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Body dissatisfaction in college students: Which sociocultural pressure best predicts drive for thinness?

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Abstract

Previous literature has suggested that family pressure is the main predictor of drive for thinness. Given the growth of social media where thin beauty is glamorized, we wanted to test if this remains true while including multiple factors that may have been disregarded in body-centric studies. Consequently, we asked which sociocultural pressure—family, peers, or media—relates the strongest with body shame, body surveillance, and drive for thinness. A sample of 1,049 undergraduate psychology students, ages 18-29, were surveyed to better understand body dissatisfaction in college students. We predicted that each sociocultural pressure would correlate with body shame, body surveillance, and drive for thinness, with family pressure being the main predictor for each. Results revealed a moderate correlation between all variables, with media pressure being the main predictor of drive for thinness. Similar to Wang and others (2020), the increase in online appearance conversations that develop into body shame supports these correlations. It is imperative that young adults are aware of how online appearance conversations could develop into body dissatisfaction. Implications, limitations, and avenues for future research are discussed.

Keywords: drive for thinness, body shame, body surveillance, sociocultural pressure, body dissatisfaction

Body Dissatisfaction in College Students

Researchers suggest that body dissatisfaction (Bucchianeri et al., 2013) and unhealthy weight control behaviors (Haynos et al., 2018) increase as young men and women move from adolescence into young adulthood. In fact, approximately 70-90% of collegiate men express body dissatisfaction (Frederick et al., 2007; Hobza & Rochlen, 2009; Neighbors & Sobal, 2007) and between 80% (De & Chakraborty, 2015) and 90% of collegiate women report body and weight dissatisfaction (Neighbors & Sobal, 2007). The intent of our research is to understand which sources influence body dissatisfaction in Western culture and how our findings could improve body image perception in college students.

Drive for Thinness

One of the most commonly reported types of body dissatisfaction in college student populations is the drive for thinness. Drive for thinness is defined as the desire or motivation to be thin, which often leads to excessive dieting (Lev-Ari et al., 2014; Turel et al., 2018). The desire to be thin is most commonly found among college women; however, college men may carry this behavior as well (Turel et al., 2018). The drive for thinness has become increasingly concerning due to the rise in popularity of social media, where thin beauty is glamorized (Leins et al., 2021). Further, when individuals are presented with the ideal body image that is valued and accepted by their peers, they experience body shame (Ferreira et al., 2015). Similarly, those most negatively affected by thin ideal images relate thinness to attractiveness (Dittmar & Howard, 2004). It is important to understand how young adult men and women, specifically college students (typically within the age range of 18-29 years old) have developed these attitudes and who has shaped their outlook on their own body image. Therefore, we looked at predictors of drive for thinness including family, peer, and media pressure (Ferreira et al.,

2015).

Body Shame

Body shame is an emotion derived from social comparison, in which those affected by shame compare their bodies negatively to peers, media, or family members (Goss & Allan, 2009; Wang et al., 2020). When an individual believes that they cannot conform to beauty standards (McKinley & Hyde, 1996), they may experience body image concerns (e.g., eating disorders, low sexual assertiveness, depression, and low self-esteem; Wang et al., 2020). In particular, two types of body shame are associated with sociocultural factors. External shame is defined as outwardly focused, in which one believes unfavorableness and unattractiveness exist in the mind of others, whereas internal shame is the judgment of one's attributes based on shameful experiences (Goss & Allan, 2009). When individuals feel negatively about themselves from shame, they may change their appearance to fit the cultural standard. Controlling appearance is a response to maintain psychological and physical well-being; it has been found by past researchers to be correlated with restrictive eating and negative health outcomes (e.g., high blood pressure, heart disease, risk of diabetes; McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Although the feeling of control temporarily eliminates stress, it is still accompanied by body surveillance (McKinley & Hyde, 1996).

Body Surveillance

Monitoring our appearances in the eyes of one another is called body surveillance (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). This habitual behavior can become increasingly concerning, such as altering one's body cosmetically to fit the media’s ideal beauty standards (Lyu et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2020). Body surveillance also affects what individuals wear and how they feel about themselves. If one's self-perception is negative, then one may change their physical appearance

to fit the beauty ideal (Hauff, 2016). Social comparison theory best explains this phenomenon, that young adults feel an increased pressure to change appearance when comparing themselves to family, peers, or media (Van den Berg et al., 2002). For example, Wang and others (2020) found that as body talk (i.e., appearance conversations) increased, so did body shame and body surveillance. In one sample, women who wore the same workout attire as other women at the gym felt less anxiety and body shame than those who did not fit the same gym standard (Hauff, 2016). Furthermore, women who envisioned themselves wearing revealing attire had increased levels of body shame (Hauff, 2016). As for young adult men, research on eating disorders like anorexia nervosa accounts for less than 1% of the data and often removed from epidemiological studies for its rarity (Murray et al., 2016). In fact, there has been found to be an overlap between body surveillance, body shame, and sociocultural factors in men (Jackson & Chen, 2015). Researchers recommend longitudinal designs to distinguish these differences to explain why men experience body dissatisfaction. Although previous researchers have found that sexual minority men have higher levels of body surveillance and shame than heterosexual men (Simone et al., 2021), further analysis should identify the source of influence on men's body image.

Sociocultural Factors

The tripartite model of body image and eating disturbance supports that body dissatisfaction comes from three influences: parents, peers, and media (Thompson et al., 1999). From adolescence, our perception of body image matches our parental figures, even when attitudes about their own body image are negative. For instance, when parents believe that thin body silhouettes of women are more appealing than larger ones, then their offspring would also tend to agree (Kościcka et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 1999). This might be one reason women feel easily influenced by family members to be thin. Moreover, women who felt an increased

pressure to be thin adopted substantial measures like restrictive eating and bulimic behavior to achieve their parents' ideal preferred body silhouette (Kościcka et al., 2016; Van den Berg et al., 2002). Similarly, males also experience increased pressure from parental figure (Thornborrow et al., 2020). For example, in a sample of Australian males, comments made about their appearance from their fathers resulted in increased pressure to exercise more frequently. As well, the attitudes derived from their mothers had a greater impact on change in appearance, specifically drive for muscularity and not drive for not thinness (Thornborrow et al., 2020).

Past researchers have shown that family pressure is related to drive for thinness (Palladino Green & Pritchard, 2003). Although this remains true, peers and social media also affect one's desire to be thin (Turel et al., 2018). For instance, weight-related teasing (a type of body shaming) among young adult women influences harmful dieting methods, which results in body dissatisfaction (Paxton et al., 1999; Thompson et al., 1995; Turel et al., 2018; Van den Berg et al., 2002). Additionally, Cash and others (1983) found that fashion models presented in media show less of an influence on body image compared to peers. For instance, participants labeled as physically attractive had poorer self-ratings than the non-attractive group, consistent with social comparison theory, suggesting that peers influence self-perception of appearance negatively. Van den Berg and others (2002) explain that social comparison tendencies are related to body dissatisfaction and dieting behavior.

Although recent studies have found that peer influence is related to thin beauty (Turel et al., 2018; Van den Berg et al., 2002), media pressure has an effect as well. For example, Lyu and others (2022) found young adult women are considering alternating their image cosmetically because of the beauty standard they see on social networking sites, mainly Instagram and Facebook. The most common and achievable beauty standard is low BMI and a

slim physical appearance (McKinley & Hyde, 1996), which is shown by altering photos on social media to fit the beauty standard (Lyu et al., 2022). Along with social networking sites, it is important to recognize other forms of media (e.g., magazines and television programs) that influence body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, watching music videos influenced drive for thinness the most, whereas watching soap operas and sports only affected individuals' body image. Thornborrow and others (2020) found significant correlations between television viewing time and increased interest in achieving overproportionate muscularity standards in males. As a result, more extensive research is crucial to explore how drive for thinness relates to media pressure in males, rather than solely focusing on drive for muscularity. Therefore, sociocultural pressures influence negative outcomes among young adults (Lev-Ari et al., 2014; Schaefer et al., 2015), that lead to body shame and eventually drive for thinness (Calogero et al., 2005; Ferreira et al., 2015).

The Present Study

Our study aimed to fill in missing gaps to this research by considering a wide range of variables that could explain why college students experience body dissatisfaction, rather than focusing on a few as previous researchers have done. Based upon past research, we believed there would be a correlation between body shame, body surveillance, and drive for thinness in young adults (Butkowski et al., 2019; Calogero et al., 2005; Ferreira et al., 2015). Although past researchers demonstrated that family pressure relates to drive for thinness (Palladino Green & Pritchard, 2003), body shame (Van den Berg et al., 2002), and body surveillance (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2012), it is important to replicate this finding given that social networking sites have become increasingly popular in the past decade, and are a source of influence on body dissatisfaction (Lyu et al., 2022; Steinfield et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2020). Therefore, we

hypothesized that family pressure is related to drive for thinness, body shame, and body surveillance, in line with past research (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2012; Palladino Green & Pritchard, 2003; Van den Berg et al., 2002). Furthermore, we hypothesized that media and peer pressure also relate to drive for thinness (as measured by the drive for thinness scale), body shame and body surveillance, consistent with the Tripartite model (Van Berg et al., 2002). Finally, we hypothesized that family pressure is the main predictor of drive for thinness compared to peers and media (Palladino Green & Pritchard, 2003).

Method

Participants

Upon institutional review board (IRB) approval, we recruited 1,182 psychology students enrolled at Boise State University and University of South Alabama through the Sona System, administered via an online survey platform, Qualtrics. Participants received course credit for survey completion. Participants were excluded if they did not complete over 80% of the survey (44 participants), failed the validity checks (67 participants), duplication (1 participant), or were outside of our age of interest (18-29 years old; 21 participants); a total of 133 participants' data were removed due based upon the exclusion criteria. Our final sample consisted of 1,049 participants (73.4% females and 26.6% males) with an average age of 19.43 (*SD* = 1.59). Participants race/ethnicity consisted of Caucasian (72.6%), followed by African American (10.1%), Hispanic/Latino/a/x (7%), Asian (3.3%), Multiracial (2.9%), Middle Eastern (1.0%), prefer not to say (1.0%), not listed (0.9%), Pacific Islander (0.6%), and Indigenous Peoples (0.5%).

Measures

Sociocultural Factors

The Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-4 (SATAQ-4) scale was used to determine if family members, media, or peer pressures to look like the 'ideal' body influence how one feels about one's appearance (Schaefer et al., 2015). We instructed each participant to answer the following questions on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). There was a total of four questions for each sociocultural factor (family pressure: "I feel pressure from my family members to look thin," media pressure: "I feel pressure from the media to look thinner'). We also asked our sample if peers influenced their body image (e.g., "I get pressure from my peers to decrease my level of body fat"). We averaged the items from each subscale to create subscale scores (Family Pressure, $\alpha = .89$; Media Pressure, $\alpha = .94$; and Peer Pressure, $\alpha = .88$).

Objectified Body Consciousness: Body Shame

The body shame subscale of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (McKinley & Hyde, 1996) measured how participants feel about their bodies. Each item was rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree;* Sinclair, 2010). We wanted to know how much body shame participants experienced (e.g., "When I am not exercising enough, I question whether I am a good enough person" and "I feel ashamed of myself when I haven't made the effort to look my best"). The questions reflected participants' internalization of cultural body standards that affect their perceived self-worth. Individuals who feel they have not attained cultural expectations for their body (McKinley & Hyde, 1996) have higher scores of body shame. This scale was scored by averaging, higher scores indicated higher levels of body shame ($\alpha = .85$).

Objectified Body Consciousness: Body Surveillance

The body surveillance subscale of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (McKinley

& Hyde, 1996) was used to measure how often participants check their appearance. Each item was rated on a 6- point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree;* Sinclair, 2010). All eight statements regarded how the participant observed their body supposed to how it feels (e.g., “I rarely compare how I look with how other people look” and “During the day, I think about how I look many times”). After averaging the scale, higher scores indicated higher levels of body surveillance ($\alpha = .85$).

Drive for Thinness

The Drive for Thinness Scale of the Eating Disorders Inventory was used to measure how participants felt about their eating habits and if it furthered their desire to be thin (Garner et al., 1983). A total of 7 items evaluated the emotions participants felt after gaining weight on a 6-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*; “I eat sweets and carbohydrates without feeling nervous,” "I feel extremely guilty after overeating”). We scored Drive for Thinness subscale items in accordance with Garner and others (1983). Higher scores suggested higher levels of Drive for Thinness ($\alpha = .89$).

Procedure

The survey was presented via Qualtrics starting with the informed consent and confirmation of age. Participants were informed they could withdraw at any point and were provided with contact information for mental health resources, through Boise State University. Next, we asked participants for the name of their institution followed by each previously mentioned instrument (SATAQ-Family, SATAQ-media, SATAQ-peers, SATAQ-self, Drive for Thinness Scale of the Eating Disorders Inventory, OBCS Shame, OBCS Surveillance). To ensure participants were engaged, we included two consecutive validity checks after scale questions. Each validity check thanked participants for paying attention and asked participants to select

"strongly agree" and "strongly disagree," If participants did not select the correct responses on the validity check questions, their data was excluded from analysis. At the end of the survey, we asked participants to provide demographic information about age, sex at birth, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, income, and daily report of time and activity spent on smartphones. It took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete the survey.

Results

First, we hypothesized that family pressure would be related to drive for thinness, body shame, and body surveillance. A Pearson Correlation analysis revealed significant positive correlations between all variables (see Table 1), thus supporting the hypothesis that as family pressure increased, so did drive for thinness, body shame, and body surveillance.

Next, we related media pressure and peer pressure to body surveillance and body shame using a Pearson's Correlation. Statistically significant positive correlations were found (see Table 1), thus supporting our hypothesis that as media and peer pressure increased, so did body surveillance and body shame.

Finally, we hypothesized that family pressure would be the main predictor of drive for thinness compared to peer pressure and media pressure. Stepwise regression procedures were used to determine the best predictor of drive for thinness (see Table 2). The results indicate that media pressure was the strongest predictor, accounting for 28% of variance in drive for thinness [$F(1, 1040) = 405.35$, $p < .001$], followed by family pressure explaining an additional 4% of the variance [$F(2, 1039) = 243.09$, $p < .001$], and finally peer pressure, explaining an additional 1% in variance [$F(3, 1038) = 170.02$, $p < .001$]. Therefore, our hypothesis was not supported.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify why many young adults are experiencing body

image dissatisfaction. Since social networking sites have become increasingly popular among young adults, where body conversations often take place (Wang et al., 2020), it was important to test if family pressure still relates to drive for thinness (Palladino Green & Pritchard, 2003), body shame (Van den Berg et al., 2002), and body surveillance (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2012). As expected, we found that as family pressure increased, so did drive for thinness, body shame, and body surveillance, reflecting research on sociocultural pressures (Lev-Ari et al., 2014; Schaefer et al., 2015). In addition to family pressure, it was important to test relationships between media pressure, peer pressure, drive for thinness, body surveillance, and body shame to understand body image concerns in young adults. Our results followed the patterns of previous work (Goodman, 2005; Van den Berg et al., 2002; Wang et al., 2020) suggesting that peers and media also influence an increase in drive for thinness.

The main purpose of our study was to evaluate who influences our body image the most: family, peers, or media (Goodman, 2005; Wang et al., 2020). Our findings suggest that media pressure has the most influence on drive for thinness, contrary to our hypothesis and past literature (Palladino Green & Pritchard, 2003). The increased exposure to thin beauty reflected in the media could explain this change (Lev-Ari et al., 2014). In other words, individuals feel increased pressure to be thin because they compare themselves negatively to the unrealistic standards in the media, further leading to drive for thinness (Lev-Ari et al., 2014).

Overall, there is a relationship between the various pressures (i.e., family, peer, and media) and body image, but media pressure had the most influence on drive for thinness. It is important to inform young adults to rethink who they interact with online, especially those who greatly influence their self-perception on social media. If young adults are aware of the thin beauty ideal and the unrealistic dieting measures that come with it, then maybe researchers will

see a decrease in young adults taking extensive measures to be thin. Furthermore, findings in the present study confirm that media pressure relates to body dissatisfaction in young adults.

Since social media has been deeply interconnected into our lifestyles, there are potential solutions that can be integrated into social networking sites. First, artificial intelligence (AI) disclaimers could be attached to digitally modified images that state, "this photo was altered by the creator." By doing so, users feel less inclined to socially compare themselves to an altered image. Ideally, social networking sites should incorporate a timer on the home page. The clock-display tracks the users time spent on the application and completely shuts down after reaching its limit. To prevent individuals from returning, the application is disabled for one hour. Besides holding social networking sites accountable for the unrealistic content it displays, we can encourage universities to hold seminars, where educators express the importance of a positive body image and the value of having meaningful conversations with peers' face to face. Further, universities should create real-time activities where college students can meet new people and are discouraged from using smartphones during these social events. Most importantly, universities could promote support groups for individuals that overuse social networking sites. This could teach young adults to reconsider how often they use social media sites when exposed to body-centric content.

Limitations and Future Direction

Although our results filled a gap in the literature on body shame, body surveillance, and drive for thinness, a few limitations need to be considered. First, nearly three-quarters of our sample were Caucasian women, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings to other genders and races/ethnicities. In the future, researchers should collect data from diverse racial and gender groups to better understand body dissatisfaction given how beauty standards vary between cultures and gender (Sicilia et al., 2022). Additionally, it is likely that our sample may include

participants who have an eating disorder or body dysmorphia; future analysis should take this into consideration when asking participants to self-report their view on body image. Finally, our regression analysis of the influence of sociocultural pressures on drive for thinness only accounted for 30% of the variance. Future studies should determine what other factors are important in predicting drive for thinness.

In summary, the data contributed to our understanding of body dissatisfaction in college students. Including which sociocultural pressure—family, peers, or media—predicts drive for thinness. By correlating each variable, we found a significant relationship across all variables (family, peers, media, body shame, and body surveillance). Thus, strengthening the framework of previous literature while adding insight to future studies on the negative health outcomes associated with social media usage. The findings from the present study have important implications by suggesting that clinicians should incorporate social media reduction techniques when treating individuals who have an eating disorder or the desire to achieve unrealistic beauty standards.

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Table 1

Correlation Matrix

Variables	*n*	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Drive for thinness	1045	5.68	5.99	-					
2. Media pressure	1047	3.40	1.22	.53*	-				
3. Family pressure	1048	2.51	1.15	.38*	.37*	-			
4. Peer pressure	1048	2.12	1.00	.37*	.38*	.49*	-		
5. Body shame	1046	3.31	1.12	.67*	.55*	.41*	.43*	-	
6. Body surveillance	1043	3.95	.99	.56*	.57*	.27*	.32*	.61*	-

Note. Each sociocultural pressure correlated with body shame, body surveillance, and drive for thinness. * $p < .001$

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression

Variables	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*p*	95% CI
Step 1					
Media pressure	2.60	.13	.53	< .001	[2.35, 2.86]
Step 2					
Media pressure	2.22	.14	.45	< .001	[1.96, 2.49]
Family pressure	1.10	.14	.21	< .001	[.82, 1.38]
Step 3					
Media pressure	2.08	.14	.42	< .001	[1.81, 2.36]
Family pressure	.84	.16	.16	< .001	[.57, 1.15]
Peer pressure	.73	.18	.12	< .001	[.38, 1.09]

Note. Media pressure is the strongest predictor of drive for thinness.