



Eating Behaviors and Cultural Influences on Appearance: What is the Experience of College Women?

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that people who suffer from eating disorders are likely to engage in unhealthy eating behaviors and to experience cultural pressure toward appearance. The purpose of the present study was to replicate previous studies examining unhealthy eating behaviors and cultural values of appearance among college women. It was hypothesized that approximately 50% of college women at WSU engage in unhealthy eating behaviors and college women who report unhealthy eating habits will also note greater awareness of cultural values toward appearance. Seventy-nine undergraduate women participated in a series of online surveys through Qualtrics. Variables examined for this project came from a demographic questionnaire and the Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Questionnaire-4-Revised (SATAQ-4R). Participants self-reported a range of BMI scores between 16.5 and 42.0. An independent samples T-test was conducted in order to identify group differences on unhealthy eating behaviors (some or none) and cultural influences. Approximately 50% of participants reported engaging in at least one unhealthy eating behavior. Women who reported engaging in some unhealthy eating behaviors also reported greater internalization of thinness, general attractiveness, and pressure from the media, compared to those who reported none. Campus efforts to improve health among women may be benefitted by interventions that reduce cultural influences on expectations for appearance.

Research Question & Hypothesis

Research Question 1: How common are unhealthy eating behaviors among college women at WSU?

Hypothesis 1: Approximately 50% of college women at WSU engage in unhealthy eating behaviors.

Research Question 2: What pressures influence college women to engage in unhealthy eating behaviors?

Hypothesis 2: College women who report unhealthy eating habits will report higher internalization of thinness and general attractiveness, as well as pressure from the media.

Experimental Methods

Table 1. Participant Demographics

	Percentage of Sample
White/Caucasian	89.9%
Hispanic or Latino	3.8%
African American/ Black	2.5%
More than one race	1.3%
Other	2.5%
Freshman	30.4%
Sophomore	30.4%
Junior	21.5%
Senior	16.5%
5 th year or above	1.2%

Participants: Seventy-nine undergraduate students attending Winona State University participated in this study. All participants were female. A majority of the participants were Caucasian undergrads.

Procedure: This study was approved by the WSU IRB. Participants completed a series of surveys relating to internalization of thinness, general attractiveness, sources of pressure, and eating behaviors. Eating behaviors included use of laxatives, diet pills, or diuretics. As well as fasting, avoiding eating for the majority of the day, eating very little food, skipping meals, and making oneself vomit.

Results were measured using the SATAQ-R-4

Results

Figure 1: Visual representation of group differences on internalization of general attractiveness.

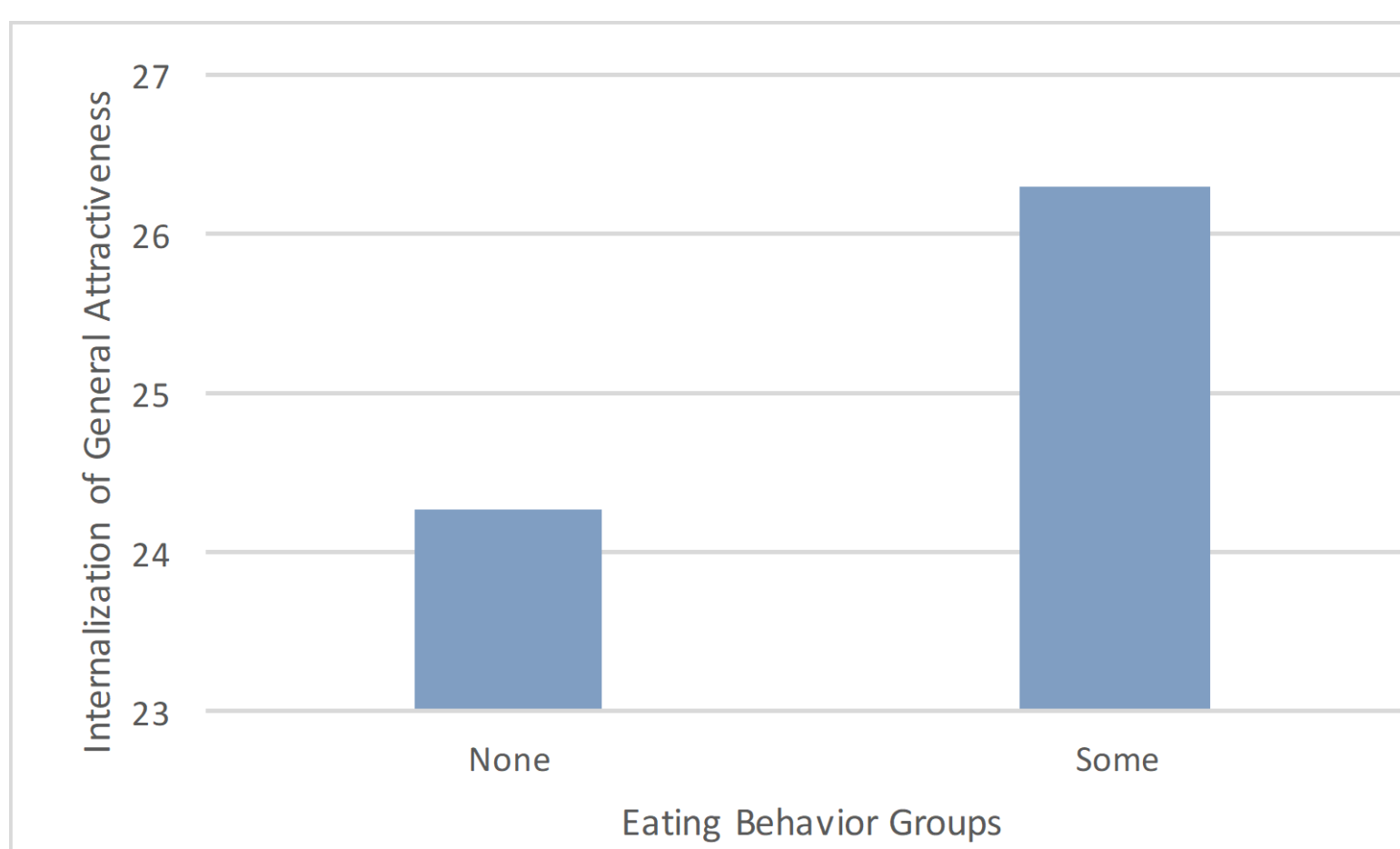


Figure 1 displays the independent samples t-test for group differences on internalization of general attractiveness, $t(77) = -2.42, p < .05, \eta^2 = 0.07$. Those who reported unhealthy eating behaviors also reported a greater mean level of internalization of general attractiveness ($M = 26.30, SD = 3.72$) compared to others ($M = 24.26, SD = 3.74$).

Figure 2: Visual representation of group differences on pressure from the media.

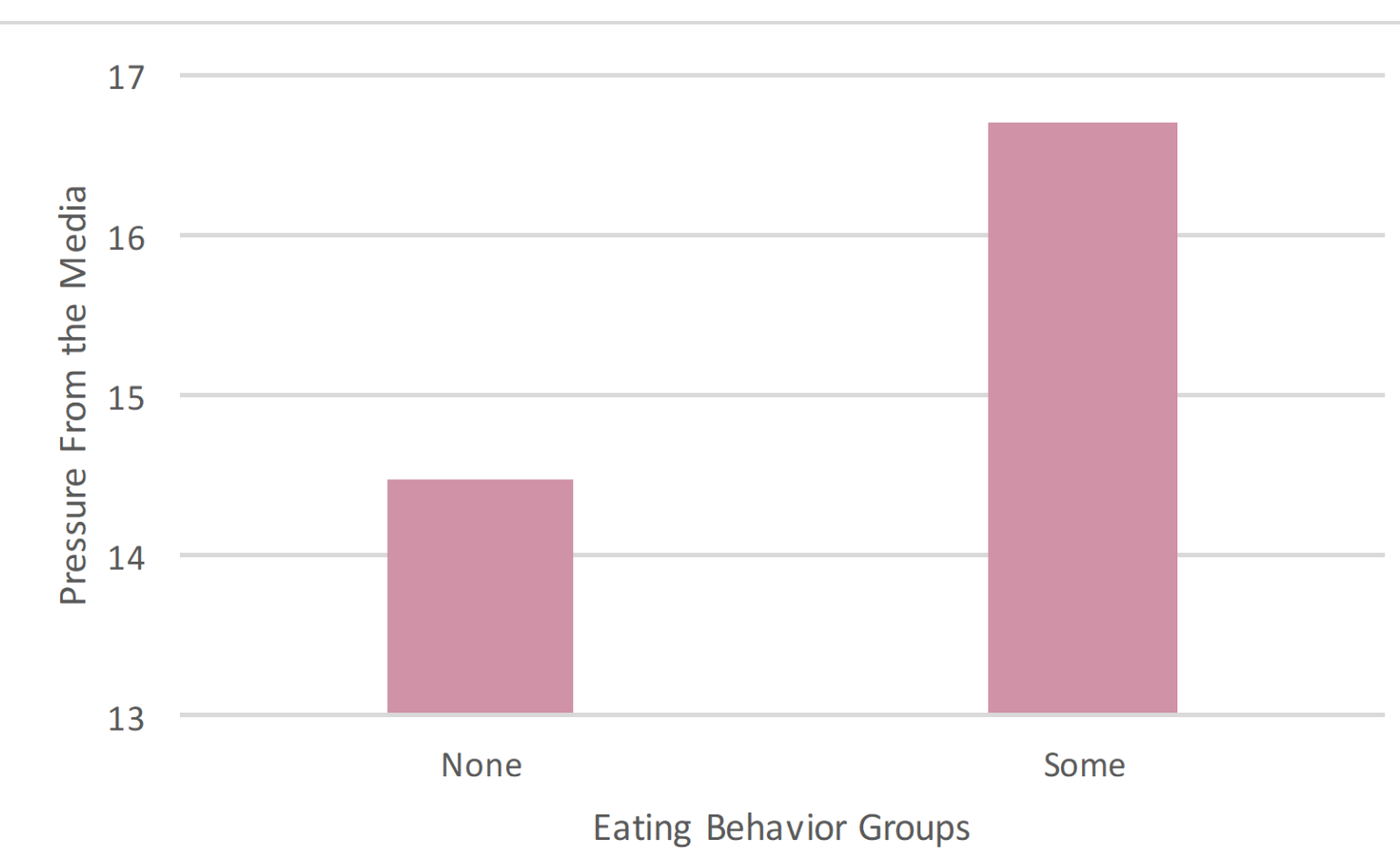


Figure 2 displays the independent samples t-test for group differences on pressure from the media, $t(75.24) = -2.04, p < .05, \eta^2 = 0.05$. Those who reported unhealthy eating behaviors also reported a greater mean level of pressure from the media ($M = 16.70, SD = 4.16$) compared to others ($M = 14.48, SD = 5.52$).

Figure 3: Visual representation of group differences on internalization of thinness.

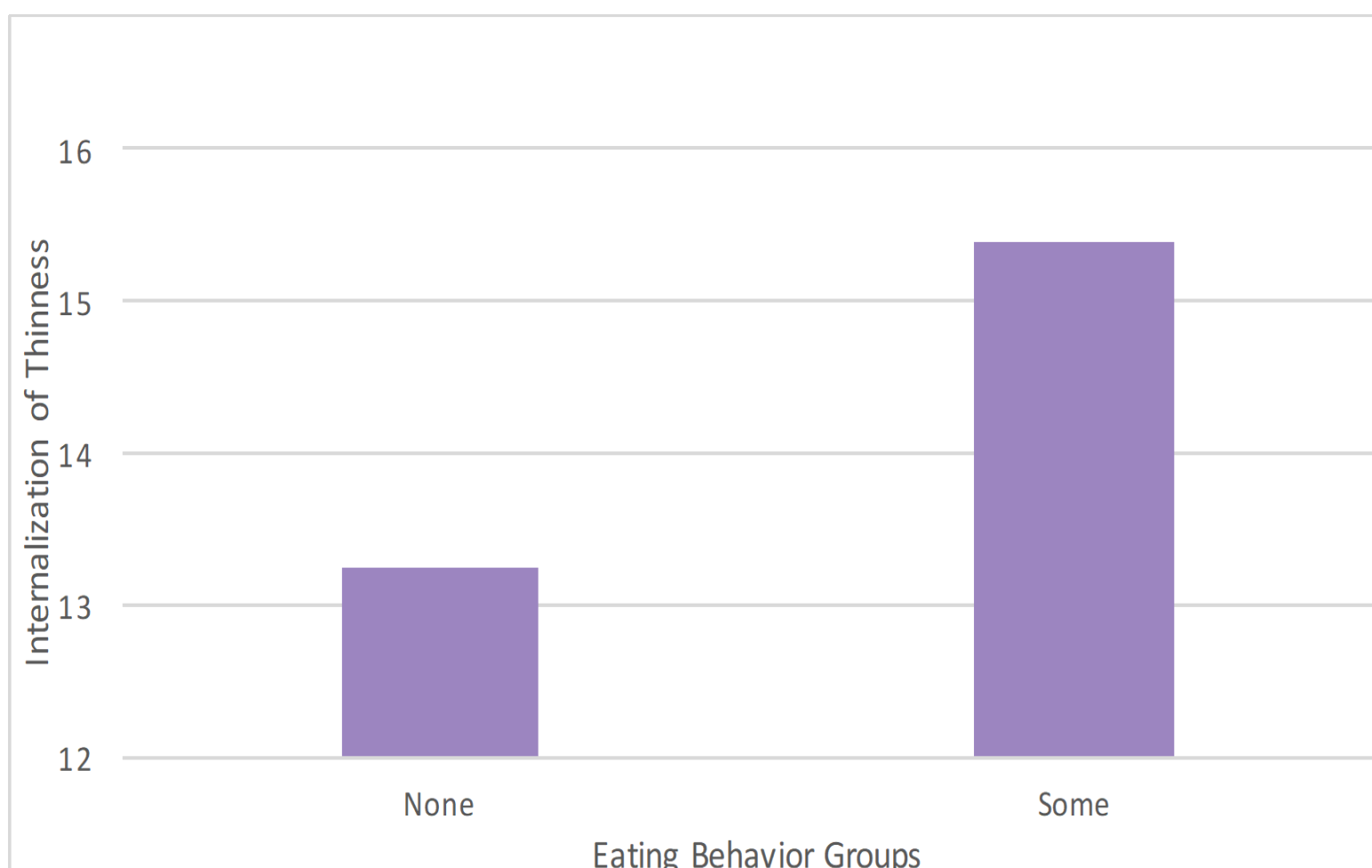


Figure 3 displays the independent samples t-test for group differences on internalization of thinness, $t(77) = -2.80, p < .05, \eta^2 = 0.09$. Those who reported unhealthy eating behaviors also reported a greater mean level of internalization of thinness ($M = 15.38, SD = 3.36$) compared to others ($M = 13.24, SD = 3.41$).

Discussion and Implications

- The first hypothesis was supported as shown that 37 out of 79 participants reported engaging in at least one unhealthy eating behavior.
- The second hypothesis was also supported reflecting that participants who engaged in "some" unhealthy eating behaviors reported greater internalization of thinness and general attractiveness, as well as greater pressure from the media. Significant results were not found for pressure from family, peers, or significant others.
- In line of previous research, cultural values of appearance are reflected in this population. Winona State women are not exempt from pressure to look a certain way.
- Future research should be directed toward utilizing more focused efforts to promote health on campus, such as promoting nutrition for health rather than appearance ideals. This change in campus climate may reduce the prevalence of unhealthy eating behaviors among WSU women.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Trisha Karr for the guidance and support on this project, and thank you to the Winona State University Psychology Department for the use of resources.

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