: Nobody wants to be fat because we are so used to see the magazines...how skinny they are, you are used to that.

Nevertheless, it seems that being extremely thin is not desired. As one girl says:

Js: I don't think is beautiful to be so skinny because I see a lot of models when I read the magazines and you see the bones and I don't think is beautiful I mean it is not really healthy and I know from a lot of boys that they don't really care if you have a little bit of fat or not and I mean a lot of boys do think is beautiful when a girl has feminine shape and you don't have a feminine shape if you don't eat . (Dutch girl)

What is clear is that Dutch girls do not consider the idea of plastic surgery as much as Colombian girls do:

J: there are also little things that we would want to have different, I don't think we are so extreme like thinking about going to a surgery, that would not be our choice but we do complain, like that you have parts that you are not very comfortable with. (Dutch girl)

In contrast, a Colombian girl says:

F: I would have liposuction, I would make a plastic surgery on my nose... maybe the nose I won't do it but liposuction I think I will.

This ideal body in the Netherlands is almost the same as the one for Colombian girls. It is one presented



by pop stars or women that appear in the video clips of male singers. The difference is that Colombian girls want to be taller, have blonde hair, and they actually do things to change their bodies to conform to this ideal:

E: Some friends of mine spend two or three hours in the gym, I don't know how they have time to do other things (Colombian girl)

In Colombia, regarding exercising, girls go to the gym rather than participate in sports. This might be due to security issues and the notion of the gym as a safe place for females. The gym is a social venue where you can meet people, socialize, and be seen by men. In addition, going to the gym is viewed as a more feminine activity than participating in sports. Usually sports are more accepted when girls are younger and they are “playing” with friends. What is clear is that most Colombian girls go to the gym to obtain a ‘good’ body. In the Netherlands, it is more common to participate in sports. Playing sports is viewed as healthy, social, and good for young people. On the other hand, it is not common for Dutch girls to go to the gym because they have to get permission from their parents, it is expensive, and is considered something that is done by older people:

M: I think that is because girls have to ask permission to the parents to go to the gym and you have to pay for it and I think is more the paying stuff. (Dutch girl)

G: (girls) is not common, going to the gym when people is older... is expensive. (Dutch girl)

In contrast, in Medellín many girls go to the gym:

D: I exercise twice per week, maximum during four hours. It relaxes me. I do aerobics and I work out but directed by a professional trainer. (Colombian girl)

Exercising is therefore a means to get an ideal body for girls in Medellín, while in Amsterdam, exercising is more a part of daily life and is done regularly by teenagers.

**Boys according to girls:** in the interviews with the girls, there was great deal of talk about what men think and how men supposedly behave. There are many assumptions, but the girls in the study brought examples that portray the behavior of men.

The first issue concerns how girls are treated by boys on the street. The Netherlands is well known as a country where girls are safe on the street and they do not feel very harassed by men. It is clear that in Amsterdam, girls do not find it pleasant if males do approach or harass them and they contrast this with experiences from other countries:

T: In Rome when we go in fifth year a group of girls is not allowed to go out on the streets alone because they have to be at least with one guy from our school, because all the people all the guys on the street in Rome. I think is the culture.

In Colombia, receiving “piropos” (men commenting on women on the street) is something very common and sometimes accepted. Girls did not raise this topic much because it is apparently not problematic for them. Moreover, receiving “piropos” is expected and can be a way of feeling beautiful and secure.

F: I would like to lose weight so the people would tell me how beautiful I am and boys would look at me (Colombian girl)

The latter highlights a phenomenon that is explained differently in Latino and Dutch cultures. In Latin America, receiving comments on the street is not a big issue, it is a compliment and girls do not consider themselves as a “piece of meat” just because of these comments. In Colombia, girls were raised with the idea that this is something normal. The cultural notions of masculinity and femininity are so ingrained that people consider it as socially accepted. It reinforces the gender identity of men and women as well.

In Amsterdam as in Medellín, it is not so important what boys look like, because women are the ones that are culturally supposed to be beautiful:

J: I think if a boy is not shy if he shows character then there's no problem, because I know a lot of fat guys that are very popular also among the girls I don't know why. Just for showing character but if you are shy, but if a girls is fat then she is locked up. (Dutch girl)

A girl from Medellín says:

F: My brothers say that I am very fat but they don't seem to see the belly they have, I tell them: 'look at yourselves' but they say that it is different because they are men (Colombian girl)

In the Netherlands, as in the rest of the Western world, girls are more concerned about their bodies than boys are. As Jones notes, girls are more concerned about the way they look and hence "the girls compared to the boys were more highly engaged in social comparisons" (22). That might explain why girls were more willing to talk about how they perceive their bodies than boys. The latter imply that they just "don't care" about it.

J: Girls are more intimate with each other, they know each other boundaries and we know we can be opened and say you know coz girls they gossip but they are very aware that we are girls we can just say... and guys are very insecure I am not saying all of them but most of the relationships among them are very superficial like they go to the movies or so but I don't think they get to know each other and that is why they are scared of showing more feminine. (Dutch girl)

Therefore, according to girls, boys are concerned about their bodies but not as much as girls are because culturally their looks are not supposed to be as important in order to be successful or admired.

In Medellín, Lopez and Velez show how, the gender expectations involve being "cute as a doll" for women and "strong as a champion" for men. They say: masculinity is characterized by the effort of surpassing the limits of one's own body; being sweaty, messy

and wasting energy are valued in a positive way but refusing to do so is seen negatively (23).

For women, the gender norm is being a "cute doll": the doll is a cultural product that is commonly associated with emptiness, without a heart and brain, that cannot feel, think or exercise its will. Being pretty, a natural attribute of the doll, is converted into a cultural requirement for a woman's being, giving her an identity that negates her ability to be herself and legitimates the elements of femininity that put her in the position of a satellite of desire and demand around another heart (23).

That might explain why in Colombia, men are allowed to be just "as they are" and they gain status and value from other things. Girls on the other hand have to be beautiful to be valued by men. It is also clear that men cannot express concern about their image or indulge in caring for themselves because that is not what a champion is supposed to do.

**Daughters and parents:** in the stories of Dutch and Colombian girls, they frequently referred to their parents as models of their identities. There was however, a big difference in the way parents referred to their daughters' bodies. In the Netherlands, girls perceive their parents as the ones who care for the adequate nutrition of their daughters (24):

J: My mom makes me eat vegetables everyday and like today I told her that today we are going to the pizzeria with the whole class and she said get a salad don't just eat the pizza, and my mother is very healthy. (Dutch girl)

Mothers do not tell to girls that they should lose weight or be thinner, and if needed, they do it in a subtle and polite way:

J: If the parents see their daughter need to lose weight they do it in a very neutral way like, they give you a diet bar, they wouldn't say to your face you are fat they help you in an ok way not in a rude way like "come on you are fat you should

lose weight” maybe more like “you should go to the gym. (Dutch girl)

In Medellín, girls perceive mothers as a great influence on how girls are supposed to eat (7):

I: My mother is thin and she has phobia towards fatness. (Colombian girl)

G: My mother says I am fat and I have to lose weight. (Colombian girl)

Dutch teenagers found it very strange when being asked about if their parents suggested to them that they diet or should have a certain type of body. The general opinion is that parents want their daughters to be healthy more than they want them to be good looking:

M: I think the parents just want the child to be healthy, they don't like very skinny and big breasts kind of girl, they just want to be healthy and they don't care if they have a little bit of fat, I think is just that they can see that they are eating enough and they prefer them a bit thicker than thinner. (Dutch girl)

As it was pointed out before, in a patriarchal society like Colombia, the importance given to the looks of girls is something very common. Mothers, who want their girls to achieve the ideal image of beauty, enforce the cultural acceptance of the need to have a particular kind of body. Fathers are not involved in the way their daughters eat or wanting them to have certain kind of body:

F: My father doesn't tell me anything about my weight or the way I eat. (Colombian girl)

E: My father is not involved in the way I eat. (Colombian girl)

In Amsterdam, fathers are involved in the way teenagers eat and they want their daughters to be healthy and to eat well. Most of the time, girls do not talk about their mothers and fathers but they talk about their parents, which indicates that the father is also involved in the way the daughters eat.

M: My parents bake and cook. I eat breakfast and dinner with them cereals in the morning, healthy, and in dinner vegetables and something else. My parents do look what they eat, I mean we eat together, some parents don't do that, after eating my mother brings some cookies or something like that. I am free for example when I am at school and I don't have more food they say yes you can buy it, but not like buying all the time snacks. (Dutch girl)

In Colombia, all activities related to food are considered an issue for women, and fathers are generally not involved in the way girls eat. That might also explain why fathers do not deal with the eating patterns of their daughters. However, the mother is not the only person involved in the way that girls eat; a girl's extended family is also involved:

J: The family of my father, they say that I should diet because I am fat, but afterwards they say you are not fat. (Colombian girl)

In the Netherlands however, there is more individualism, and the extended family does not seem to play such an important role for girls as it does in Colombia. That might be the explanation for why Dutch girls did not bring up the topic of the extended family.

## DISCUSSION

Body and food are topics that raise interest in the Western world, especially in relation to adolescents. A cultural perspective is fundamental to understand the teenagers' behavior because there is no concrete body that is decorated by culture. The body itself is a cultural creation (25). In Colombia, it is normal to see girls going to the gym and thinking about plastic surgery to increase the size of their breasts, for Dutch teenagers the same concept is abnormal. Similarly, what is considered as a meal, or not, is culturally influenced. For example, Dutch teenagers may see some foods as lunch, while Colombian teenagers may consider the same foods to be just a snack.

In this study, it appears that beauty models in the Netherlands as in Colombia are almost the same. Why then, if the beauty models are the same in both countries, is the reaction of the girls in the two countries so different. Some findings enlightened and allowed to find answers to this question and will be discussed next.

Colombia is a patriarchal society where women are raised to answer to male notions of beauty and femininity. Women are defined through their attractiveness to men and the latter often pay their girlfriends to have plastic surgery.

Women are objects, “dolls” that are produced to fit the imagination of men (23). This ideal is reproduced in daughters by mothers who wish the former to attain the necessary bodily attractiveness and thus to attract males. Women apparently have little power over their bodies – patriarchal and masculine expectations dictate how they see their bodies. As a result, they view them as somehow not normal and medical professionals assist them to achieve an ideal. However, viewing women as the victims of men is also not sufficient as Seppä says: It does not make much sense to regard men merely as the enemy or the oppressor, because power is not simply possessed by men. In other words, power is not something that people have, but it is rather a non centralized struggle of forces, which constitutes a dynamic network into which power comes from everywhere, including from below (21).

In the Netherlands, women are more equal to men, and they do not feel the same strong need to adhere to the kind of body men wish for.

This leads us to think about the health programs that are related to mental health in the adolescent population. It must be considered that girls do not only want to be beautiful in order to fit in a prototype. Fitting into the beauty ideal is a way to have power, control and a place in society.

Another subject that is important to consider is the role parents play in the socialization of teenagers. In the Netherlands parents are role models for their children and care-takers of the health of their daughters and sons. In Colombia, girls perceive their mothers as pushing them to have an ideal body. Unlike Dutch fathers, in Colombia, fathers were not involved in how their daughters eat. In Colombia, the body is an issue for women, dieting is feminine, and eating problems are most of the time related to women. As Bourdieu (26) points out, women react to masculine and patriarchal domination by fitting into the stereotype of what is considered a ‘beautiful woman’. Cultural notions and practices are so ingrained that people do not even see how distorted it is anymore and accept it as normal. That might be the reason why in Colombia, medical and psychological specialists search for reasons for eating disorders within the mass media or medicalize eating and the body.

It is important to know the perspective of the parents towards the beauty ideal and how do they think their daughters should behave accordingly. It is in the family where adolescents learn to have mechanisms to cope with social pressure. In Medellín, girls express that families give a lot of importance to body image; and in higher class mothers are referred as the ones that give more importance to this issue (7). If teenagers are being told by their own parents that they are not “pretty enough” this might cause them problems about feeling accepted. Therefore, instead of feeling strong enough to face the social pressure it can occur that girls try to get the body ideal that provides them power, control and acceptance.

Food and eating are very symbolic and are also used by Colombian teenagers to culturally express their dissatisfaction with the patriarchal society they live in. It does not simply mean that women are the oppressed and men are the oppressors. As Seppä points out: Foucault’s genealogical scheme also implies that feminist analysis of power should

not be based on the traditional model according to which men are simply oppressors and women are mere victims of patriarchal power. For if it is true that power comes from everywhere, and if resistance is always found where there is power, women also produce and use power, despite the fact that they are in many ways also oppressed by the political structures, habits and value beliefs of the patriarchy (21).

In Colombia it can be said that teenagers use their bodies as a locus of resistance. They complain, The society wants us to be like the models accordingly, they are not responsible for their actions when they diet excessively, yet they know it will worry their families if they become too thin. That can be the reason why sometimes treatments fail, because they do not consider these aspects of power and control. It is important to listen carefully to the teenagers because the way they deal with their bodies might symbolize a way to cope with the social pressure they live in. This may be one reason why they do not want to change their eating behavior or their obsession to have an ideal body.

Objectification of female bodies is not so emphasized in the Netherlands. Girls do not like to be harassed by boys and boys think that it is not good either. Men do not tell girls what they should ideally look like. Girls feel more ownership of their bodies than in Colombia. I think that is reflected in the way Dutch girls manage their bodies. Dutch girls did not want to have an ideal body to attract men. As explained before, the idea of having a perfect body in Colombian society is not just

a way to fit in the ideal promoted by mass media. It implies being accepted and recognized; and it gives adolescents the possibility to improve their personal relationships.

## CONCLUSION

Comparing two cultural settings allowed studying the same phenomenon from different perspectives. It was precisely that difference that permitted one to get a better understanding of why teenagers behave in certain way. In Colombia, the actions impacting teenagers' health in regards to body image must include several entities in order to impact in the problems adolescent girls have in accepting their bodies. It is responsibility not only of the teenagers, but also of the parents, health professionals and society in general because body image is a social construction. This construction permeates easily in teenagers' life since they are searching for an identity. The body, then, becomes a means to be "someone".

This study was important because it confirms that actions in health's programs sometimes fail because they have stereotypical and generalized assumptions that might not serve in all cultural settings. New studies that consider the perspective of eating patterns and body image among teenagers might be useful to clarify and deepen the role played by culture and social issues in the construction of body image. These studies may also find the way to help the teenagers to accept themselves as they are, even if the culture they live in is demanding them to achieve a beauty ideal.

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