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WARNING—MEDIA ATTACHMENTS MAY YIELD DIMINISHING RETURNS:  
AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF ATTACHMENT STYLE, MEDIA  
CONSUMPTION AND EATING DISORDERS

A Thesis Presented

by

DARA N. GREENWOOD

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

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Social Psychology

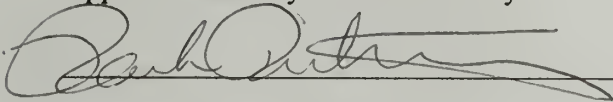
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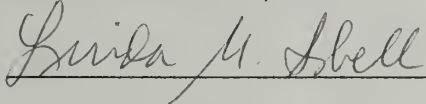
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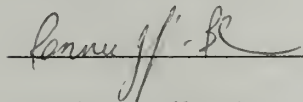
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## ABSTRACT

# WARNING—MEDIA ATTACHMENTS MAY YIELD DIMINISHING RETURNS: AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF ATTACHMENT STYLE, MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND EATING DISORDERS

MAY 2002

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Amidst ongoing attempts to determine a causal link between media consumption and eating disorders, attachment style has recently emerged as provocative variable in the respective fields of psychology and communications. Specifically, insecure attachment has been associated with eating disorders and media consumption independently. The present study seeks to provide conceptual and empirical integration of the exiting literature by exploring the relationship among all three domains. It was hypothesized that anxious ambivalent and fearful avoidant women may be highly motivated to engage in media consumption because media images offer a means for achieving felt security, functioning as surrogate attachment figures with whom to identify and idealize. Due to the predominance of ultra-thin body types in the mass media, it was further hypothesized that these insecurely attached women may also be at greater risk for disturbed body image and disordered eating. Results showed that anxious ambivalent, but not fearful avoidant women, experience feelings of identification, idealization, and closeness to a favorite female character, as well as higher levels of body anxiety.

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## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND

#### Attachment Theory

Bowlby's (1969) original conceptualization of attachment theory has generated a substantial body of research, blurring disciplinary lines within and beyond the field of psychology. Rooted in both traditional psychoanalytic and social cognitive models of behavior, attachment theory is uniquely positioned to answer why and how we develop our sense of self and other. According to Bowlby, our early relationships determine the nature of our "internal working models"—a set of beliefs and expectations about ourselves and others—that shape the way we respond to and negotiate our social worlds. Ideally, through positive early experiences with caregivers, we acquire a sense of "felt security" that enables us to feel protected and valued by others even when we are alone. If we fail to acquire "felt security" we may develop an unstable, negative view of self and others. This distinction provided the theoretical basis for the classification of specific attachment styles (secure, anxious-resistant, and avoidant), first used to describe individual differences in children's response to the now famous "strange situation" (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Recently, researchers have applied the concept of attachment styles to adult relationships, emphasizing that attachment theory implies our "continuing need for secure attachments and the continual construction, revision, integration, and abstraction of mental models" (Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988, p. 83).

While childhood attachment patterns are based on relationships with parental figures, adult attachment patterns are generally studied in the context of close friends or



romantic partners. The extent to which continuity exists across these developmental stages remains unclear, and is beyond the scope of this proposal. Adult attachment styles will provide the relevant focus of inquiry from this point forward. The first categorical measure of adult attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) was intended to uncover deep-seated attitudes about close others. Secure adults were those who reported high comfort with intimacy and low fear of abandonment, while anxious-ambivalent (preoccupied) adults reported a high desire for intimacy coupled with high fear of abandonment. Lastly, avoidant adults reported a low comfort with intimacy and lack of trust for others. Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991) modified this approach by validating a four-category model which is based on dimensional evaluations of self and other. See below:

**Models of Self**

		<u>Positive</u>	<u>Negative</u>
<b>Models of Other</b>	Positive	Secure	Preoccupied
	Negative	Dismissing	Fearful*

\*A primary contribution of the four-style approach has been the emergence of the fearful avoidant group, previously embedded within either preoccupied and avoidant categories.

In addition to describing working models as *beliefs* about self and other, some researchers have taken a more dynamic route, endeavoring to assess adult attachment in terms of underlying motivational and behavioral *processes*. Pietromonaco and Feldman Barrett (2000) posit that the four attachment styles may be distinguished from one another by two related processes: the degree to which the need for “felt security” is activated, and, the extent to which interpersonal relationships are used to regulate this need. For example, the attachment system of secure adults may be activated only in

times of objective distress, during which they will attempt to gain comfort by seeking the support of close others in their lives. The attachment system of dismissing avoidants, on the other hand, may be (defensively) de-activated, preventing them from either consciously experiencing attachment distress or relying on others for support.

In contrast to secure and dismissing avoidant individuals, those with anxious-ambivalent and fearful avoidant styles may experience a hyperactivated attachment system. Having less stable and less positive views of self, they may interpret many situations as threatening to their esteem (Pietromonaco & Feldman Barrett, 2000). The difference between these styles exists therefore, not in their heightened need for “felt security,” but in the way they cope with this chronic state of arousal. Fearful avoidant individuals, afraid of rejection, may feel conflicted about depending on others in times of distress. Anxious ambivalents however, may depend excessively on various others in the lives in order to gain validation and reassurance. See figure below:

From Pietromonaco & Feldman Barrett, (2000):

**Emotional Reactivity**

		<u>Low</u>	<u>High</u>
<b>Reliance on Others</b>	Willing	Secure	Preoccupied
	Unwilling	Dismissive	Fearful

While much of the above mentioned research focuses on the degree to which adults use *actual* others in the service of obtaining “felt security,” there is new evidence to suggest that *imagined* others, such as those found in the mass media, may also address attachment needs.

## Attachment and Media Relationships

Modern media now engages old brains... There is no switch in the brain that can be thrown to distinguish between the real and mediated worlds. People respond to simulations of social actors and natural objects as if they were in fact social, and in fact, natural (Reeves & Nass, 1996).

Believing the mass media to be an inherently social domain, communications researchers have developed a measure of “parasocial interaction” (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985), or degree of perceived closeness experienced by individuals with their favorite television characters. It is perhaps intuitive, then, that they have also begun to use adult attachment style as a framework for understanding the nature of our relationship with media images. Though, to date, only two studies (Cohen, 1997; Cole & Leets, 1999) have been conducted on the topic, preliminary evidence suggests that preoccupied individuals may engage in more intense parasocial interaction than either secure or avoidant individuals. In explanation of this finding, researchers speculate that television characters may provide anxious-ambivalent individuals with reliable, if illusory, feelings of intimacy they crave in their real life relationships (Cole & Leets, 1999). As further support for the theory that parasocial goals may reflect real life relationship goals, avoidant individuals in this study were least likely to engage in parasocial relationships.

In addition to providing a direct means of obtaining felt security by functioning as surrogate attachment figures, media images may also provide felt security indirectly, by enabling vicarious identification with highly valued icons. The phenomenon of deriving pleasure from identification with/as an idealized other has peaked the interest of psychodynamic and social cognitive theorists alike. Rauch (1987) suggests that feeling connected to idealized media images may feed a primitive desire to replicate the original

parent-child bond, noting that “the subject’s need for love and recognition by an other is substituted by an imaginary unified identity derived from the image” (p. 33). This feeling of oneness, derived from actual or imagined closeness with an idealized other, has also been captured by Aron, Aron, and Smollan (1992). They designed a visually based scale that measures the degree of close self-other overlap, “hypothesized to tap people’s *sense* of being interconnected with another (Ibid., p. 598). Finally, Markus’ (1991) work on “possible selves” indicates that feelings of self-other overlap may prove to be motivational in daily life; by fantasizing that we are idealized versions of our selves we have the opportunity to simulate and prepare for various future roles. Following this line of reasoning, connecting to and identifying with idealized images in the mass media may allow insecurely attached individuals to rehearse felt security.

Using media images as surrogate attachment figures to promote felt security seems like a harmless, even productive process for the insecurely attached among us. But any discussion of idealized images is incomplete if it does not consider the recent flurry of popular and empirical attention devoted to the potentially destructive influence of ultra-thin female body types, ubiquitous in today’s mass media. What are the costs of attaching to unrealistically thin media figures? Are insecurely attached women who are particularly motivated to engage in parasocial interactions with ultra-thin media figures at greater risk for experiencing body shame and disordered eating? Integrating the literature on media and attachment with two parallel lines of emerging research in the field of eating disorders, we have reason to believe the answer may be yes.



## Attachment and Eating Disorders

In two extensive, yet inconclusive areas of research, eating disorders have been associated with both insecure attachment styles and media consumption independently. Recent reviews on the relationship of attachment style to disordered eating (Ward, Ramsay, Treasure, 2000; O’Kearney, 1996) have concluded that, despite a lack of standardized measures for both eating disorders and attachment, the “overwhelming message from the research literature is of abnormal attachment patterns in eating disorder populations.” (Ward et al., 2000, p. 45). Specifically, many studies have found preoccupied attachment style to be correlated with eating disorder symptomatology (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Freidberg & Lyddon, 1996; Sharpe et al., 1998). However, the authors also caution against a single-pathway model, pointing out that insecure attachment appears to be predictive of psychopathology in general, and it may be premature to speculate about the specific causal relationship between insecure attachment and eating disorders. Research on the association between media consumption and eating disorders echoes this latter sentiment.

## Media and Eating Disorders

Studies of media influence on the development of eating disorders have been, perhaps understandably, prone to circularity. For example, while most studies have only documented a correlational relationship between the two (Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Stice & Shaw, 1994), others have found that experimentally manipulated media exposure negatively impacts those who are already preoccupied with eating and weight (Hamilton & Waller, 1993; Heinberg & Thompson, 1995; Posovac, Posovac, & Posovac, 1998). Even attempts made to identify underlying psychological mechanisms linking media to

eating disorders have been somewhat uninformative. The description of “ideal body type internalization” (Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994; Heinberg & Thompson, 1995) as a risk factor for example, is not only fairly intuitive, but leaves open the question of why some people are more likely to internalize this ideal than others.

One notable study (Harrison, 1997) has helped address the question of why, suggesting that self-selected exposure to media images may only be the surface manifestation of a more active relationship with idealized images. Harrison (1997) found that interpersonal attraction to thin media personalities was significantly predictive of disordered eating, even after controlling for individual differences in frequency and quality of media consumption. She concludes that, “young women’s patterns of disordered eating...are related not only to the types of media that they expose themselves to, but *also the way they perceive and respond to specific mass media characters*” (Ibid., p. 494, emphasis mine). In light of this finding, it is plausible to speculate that the relational styles captured by attachment measures may provide a crucial link in the media-eating disorders connection.

#### Connecting the dots: Attachment, Media, and Eating Disorders

Given the striking overlap in the literature on adult attachment style, media consumption, and eating disorders it is perhaps surprising that no one, to my knowledge, has attempted to integrate all three domains of inquiry. Research on media and attachment has yet to incorporate the problem of eating disorders, while research on media and eating disorders has yet to utilize attachment style as a potentially useful individual difference variable. Finally, research on attachment and eating disorders has yet to include media consumption into the hypothesized etiological models. In an effort

to connect the various associations reviewed thus far, I propose that attachment style may motivate certain individuals to use idealized images in the interest of obtaining a temporary sense of felt security. I further propose that the inevitable failure of two-dimensional images to generate actual attachment security, may ultimately replicate feelings of anxiety and instability. One manifestation of this anxiety may be the development of body image concerns and disordered eating due to the over-representation of ultra-thin figures in the mass media, as well as our culturally sanctioned belief in the inflated value of women's appearance. As media scholar Robert Goldman (1992) aptly states:

Where unequal and segregated labor markets and patriarchal rule have prevailed, women have learned there is a kernel of truth to claims that social power hinges on their ability to evoke desire through appearance. Becoming an object of desire supposedly makes a woman more valuable in the eyes of others, and hence more valuable to herself (p. 129).

And so insecurely attached women may end up back where they started: initially motivated to engage in idealized image consumption to gain much needed felt security, they may find their relational anxiety simply recast, rather than resolved, into body anxiety.

The present study seeks to gain a more in depth understanding of the way in which attachment style and disordered eating may be mediated by media consumption. Based on the proposed model, the following question will be addressed: is there an interaction between attachment style, degree and nature of media consumption, and body image/eating preoccupation? In addition to conducting an exploratory analysis of the relationships among all three variables, the present study will advance the literature by

administering more comprehensive measures of each variable than have been previously used.

Attachment will be assessed using the both the four category, dimensional model (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and the multi-item subscale developed by Brennan, Clark & Shaver (1998) comprised of anxiety and avoidance dimensions of attachment feelings. Both models allow for the identification of a high anxiety, high avoidance orientation (fearful avoidant), which provides a more comprehensive assessment than the oft relied upon three category model of secure, anxious and dismissing prototypes (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). This fearful group may be crucial to account for, as they may be highly motivated to engage in media consumption because the threat of rejection is necessarily lower in an imagined relationship.



## CHAPTER 2

### THE PRESENT STUDY

#### A Summary Model:

Insecure Attachment → Idealization of thin media characters → Body image anxiety

Review of Attachment Dimensions: Brennan et al., 1998

#### Avoidance

		<u>Low</u>	<u>High</u>
Anxiety	Low	Secure	Dismissing Avoidant
	High	Preoccupied*	Fearful Avoidant*

From Pietromonaco & Feldman Barrett, 2000

#### Emotional Reactivity

		<u>Low</u>	<u>High</u>
Reliance on Others	Willing	Secure	Preoccupied*
	Unwilling	Dismissive	Fearful*

\*Because preoccupied and fearful avoidant individuals report low self-esteem combined with a high desire for intimacy, I hypothesize that the self-other security addressed by the mass media will be most appealing to them. Though fearful avoidant report feeling conflicted about seeking felt security with actual others, it is likely that seeking felt security with imagined others would not arouse fear of rejection.

## Hypotheses

1. Anxious ambivalent and fearful avoidant women will be more likely to feel close to a favorite female character (experiencing them as surrogate attachment figures).
2. Anxious ambivalent and fearful avoidant women will be more likely to identify with their favorite female characters (experiencing the projected pleasure of being an valued icon)
3. Anxious ambivalent and fearful avoidant women will be more likely to idealize (want to be like and look like) their favorite female characters.
4. Because the majority of favorite characters are ultra-thin, attachment relevant feelings of identification, idealization, and closeness with (ultra-thin) female characters will, in turn, promote feelings of body anxiety.
5. Anxious ambivalence and fearful avoidance will also be independently associated with greater feelings of body anxiety (as the literature suggests).

## Measures

### Adult Attachment Questionnaires

Two measures of adult attachment were implemented in this study. Brennan et al's multi-item measure comprised of anxiety and avoidance subscales, was administered as part of the psychology prescreening session. Bartholomew and Horowitz' (1991) four category measure comprised of secure, anxious ambivalent, fearful avoidant, and dismissing avoidant paragraphs was administered at both the prescreening session and the final lab session of this study. The primary attachment measure used in the analyses was the Brennan et al. (1998) measure, composed of thirty-six interrelated questions.

Examples of questions comprising the anxiety subscale (alpha: .92) are: I worry a lot

about my relationships, or, I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner. A reverse scored anxiety item is: I do not often worry about being abandoned. Examples of questions comprising the avoidance subscale (alpha: .93) include: I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close, or, I prefer not to show my partner how I feel deep down. A reverse scored item on the avoidance subscale is: I feel comfortable depending on romantic partners. Participants have the option of choosing a score from 0-6 (disagree strongly to agree strongly). The middle score of 3 indicates “neutral/mixed.” When averaged, these subscales can be conceptually combined to correspond with the four categories described in the Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) measure. Those scoring high on anxiety and low on avoidance fit a preoccupied style (i.e., desire intimacy but fear of abandonment); those high on avoidance but low on anxiety fit a dismissing avoidance profile (i.e., avoid intimacy and desire autonomy); those high on both avoidance and anxiety fit a fearful avoidance profile (i.e., desire intimacy but fear of rejection); and those low on both anxiety and avoidance fit a secure profile (i.e., desire both intimacy and autonomy).

#### Media Consumption Questionnaire

The media questions in this study were adapted from Harrison (1997) from her study on interpersonal attraction to media characters, as well as from the parasocial interaction scale, developed by Rubin, Perse, & Powell (1985). Our questions were designed to elicit descriptive information about media consumption (favorite character), feelings of identification with (perceived similarity to), idealization of (desire to be like/look like) and imagined closeness with favorite television characters. Certain items were collapsed within this measure due to being highly correlated. For the purposes of

analyses, we combined these two questions into one similarity variable: how similar is your favorite character's behavior to your own, and how similar are your favorite character's social interactions to your own? We did the same for questions of wanting to be like a favorite character in terms behavior and social interaction. Finally, we combined proximity seeking questions into affective and behavioral clusters.

The following questions make up the affective set (alpha: .64):

1. How much can you imagine being close friends with your favorite character?
2. How much would you miss your favorite character if s/he left the show?
3. How much do you look forward to watching your favorite character's how?

The following questions make up the behavioral set (alpha: .77):

1. If the person who plays your favorite character is being interviewed on a program you do not typically watch, how likely would you be to tune in?
2. If the person who plays your favorite character is featured in a magazine that you do not typically buy, how likely would you be to buy it?
3. If you knew you had to miss your favorite character's show, how likely would you be to tape it and watch it later?
4. Before or after watching your favorite character's show, how likely are you discuss him/her with your friends?

### Body Image Scales

Two measures of body image were implemented. The first, given as part of the psychology prescreening session, was the QEDD (Mintz, O'Halloran, Mulholland, & Schneider, 1997), a recently validated clinical instrument, used to assess varying degrees of eating disorder symptomatology. For the purposes of our study, however, we decided



to analyze three questions that were most cognitive and continuous in nature. The choices of answer ranged from not at all (0) to extremely (4), and the questions are as follows: Does your weight and/or body image influence how you feel about yourself? How afraid are you of becoming fat? How afraid are you of gaining weight?

The second body image measure, given in the final lab session, was McKinley and Hyde's (1996) Objectified Body Consciousness Scale. This scale is made up for three subscales of 8 questions each: body shame (alpha: .82), body surveillance (alpha: .88), and body control (alpha: .71). The authors posited that the more in control one feels about one's body, the greater the risk of making a failed effort attribution for weight dissatisfaction, and thus the more prone to poor body image. However, as shown in our findings below, less perceived control over one's body might in fact reflect less relational security rather than more. Ratings ranged from agree strongly (1) to disagree strongly (6). Body shame items include: "When I can't control my weight, I feel like something must be wrong with me," or, reverse scored, "Even when I can't control my weight, I feel like I'm an okay person." Body surveillance items include: "During the day, I think about how I look many times," or, reverse scored, "I am more concerned with what my body can do than how it looks." Finally, body control items include: "I think a person is pretty much stuck with the looks they are born with," or reverse scored, "I think a person can look pretty much how they want to if they are willing to work at it."

### Procedure

Participants were 132 undergraduate women at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst who volunteered for a study on "media consumption." Adult attachment patterns were assessed at a prescreening session (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998;

Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and provided the basis for subject recruitment across each attachment style. At the first lab session, subjects were given a brief questionnaire entitled: General Media Survey. They were asked for their favorite television shows, magazines, and their favorite character, as well as specific questions about their feelings for that character (see media measure above). They were then asked to participate in a three-week diary study on television viewing, the data for which is not yet available for the purposes of this Master's study. Finally, participants were asked to come back to the lab to fill out a series of background questionnaires to help us learn more about them. This final set of questions included a re-administering of Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) four-paragraph measure of adult attachment, McKinley and Hyde's (1996) Objectified Body Consciousness Scale, and Glick and Fiske's (1996) Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. Because the latter scale was used as filler and did not yield any significant findings in preliminary analyses, it will not be discussed further. Similarly, because Bartholomew and Horowitz' (1991) scale provided fewer, and overlapping results with the Brennan et al. (1998) measure, it will also be dropped from further discussion.

### Analyses

We hypothesized that attachment scores would predict feelings for a favorite female character, which in turn would predict level of body anxiety. However, because over half of the sample actually chose male favorite characters, we initially entered gender as a predictor variable in the analysis of both media and body image variables. The media variables of wanting to look like a favorite character and being sexually attracted to that character were not included in this preliminary analysis as they were specific to female and male characters respectively.

As expected, character gender significantly interacted with anxiety and avoidance to predict perceived similarity ( $F(1, 124)=9.13, p<.01, B=-.523, b=-.415$ ), wanting to be like ( $F(1, 124)=9.8, p<.01, B=-.63, b=-.43$ ), and feelings of closeness to a favorite character ( $F(1, 124)=4.71, p<.05, B=-.36, b=-.31$ ). Character gender also significantly interacted with anxiety and avoidance to predict level of body shame ( $F(1, 97)=4.53, p<.05, B=-.28, b=-.34$ ), and believing that body image influences self image ( $F(1, 97)=6.12, p<.05, B=-.40, b=-.38$ ). Thus, we decided to go ahead with our plan to conduct separate analyses for favorite female and male characters.

We first conducted hierarchical regressions to determine whether attachment styles predicted feelings towards favorite character of each gender. For each dependent variable, we conducted a regression entering at step 1, anxiety and avoidance scores (centered, Aiken & West, 1991) and, at step 2, interactions of both scores.

#### Attachment and Media

When favorite character is female: Participants who scored high on anxiety and low on avoidance (the more anxious ambivalent/preoccupied group) also scored highest on reports of similarity to ( $F(1, 60)= 5.14, p<.05, B=-.25, b=-.30$ ) wanting to be like ( $F(1, 60)=14.1, p<.001, B=-.46, b=-.46$ ), wanting to look like ( $F(1, 60)=16.04, p<.0001, B=-.72, b=-.48$ ) and feelings of closeness to a favorite female character ( $F(1, 60)= 6.89, p<.01, B=-.30, b=-.34$ ). In contrast, women scoring high on both anxiety and avoidance (the more fearful avoidant group) scored lowest on these media relevant variables (please refer to Figures 1-4 in the appendix). The above association between attachment and desire to look like a favorite character was replicated for subjects choosing an ultra-thin female character ( $n=40$ ).

When favorite character is male: Participants who scored low on anxiety and low on avoidance (more secure subjects) reported feeling most similar to a favorite male character ( $F(1, 64) = 4.13, p < .05, B = .27, b = .26$ ); refer to Figure 5 in the appendix).

#### Attachment and Body Image

When favorite character is female: The more anxious ambivalent women scored highest on the believing that body image influences their overall self-image ( $F(1, 50) = 5.47, p < .05, B = -.24, b = -.32$ ), and lowest on perceived control over their weight and shape ( $F(1, 50) = 7.81, p < .01, B = .20, b = .38$ ). In contrast, women scoring low on both anxiety and avoidance (the more secure group) scored highest on feelings of body control and scored lowest on believing that body image influences their self-image (please refer to Figures 6-7 in the appendix). There were no significant effects of attachment on body image for subjects choosing a favorite male character.

#### Media and Body Image

We conducted multiple regressions to determine which, if any, media variables predicted body anxiety. Due to conceptual overlap, some media variables were entered in a block. For male character, feeling similar to and wanting to be like a male character was entered as a block, with being attracted to, feeling close to, and behaving in a proximity-seeking way towards that character (e.g. taping a show if missed, buying a magazine featuring favorite character) were all entered simultaneously in the second step. For a favorite female character, wanting to be like and wanting to look like that character were also entered as a block in the first step, while the remaining variables (perceived similarity to, closeness, proximity seeking) were entered simultaneously in the second step.



When favorite character is female: Wanting to look like a favorite female character predicted significantly increased feelings of body shame ( $t(2,52)=2.01, p<.05$ ), body surveillance ( $t(2,52)=2.9, p<.01$ ), believing body image affects self image ( $t(2,52)=2.7, p<.01$ ), fear of becoming fat ( $t(2, 52)= 2.45, p<.05$ ) and marginally increased fear of gaining weight ( $t(2, 52)=1.9, p<.06$ ). These results were replicated for subjects choosing an ultra-thin female character.

When favorite character is male: Sexual attraction to a male character predicted increased body surveillance scores ( $t(2,48) = 2.50, p< .05$ ), and behaving in a proximity-seeking manner predicted less fear of gaining weight ( $t(2, 48)= -2.03, p< .05$ ).

### Additional Media Analyses

#### Modal Preferences

Overall, 65% ( $n=87$ ) of participants selected a favorite character from the comedy genre, while 29% ( $n=38$ ) chose characters from a dramatic genre. The sample was about evenly split in terms of character gender, with 51% ( $n=68$ ) of subjects choosing a male character. Of the remaining 49% of participants who chose a female, 62% ( $n=40$ ) picked a character with an ultra-thin body type. The most popular female and male characters selected both appear in the NBC situation comedy, *Friends*: “Rachel” (Jennifer Aniston) and “Chandler” (Matthew Perry).

#### Television Genres: Drama vs. Comedy

Because the vast majority of participants chose favorite characters from either comedy (i.e. sitcoms, comedy shows) or dramas (i.e. evening or daytime dramas), these were the two genres used in the analysis of variance. Participants whose favorite character appeared in a dramatic series had significantly higher scores ( $F(1, 123)=14.68,$

$p < .0001$ ) on the proximity seeking behavioral variable outlined above (i.e. reported higher likelihood of taping a missed show, buying a magazine featuring that character etc.). When analyses were conducted for male and female characters independently, only one significant variable emerged: participants choosing a favorite male character in a drama series reported higher levels of attraction to that character ( $F(1, 61) = 6.44, p < .01$ ) than those choosing a comedic male character.

#### Character Body: Ultra-thin vs. “Normal”

Female character body types were coded as ultra-thin, normal, or overweight. Examples of ultra-thin characters are “Rachel” and “Monica” from *Friends*, as well as Ally McBeal from the eponymously named show. Examples of “normal” body characters include “Phoebe” from *Friends* and “Elaine” from *Seinfeld*. Because only two participants chose characters from the overweight category (Oprah Winfrey and Rosie O’Donnell), this third group was dropped from the analyses.

While choosing a “normal” weight character was significantly associated with greater perceived similarity of appearance ( $F(1, 55) = 5.08, p < .05$ ), choosing an ultra-thin favorite female character predicted wanting to look like that character ( $F(1, 56) = 7.48, p < .01$ ). Choosing an ultra-thin character was also associated with marginally higher body surveillance ( $F(1, 49) = 3.79, p < .06$ ), higher fear of becoming fat ( $F(1, 52) = 5.32, p < .05$ ), gaining weight ( $F(1, 52) = 5.95, p < .01$ ), and believing that body image influences self image ( $F(1, 52) = 10.94, p < .01$ ).

#### Discussion

Our findings replicate previous research linking attachment insecurity to body image disturbance (Ward et al., 2000). More importantly however, the results highlight

the underlying relational processes in the media-eating disorders equation. Women scoring high on anxiety and low on avoidance (preoccupieds) were most likely to identify with, idealize (want to be like *and* look like), and feel close to favorite female characters. Furthermore, wanting to look like a favorite female character, predicted body anxiety. It appears that wanting to look like a favorite character may be one link between the constellation of attachment relevant feelings and the constellation of body image concerns. Finally, anxious ambivalence was also predictive of feeling that body image is central to self-image, and to feel out of control of their body size and shape. Although we cannot determine causality from these cross-sectional, correlational data, the findings are consistent with the possibility that attachment needs may drive relational engagement with media figures, which in turn, may exacerbate body image concerns via idealization of physical appearance.

The hypothesis that fearful avoidant women would also report this type of relational engagement with media characters was not supported; they did not exhibit the same tendencies as their preoccupied counterparts. Instead, fearful avoidance was associated with the least attachment relevant feelings towards a favorite character. Rather than perceiving imagined relationships as safer than actual relationships, as predicted, fearful avoidant individuals report the same fear of intimacy for media characters as they do for real people. These findings, however, support previous research (Cole & Leets, 1999) in which anxious ambivalent individuals experienced significantly more intense parasocial interaction with media personalities than avoidant individuals.

An unanticipated distinction emerged with respect to character gender; over half of the sample chose a male for their favorite character. Interestingly, though, in keeping with our model, the predictions for female character did not hold true for male characters, two findings did emerge that merit further exploration. First, feelings of security were associated with greater perceived similarity to a favorite male character. This suggests that more secure women may be less vigilant about adhering to gender role stereotypes, and more likely to identify with others who share similar characteristics across gender lines. Second, sexual attraction to a male character predicted increased body surveillance. This adds a new dimension to literature on media and body image. Beyond wanting to emulate an ultra-thin female, it appears that the desire to be attractive to a fictional male character also provokes body anxiety.

The finding that choosing a character with an ultra-thin body type (vs. a normal weight body type) was associated with significantly higher levels of body anxiety replicates work by Harrison (1997). By contrast, choosing an average weight character was associated with greater perceived similarity to one's own appearance. Although body type of a favorite character did not differentiate attachment styles, the poignant discrepancy between actual and ideal perceptions of weight shows how media images may contribute to and perpetuate negative body image among young female viewers.

While television genre, like body type, did not significantly discriminate among specific attachment styles, dramas did appear to provoke more intense attachment responses from viewers than comedies. Specifically, individuals whose favorite character appeared in a drama series reported significantly higher levels of behaving in a proximity-seeking manner towards that character (e.g. buying a magazine featuring that



character). This pattern was true for both male and female characters. Further, individuals choosing male characters were more likely to report feelings of sexual attraction to that character if he was featured in a drama rather than a comedy. Dramatic leads often find themselves as romantic leads, and hence, may be cast as more attractive in order to give them sex symbol status. Favorite male leads in comedies, by contrast, tend to be loved for their lack of sex appeal—and are more likely to be non-threateningly effeminate (e.g. “Chandler,” “Niles”).

Anecdotally, women in dramatic roles may be considered more attractive than their comedic counterparts as well, which, for women on television, is always confounded with body size. While approximately half of the comedic female characters in this study were coded as being average weight, only one dramatic character fit this description (“Dana Scully” of *X-Files* fame, whose frame might be considered ultra-thin were she not confined to the ultra-thin universe that is today’s mass media). Overall, though comedic characters were more popularly selected as favorites than dramatic characters, it appears that dramatic leads inspire more attachment relevant feelings. This may be due, in part, to their emotional range and intensity. However, it is important to note the role that physical appearance may play in soliciting more active viewer involvement.

For anxious individuals, the glamorous stars of their favorite television shows may function as compelling role models in more ways than one. Beyond being drawn to any specific traits of any television character, anxious individuals may also be drawn to the success and popularity that is associated with being a television star. It is not simply “Rachel” (*Friends*) whose body size and interpersonal relationships may inspire

admiration, but Jennifer Aniston, whose real life style and real life relationships give her character extra depth and appeal. If anxiously attached women are highly concerned with gaining the attention of others, who better to study vigilantly and strive to be than those members of our society whose job is defined by being noticed and valued for their ability to stand out in a crowd?

Two limitations of the present study bear mentioning. First, although our data do indeed fit the proposed model linking greater attachment anxiety with specific kinds of media consumption, which, in turn is associated with greater body image concerns, as mentioned above, we are unable to make clear causal claims from correlational data. However, the conceptual and empirical overlap we found among these three areas of psychological inquiry is in itself valuable. For example, regardless of which sets the cycle in motion first, feelings of idealization towards a favorite (often, ultra-thin) female character or body image anxiety, the two may be mutually reinforcing. Further, media consumption and body image concerns may both be surface *reflections* rather than repercussions of a more deep-seated relational insecurity. Indeed, the developmental literature does suggest that deficits in attachment and body anxiety may be intimately linked (Ward et al., 2000). Ultimately, this constellation of attachment, media, and body image concerns may provide useful reference points for clinicians.

Rather than simply demonizing the mass media for its potentially toxic influence on young women's body esteem, given the above findings, it may be prudent for clinicians to consider a patient's media habits to be informative and enlightening for both parties. If a young woman does engage in idealization of specific shows or characters, it may be helpful to talk to her about it. Perhaps by starting with a less threatening topic,

such as, “what are your favorite television shows and characters?” the clinician may help the client feel at ease while also getting closer to the nature of her issues. The kind of media stimulation that elicits particular emotions or serves particular emotional purposes for a patient may provide a key to more central relational themes in her life. Projective identification can be a powerful defense against great anxiety, but it may also be a powerful tool by which to understand and undo those very defenses.

The way we use media characters may not only be indicative of individual levels of relational anxiety, but may also mirror more broadly based, social anxieties. For example, a recent quote in *People* magazine underscores the way in which media characters provide relief and comfort in times of anxiety, such as in the aftermath of Sept. 11<sup>th</sup>. Describing why “Friends” enjoyed a sudden resurgence to the top of ratings list, the president of NBC (Jeff Zucker) told CNBC, “In the wake of what’s happened, there’s been a rush to comfortable, familiar programs...we literally and figuratively wanted to hang out with our friends” (12/31/01 issue, p. 69). Indeed, even if the cast of popular sitcoms did not provide a major source of post-terrorist comfort, then certainly news anchors such as Peter Jennings or Tom Brokaw became instant attachment figures due to their seeming calm and competence during such a chaotic time. Overall, we must be careful not to underestimate the social psychological role that media personalities may play in our daily negotiation of relationships, moods, and emotions. Future research in this area might include more comprehensive method such as a diary study (in progress) and might take into account the role that depression may play in both the quantity and quality of media consumption.

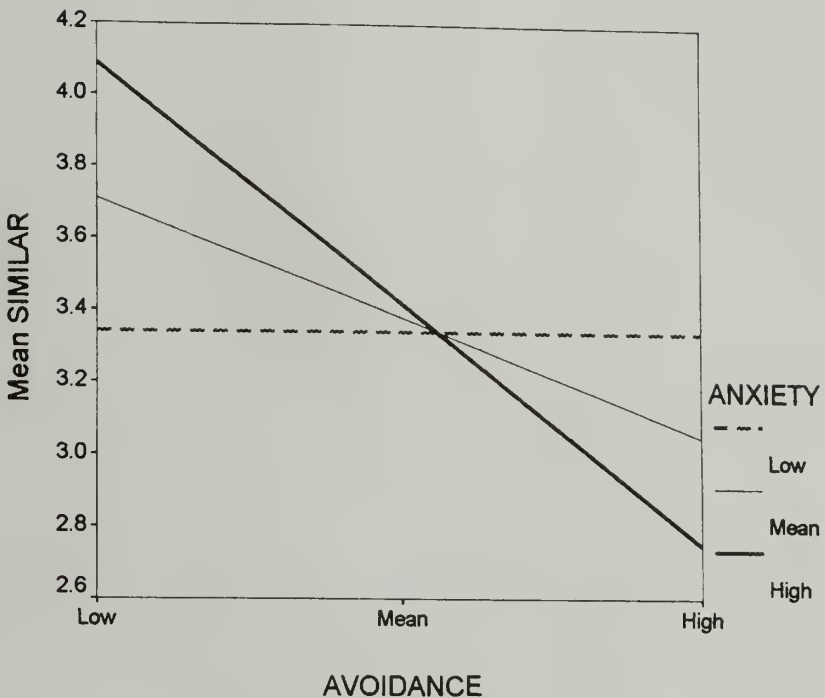
In conclusion, the present study illuminates the value of understanding the psychology of media consumption, from both the individual and social perspectives. As television and commercial industries continue to flood our social world, we must continue to hone our media literacy skills. If we do not simultaneously absorb and deconstruct the influences and appeal of the vast sea of media images, we may find ourselves in over our heads.



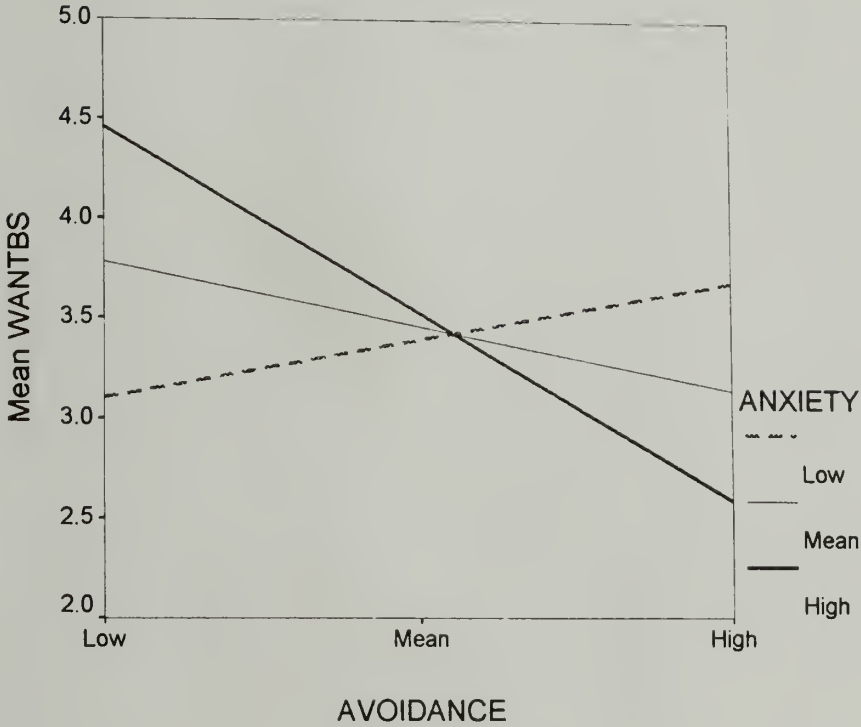
## **APPENDIX A**

### **FIGURES 1-7: REGRESSION GRAPHS**

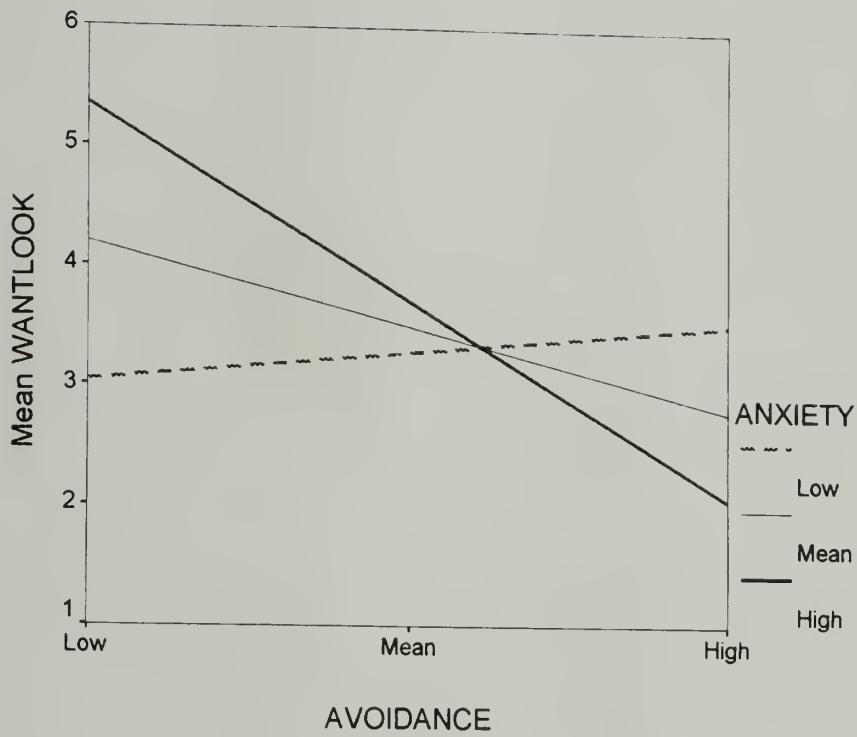
**Figure 1: Perceived similarity to favorite female character as a function of anxiety and avoidance**



**Figure 2: Desire to behave and socialize like a favorite female character as a function of anxiety and avoidance**



**Figure 3: Desire to look like a favorite female character as a function of anxiety and avoidance**





**Figure 4: Feelings of attachment to a favorite female character as a function of anxiety and avoidance**

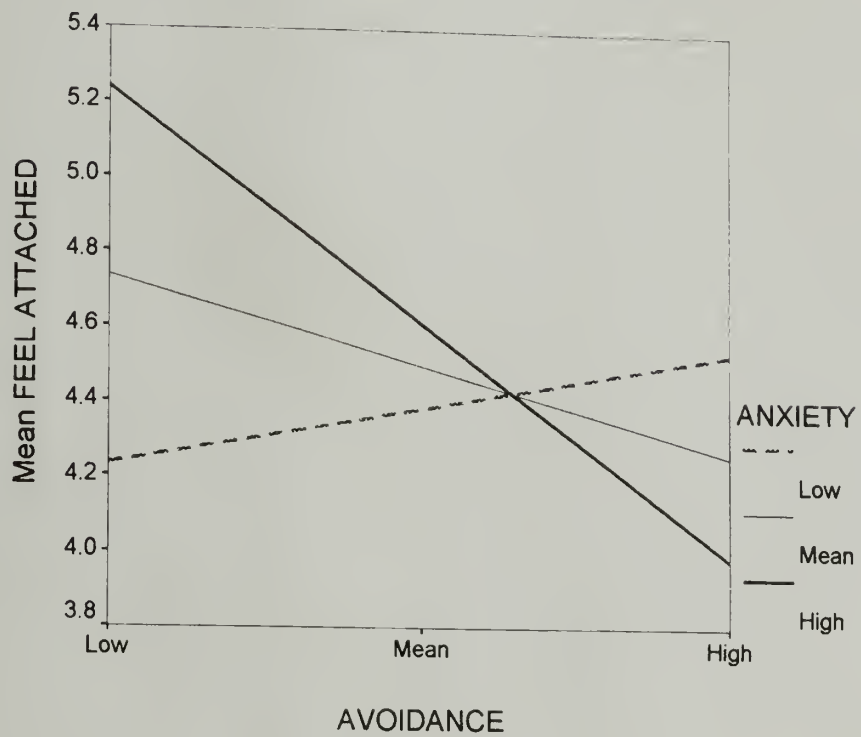
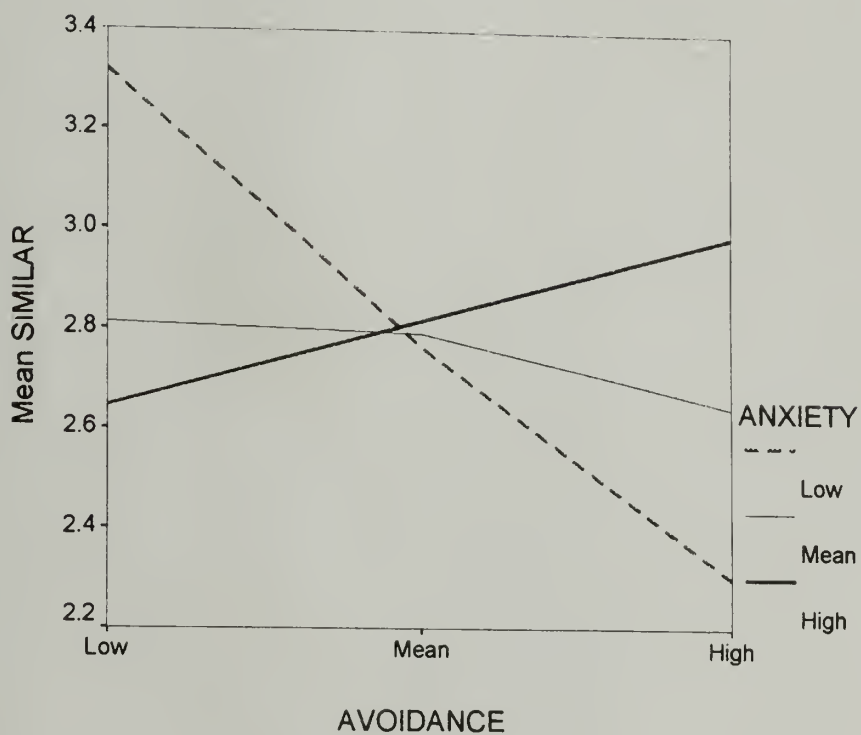
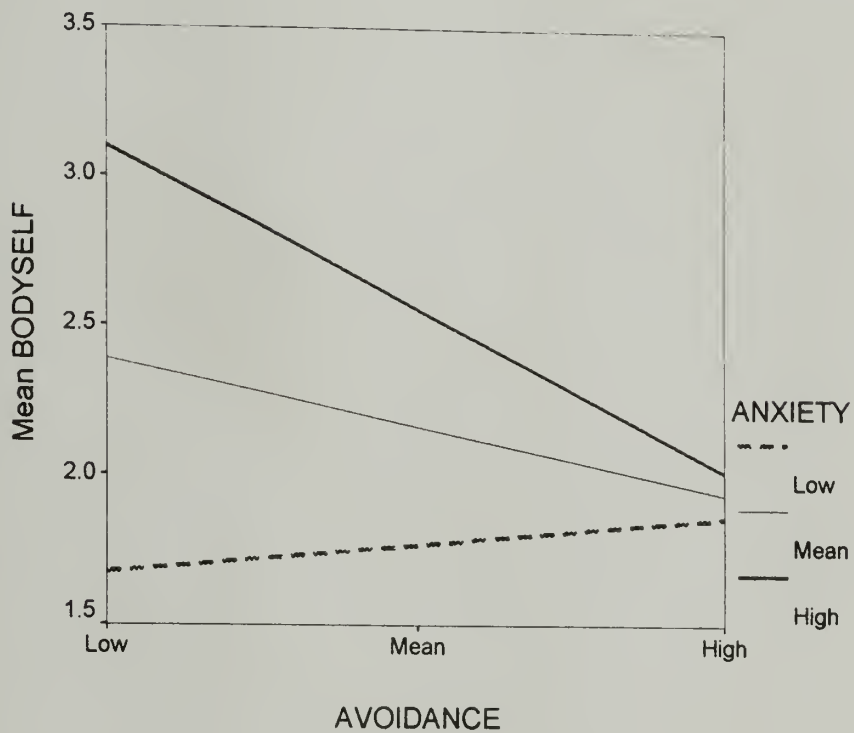


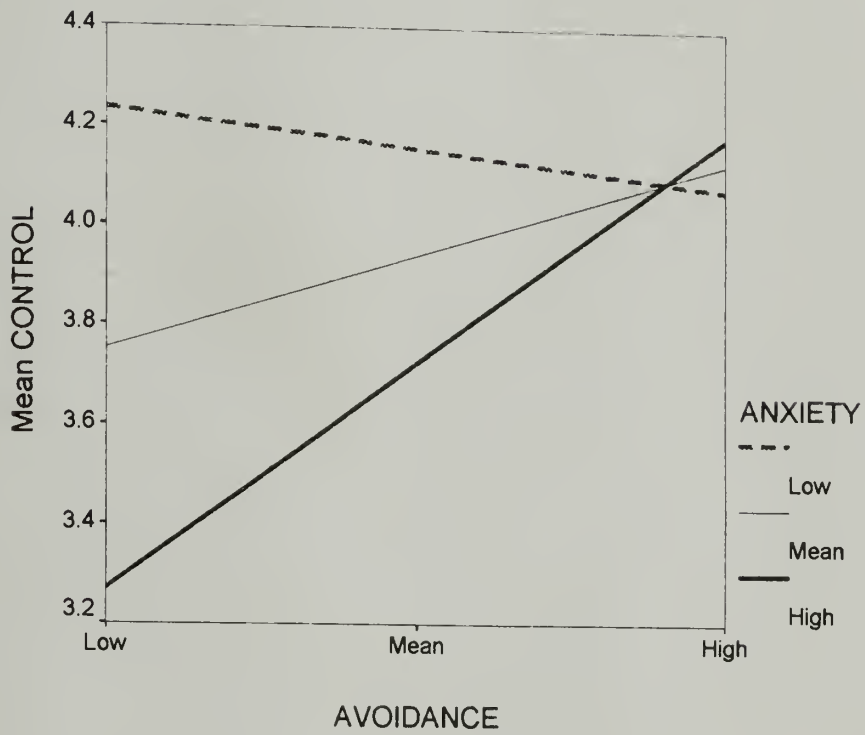
Figure 5: Perceived similarity to a favorite male character as a function of anxiety and avoidance



**Figure 6: Believing that body image affects self image as a function of anxiety and avoidance**



**Figure 7: Perceived control over body weight and shape as a function of anxiety and avoidance**





## **APPENDIX B**

### **RELEVANT MEASURES**

**ATTACHMENT MEASURE**  
(Brennan et al., 1998)

**MEDIA QUESTIONS**  
(Adapted from Harrison, 1997; Rubin et al., 1985)

**OBJECTIFIED BODY CONSCIOUSNESS SCALE**  
(McKinley & Hyde, 1996)

Attachment Measure (Brennan et al., 1998)

Disagree  
Strongly

Neutral

Agree

0      1      2      3      4      5      6

1. I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down.
2. I worry about being abandoned.
3. I am very comfortable being close to romantic partners.
4. I worry a lot about my relationships.
5. Just when my partner starts to get close to me as much as I care about them.
6. I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them.
7. I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close.
8. I worry a fair amount about losing my partner.
9. I don't feel comfortable opening up to romantic partners.
10. I often wish that my partner's feelings for me were as strong as my feelings for him/her.
11. I want to get close to my partner, but I keep pulling back.
12. I often want to merge completely with romantic partners, and it sometimes scares them away.
13. I am nervous when partners get too close to me.
14. I worry about being alone.
15. I feel comfortable sharing my private thoughts and feelings with my partner.
16. My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away.
17. I try to avoid getting too close to my partner.
18. I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner.
19. I find it relatively easy to get close to my partner.

20. Sometimes I feel I force my partner to show more feeling, more commitment.
21. I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on romantic partners.
22. I do not often worry about being abandoned.
23. I prefer not to be too close to romantic partners.
24. If I can't get my partner to show interest in me, I get upset or angry.
25. I tell my partner just about everything.
26. I find that my partner(s) don't want to get as close as I would like.
27. I usually discuss my problems and concerns with my partner.
28. When I'm not involved in a relationship, I feel somewhat anxious and insecure.
29. I feel comfortable depending on romantic partners.
30. I get frustrated when my romantic partner is not around as much as I would like.
31. I don't mind asking romantic partners for comfort, advice, or help.

## General Media Survey

Please list the title and genre of the three television shows you watch most often during any given week:

	Title	Genre
e.g.	Seinfeld	Sitcom
1.	_____	_____
2.	_____	_____
3.	_____	_____

Please list the title and genre of the three magazines you read most often during any given week or month:

	Title	Genre
e.g.	Vogue	Fashion
1.	_____	_____
2.	_____	_____
3.	_____	_____

My favorite character/actor on television is: \_\_\_\_\_

S/he appears on (name of show): \_\_\_\_\_

I typically watch this television show (circle one):

a) alone b) with friends c) with a romantic partner d) with family e) other \_\_\_\_\_

Three adjectives I would use to describe my favorite character/actor are:

\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_

For the next set of question please circle one number on each corresponding scale.

1. How similar is your favorite character's *behavior* to your own?  
Extremely Dissimilar 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely Similar

2. How similar are your favorite character's *social interactions* to your own?  
Extremely Dissimilar 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely Similar

3. How similar is your favorite character's *physical appearance* to your own?  
**Extremely Dissimilar** 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 **Extremely Similar**
4. Ideally, how much would you want to *behave* like your favorite character?  
**Not at all** 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 **Very Much**
5. Ideally, how much would you want to have *social interactions* similar to those of your favorite character?  
**Not at all** 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 **Very Much**
6. Ideally, how much would want to *look like* your favorite character?  
**Not at all** 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 **Very Much**
7. How sexually attracted (if at all) are you to your favorite character?  
**Not at all Attracted** 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 **Extremely Attracted**
8. How much can you imagine being close friends with your favorite character?  
**Not at all** 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 **Very Much**
9. How much would you miss your favorite character if s/he left the show?  
**Not at all** 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 **Very Much**
10. How much do you look forward to watching your favorite character's show?  
**Not at all** 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 **Very Much**
11. If the person who plays your favorite character is being interviewed on a program you do not typically watch, how likely would you be to tune in?  
**Not at all likely** 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 **Extremely Likely**
12. If the person who plays your favorite character is featured in a magazine that you do not typically buy, how likely would you be to buy it?  
**Not at all likely** 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 **Extremely Likely**
13. If you knew you had to miss your favorite character's show, how likely would you be to tape it and watch it later?  
**Not at all likely** 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 **Extremely Likely**
14. Before or after watching your favorite character's show, how likely are you to discuss him/her with your friends?  
**Not at all likely** 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 **Extremely Likely**



## Attitudes about Self Image

Please use the following scale in responding to the statements below. On the line preceding each item, please write the number that best corresponds to how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

- 1=strongly agree**
- 2=agree on the whole**
- 3=agree a little**
- 4=disagree a little**
- 5=disagree on the whole**
- 6=disagree strongly**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I rarely think about how I look.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. When I'm not the size I think I should be, I feel ashamed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I think a person is pretty much stuck with the looks they are born with.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. It doesn't matter how hard I try to change my weight, it's probably always going to be about the same.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. When I can't control my weight, I feel like something must be wrong with me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I am more concerned with what my body can do than how it looks.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I rarely worry about how I look to other people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I feel ashamed of myself when I haven't made the effort to look my best.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. A large part of being in shape is having that kind of body in the first place.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Even when I can't control my weight, I think I'm an okay person.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. I think it's more important that my clothes are comfortable than whether they look good on me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. I think more about how my body feels than how my body looks.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. I feel like I must be a bad person when I don't look as good as I could.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. I think a person can look pretty much how they want to if they are willing to work at it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. When I'm not exercising enough, I question whether I am a good person.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. I rarely compare how I look with how other people look.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. During the day, I think about how I look many times.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. I really don't think I have much control over how my body looks.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. The shape you are in depends mostly on your genes.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. I would be ashamed for people to know what I really weigh.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. I often worry about whether the clothes I am wearing make me look good.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. I never worry that something is wrong with me when I am not exercising as much as I should.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 23. I think a person's weight is mostly determined by the genes they are born with.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 24. I can weigh what I'm supposed to if I try hard enough.

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