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Colleen Culley

Xavier University - Cincinnati, culleyc@xavier.edu

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Body Perception in First-Year College Females:

The role of the thin ideal and the arenas from which females learn to perceive their bodies

Colleen Culley

Xavier University's Gender and Diversity Studies Department

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Introduction

Body image has been defined by Janelli (1986) as “the picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say the way in which the body appears to ourselves” (p. 24).

According to Lin, McCormack, Kruczkowski, & Berg (2015), college women are at particular risk of experiencing negative body image, namely by exhibiting poor eating behaviors and general body dissatisfaction. They reported the significance of female peer weight preferences, reporting that women who use such as a comparison standard are more likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies (p. 123). Despite a great deal of research on body image, their 2015 study proposed the need for additional research on how weight norms get communicated, which this study is meant to address.

Duarte and Pinto-Gouveia (2017) comment on the connection between body image and disordered eating, claiming that body image is “a shame-eliciting dimension” that is related to symptoms of binge-eating (p. 348). Participants included college students, as this study will, though also expanded to the general community. Studying both genders, Duarte and Pinto-Gouveia (2017) found women to have significantly higher levels of both body image troubles and disordered eating behaviors. Consistent with the need to focus on females, this research will limit its scope to women only to allow for a deeper analysis of one gender. Previous research cited by Duarte and Pinto-Gouveia note interpersonal stressors and familial experiences as having a significant impact on binge symptoms, both of which are explored during the interview process of this study. Damani, Button and Reveley (2001) investigate a similar topic, noting that a high prevalence of body dissatisfaction is consistent with sociocultural explanations of eating disorders (p. 168). Whereas Duarte and Pinto-Gouveia analyze both genders but narrow their focus to binge eating behaviors only, Damani, Button and Reveley focus on women only

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and expand their understanding of disordered eating behaviors beyond that of bingeing. Their research demonstrates the thin ideal as being important to the development of female identity (177). This research should further knowledge of the thin ideal.

Alternatively, Aubrey (2006) looks to media and the sexually objectifying images it may produce to describe body shame. She notes that “exposure to both magazines and entertainment television is correlated with body perception and affect” (p. 160). With the prevalence of mediums of social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snap Chat, this research will expand upon what Aubrey discovered, and explore the connection between body image and these newer forms of potentially objectifying media.

This study was initially designed to discover from what arenas females learn to perceive their bodies in the way they do, the effects of living in a dorm where one is surrounded by other female bodies, and the implications of the thin ideal that persists in today's society. As a Gender and Diversity Studies capstone requirement of Xavier University, it explores the vulnerable population of women, with special attention to students in their first year of college. There was hope that it could contribute to the knowledge on college-aged females' body image and where it may develop from, with results potentially allowing for greater prevention against eating disorders among college women. Due to recruitment problems, limited data was collected from first-year college students. A larger review of the literature has been completed to respond to gaps in data collection.

Review of the Literature

Media is known to influence body perceptions and affect, while having the potential to even more powerfully effect viewers with low self-esteem. Aubrey (2006) studied college-aged

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women, looking at their exposure to sexually objectifying media, self-objectification, appearance anxiety, body shame, thin-ideal internalization, and global self-esteem. Suls and Krizan (2005) note that global self-esteem is the general value a person sees in him/herself rather than self-esteem related to specific traits or abilities. They identified this concept as influencing motivation, career aspirations, educational success, job satisfaction, and both mental and physical health. Hanan, Saleem, and Arshad (2017) describe the thin ideal as the standards or norms presented by the media that recommend a thin body for females and which creates a discrepancy between one's actual self and a beauty ideal. Aubrey's (2006) study found that exposure to sexually objectifying media predicts a small decrease in trait self-objectification, measured by The Trait Self-Objectification Questionnaire, but that the general effect is much stronger for women in low global self-esteem. The Trait Self-Objectification Questionnaire, allows for assessment of the extent to which participants utilize one form of physical self-concept over the other, namely attractiveness-based self-concept, which incorporates physical attractiveness, weight, sex appeal, measurements, and muscle tone, and competence-based self-concept, which involves muscular strength, physical coordination, stamina, health, and physical fitness physical (163). Aubrey (2006) proposed that college-aged women may purposefully avoid media they understand to intensify their tendency to self-objectify due to a possible awareness of media effects.

Chia (2007) studied a more basic form of media than we often think of today, magazines, in Chinese college women in Singapore. The thinness rating participants gave of models in magazines did not vary depending on if the model was Chinese or Caucasian. Interestingly, participants reported media effects on their friends to be greater than those on themselves, when exposed to the Chinese models. However, when exposed to Caucasian models, there was little

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perceived difference between media effects on friends and on oneself, and there were no significant results found regarding participants perceiving greater media effects on themselves when their race matched that of the model. Both groups perceived greater effects on male friends than female friends. Problematically, perception of media effects on oneself was positively associated with intention to take diet pills, though the model's race had no effect on the participant's reported intention to engage in weight-loss behavior. The association between women's perceptions of media effects on friends and their own intention to lose weight was not significant but the perception of media effects on oneself had a significant association with intention to lose weight. This study exposed that the great differences between perceived media effects on oneself and on others is not limited to Western culture.

Concerning the notion of difference between perceived effects on oneself and on others, Lin, McCormack, Kruczkowski, and Berg (2015) questioned how women's perceptions of their peers' weight preferences are related to their own drive toward thinness. Women's degree of accuracy in what body size their peers preferred was examined, finding that they underestimated the body size both men and women prefer. Perceived weight preferences of peers were examined to determine if women believed differing peer groups had different weight preferences for their body size. It was found that the women perceived their female peers as favoring a thinner size than male peers, and distant peers favoring a thinner size than close peers. Additionally, the potential association between a drive for thinness and the degree of discrepancy between the weight preferences of women and their peer was investigated. Women who perceived their body size as different from their close peer's preferences displayed a greater drive for thinness. All women in the study were college students, as college women are particularly vulnerable to poor body image and irregular eating behavior.

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Irregular eating behavior can, sometimes, manifest into an eating disorder. Damani and Reveley (2001) studied the body image of women with eating disorders, as compared to those without. Emphasis on slimness and physical appearance was evident in both groups, but there was a greater pervasiveness of such among the women with eating disorders. The Body Image Structured Interview (BISI) was used and was found to be suitable for those suffering from eating disorders, as well as potentially of value when highlighting personal body image issues. The following themes were prominent in the eating disorder group: 87.5% of subjects emphasized physical appearance (specifically thinness) and 37.5% emphasized interpersonal qualities. Only 12.5% of this group indicated their career as being important to them. In the comparison group, only 18% emphasized thinness/physical appearance. Being independent, one's career, and marriage/family, were much more prominent themes for this group. The eating disorder group and control group had similar responses to how the media presents the ideal woman's body, with a focus on being thin, fat-free, and to a lesser extent, tall. The two groups differed greatly in how they described their body parts. The comparison group had a greater variety of responses. These findings are not generalizable but the results are consistent with previous explanations of eating disorders, with being thin of great importance to the female identity.

Considering eating disorders in both men and women, specifically binge eating, experiences of shame related in body-image are suggested to be associated with binge-eating symptoms. Duarte and Pinto-Gouveia (2017) found, consistent with other studies, that women present higher levels of body image issues and disordered eating behaviors as compared to men. However, there were no differences among genders in regard to depressive symptoms, forms of self-criticism, and the centrality of memories of shame experiences related to body image. Early

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negative experiences related to one's physical appearance were shown to play a role in one's feelings of inferiority, evaluation of flaws, and binge eating symptoms.

Why does it matter?

As mentioned in the above literature, eating disorders can be closely connected to body image. The National Eating Disorder Association, NEDA, notes that people with negative body image are more likely to develop an eating disorder and to suffer from feelings of depression, isolation, low self-esteem, and obsessions with weight loss (n.d.). NEDA (n.d.) outlines a variety of eating disorders, including Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, Binge Eating Disorder, Orthorexia, Other Specified Feeding or Eating Disorder (OSFED), Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID), Pica, Rumination Disorder, as well as two categories not identified as diagnosable disorders, Laxative Abuse and Compulsive Exercise. Despite the various diagnoses, all eating disorders are considered to be mental illnesses, affecting roughly 20 million women and 10 million men in America, believed to be caused by biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors (NEDA, n.d.). It is those sociocultural factors that are important to note here.

Jean Kilbourne, activist, speaker, and writer, illustrates the messages advertisements give about both girls and women, in her film series *Killing Us Softly*. In the most recent of the series, *Killing Us Softly 4: Advertising's Images of Women* (2010), Kilbourne makes some very powerful statements about the media and the thin ideal that permeates our culture. As identified by Hodgeson (2018), some of these include: "The body type that we see in advertisements as acceptable or desirable is one that fewer than 5% of American women have" and "The obsession with thinness is about cutting girls down to size—to aspire to become nothing" (p. 6).

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Kilbourne's (2010) tells us that our entire culture's attitudes towards food and the way we eat need to be transformed, but that such is a difficult task because we are taught to hate our bodies.

As a means of further understanding the impact of the thin ideal and both positive and negative body image, some female college students were asked to share photographs and/or statements in response to this topic. A total of eight photos/statements were received, four of which were positive and four of which were negative. As for the positive ones, three students sent images of parts of their body that society may judge negatively but they have embraced, including stretch marks, "chicken legs," and thick fingers. The other positive message was from a female who loves her arm muscle, showing off her strength with a picture of her bicep. On the other hand, the negative comments and images showed the tremendous impact the thin ideal has on women. They included two pictures of stomachs, one noting that this particular body part defines her happiness/lack-thereof, and the other terming it her "kangaroo pouch" and reveling the many ways she has tried, and failed, to slim down, remaining "stuck" in her size as well as in a society that tells her she is not skinny enough. A picture of a sticky note with the infamous Kate Moss quote "Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels" and a statement from one female who noted feeling embarrassed and ashamed to snack in front of her boyfriend, often hiding it from him, were also received.

A variety of social media platforms were examined, in the hopes of viewing them with this background knowledge and seeing the impacts they may have on viewers. A variety of troubling images on Instagram, Snap Chat, and Pinterest were uncovered. These included transformation photos with the caption "just in time for summer," as if a larger body is not fit for warm weather/shorter clothing (Fitness, 2018), stories of the types of workouts to do in order to burn off the calories in beloved foods such as pizza and hamburgers (Food network, 2018),

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images directly advertising bodies rather than the people that own them (Daily Mail, 2018), quotes about getting what you work for, insinuating that anyone can have an extremely fit/thin body if they only tried and that it is one's own fault if they do not have the desired body type (V3 Apparel, n.d.; Bloglovin', 2014) and many more. These media sources were posted by, viewed by, and/or saved by real women who, presumably, internalized such messages.

Interviews

I interviewed two females. My first interviewee—whom I will refer to as *A*—is 18, identified as white/Asian, 5' 9" tall, and reported her weight as 150. The second—whom I will refer to as *B*—is 19, identified as Filipino, 5' 3" tall, and reported her weight as 125. Both were residents of a freshman dorm on Xavier's campus. Their mood and responses were vastly different, with the first interview being more positive than the second. *A* mentioned feeling more confident since coming to Xavier, whereas *B*, mentioned feeling a loss of control. *A* is currently in a relationship but *B* is not. When asked what they liked about themselves, not explicitly asking about their physical appearance, *A* listed physical attributes, including her hair, face, and the size of herself, noting that she feels evenly proportioned, whereas *B* took a different approach, saying she likes how she tries to see the best in people, only commenting on her appearance when asked if she has a favorite bodily feature, at which time she chose her eyes. Along similar lines, *A* reported the importance of looks to her as a 7 or 8 out of 10, whereas *B* said they are not particular important to her.

A mentioned physical activity throughout the interview, reminiscing of times her brothers would encourage her to play basketball with them as a way of staying healthy. She has continued this activity, playing intramural basketball at school. She noted that basketball was the way she took control of her health. She described being overweight when she was younger and then, in

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high school, joining a basketball team and becoming more active. Upon arriving at Xavier, she made use of the gym—free to students—and began working out. These experiences helped her grow in confidence. She did not attribute the lack of confidence she felt prior to any particular person or media outlet, noting that her family was very supportive and that she was not allowed to have social media at a young age. However, *A* did reference the indirect influence her friends' body shapes had on her. She mentioned shopping with friends and realizing she could not try on the same clothes they could, but then saying that it was a more “personal, mental thing” rather than a feeling that presented itself because of overt comments her friends made.

As far as the media, *A* noted the benefits of not engaging in it until an older, more matured age. In line with Aubrey's (2006) proposition that some women purposefully avoid media because of the effects it has on them, *A* mentioned not wanting to look at social media for some time because she was already unconfident. *A* only began using social media when she felt determined to lose weight. Even then, it made her feel bad about herself as she realized she did not look like the images she was seeing. However, luckily, this was around the time of the Body Positivity movement, and *A* began feeling better about her own looks. When asked about difference between social media outlets, *A* reported using YouTube for workout videos, Instagram showing off fit people, and Snap Chat displaying unhealthy food stories. When asked about other influences, *A* described the importance of the people you surround yourself with, noting Xavier to be a positive environment for her. In this way, social media and peers seemed to have the greatest influence on *A*'s self-perception.

On the other hand, *B* did not describe any critical childhood moments, such as being over or under weight. She reported less daily activity than *A*, but also utilizes the gym on campus. She does not engage in intramural sports, feeling she is bad at sports and that playing would be more

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for social reasons than anything else, though she used to play tennis. Unlike *A*, *B* is not currently in a relationship. *B* reported paying more attention to her body and what she thought of it when she was younger than she does now, feeling that her thought process began changing around the time of high school. She reported nothing about herself that she would change if she could. Despite these seemingly positive responses, she seemed to give little explanation or thought, often answering “not really,” unlike the prior interview. *B*’s family emphasized the importance of her being herself. As *A* did, *B* brought up shopping with friends, though the situations described were different. For *B*, shopping was easy with friends because they all have similar styles and are honest about how things look. When asked what influence that has on her *B* simply stated that it is fun to get ideas from each other. From these responses, it seems *B*’s family and friends have a positive impact on her self-view, and do not over-emphasize appearance. In line with Damani and Reveley’s (2001) study, as a non-eating disordered individual, interpersonal qualities are more noteworthy than appearance-related qualities, such as thinness. *B* did report having and using social media but said she does not think it has much impact on her and the messages she gets from varying types all seem to be the same, rather than one influencing her more in any way than another. The last potential influence mentioned, was *B*’s Catholic identity. She said this gives her conservative values, but that she stuck to a modest lifestyle more when she lived at home than she does now.

Clearly, these interviews led to entirely different themes. Without more subjects to study, results are inconclusive on what arenas females learn to think of their bodies in the way that they do and what impact entering college life has on female students. Further research is needed to determine the healthy and unhealthy nature of social media, what gyms and cafeterias on campus mean to students, and how differing home lives affect women long-term.

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