

PRISONERS IN OUR BODIES

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes a survey (n=60) conducted in the fall of 2000 to examine the level of women's body satisfaction and factors that might influence it. Satisfaction was evaluated on a scale from very satisfied to very unsatisfied. Body satisfaction was then compared to the information the women gave about the number of times they viewed fashion magazines, how often they talked about their bodies, their age, and their race. By comparing this information, conclusions were drawn about what factors influence women's levels of body satisfaction. The most significant conclusions about low body image that were drawn were a high frequency of viewing fashion magazines, the younger the woman was, and her race.

INTRODUCTION

Americans today are very concerned with body image. Women specifically are subject to the effects of what it takes to obtain the "ideal" body. Because women in our society are readily objectified, there is constant pressure on women to maintain society's objects, their bodies (Hesse-Biber 1996). This becomes a problem when bodies are viewed in parts, such as having "nice legs." Women and society begin to only see the parts of the body, not the woman as a whole. Those who do not have the "ideal" body types begin to have negative views of their bodies and become unsatisfied.

Ninety-five percent of all college students want to lose weight (Hesse-Biber 1996). I recently asked two college women what they thought the ideal body was, the first responded by saying, "Thin. All women want to be thin, so thin that your bones stick out." The second said, "Skinny, like the models, only I'm not that tall, so I have to settle with skinny." It seems to be a common idea that although things like height cannot be controlled, women choose to take control of their weight to gain satisfaction with their bodies.

What factors are influencing women's views of their body image? Factors will be examined on how many times they view fashion magazines, how often they discuss their bodies, their age, and their race to determine how each is linked to their level of body satisfaction. Specifically I want to know what causes women to view their bodies in the negative manner that so many women do today. These issues are very

important to myself as a woman. I also think that my conclusions could be very beneficial to other women, especially those who struggle with low body satisfaction.

MY PROPOSITIONS ARE:

- 1) As exposure to fashion magazines increases, a woman's body image worsens.

Theorist Michel Foucault's prison structure can be used to explain how women internalize and monitor their actions when it comes to their body image. The prison structure, known as the panopticon, is a prison tower in which the prisoners cannot see who is guarding them or if they are being guarded at all. This structure forces the guarded to learn to monitor themselves (Foucault 1979). The self-monitoring encouraged by the panopticon illustrates the fact that modern society does not need enforced social laws due to its own social control mechanisms. Individuals monitor and control themselves because of the notion that they never know when or if they are being observed. This is very evident in the issue of body image in fashion magazines. Women are looking at beautiful models in the magazines just as they would look at other women on the street. They may begin to assume that other women are also observing them at the same time. Just like the prisoners, they do not know who is watching them, but feel that they are constantly being watched. Therefore, the more women view fashion magazines, the more they will be concerned with people watching them, thus being concerned about the way they look and their body image.

2) Younger women are more likely to have a negative view of their body image than older women.

Studies have shown that older women are less likely to view their bodies as negatively as younger women (Hetherington and Burnett 1994). Younger women are more likely to be in social institutions that indirectly promote peer pressure. A college campus is a place that may generate a lot of pressure for women to look a certain way and be concerned about their body image. Sororities think of thin women as valued individuals (Hesse-Biber 1996). Social Comparison Theory can be used to predict why younger women are more likely to be concerned with their body images (Martin and Gentry 1997). This is a transitional time for women, and they are very vulnerable, because of changes in their social environment and in their bodies. Physical appearance is always visible and it is a critical factor in the development of women, who are especially vulnerable in young adulthood (Hesse-Biber 1996). Social Comparison Theory addresses how people develop self-knowledge and make social choices based on their comparison with others. One type of social comparison is distinguishing what is normal (Martin and Gentry 1997). If young women, in particular, are constantly looking at others and comparing themselves to those who portray the ideal body, their satisfaction with their own body will be lower. The social choices they will make about what is the ideal body image will be based on their comparison of themselves with others.

3) The more contact women have with peers concerned with body image, the more negative the women's body image.

These women also engaged in the ideas of the Social Comparison Theory. They are being compared and are comparing themselves to their peers. They are searching for what is acceptable or what they feel is normal in their peer group (Martin and Gentry). If women surround themselves with other women who are always talking about body image, it will force them to also think about it. They will become accustomed to thinking and talking about it when with this group of women. After talking about it for a period of time, they will also begin to think about it on their own. If their peers are critical of the less than ideal body image, they would feel pressure to obtain the ideal image.

4) Women who are white are more likely to have negative body images than women of other ethnic groups, such as African Americans or Latinos.

Most of the imagery on television and in the print media is directed toward white women. Women of other ethnic groups have fewer images to compare themselves to. African Americans and Latinos identify less with Western views about body image, therefore they are not drawn into the same kinds of comparisons as white women (Hesse-Biber 1996). Because there are different ideas of beauty, white women compare themselves to gaunt models, an intangible form of beauty, while African Americans and Latinos have more realistic

views of beauty.

The topic of what factors influence women's views of their body image is important for both social and personal reasons. It will be important for society to discern why women want to obtain the ideal body. Does viewing fashion magazines, age, peer groups, or race have anything to do with why women look at their bodies in the way that they do? If there is a way society can begin to get away from these negative values of body image, then the rate of eating disorders and general unhappiness with one's body might decrease.

Personally, as a woman, I am affected by the way I view my body everyday. It affects what I wear, what I eat, with whom I go out, and almost everything I do during the day. If I know that I will have to wear something fitting or a swimsuit, I will change my eating habits for the weeks prior to the event. I also choose what I wear carefully and try to wear things that make me look thinner. I tend to associate with women who feel the same way about their bodies. It is comforting to know that other women are not satisfied with their bodies, and I enjoy comparing stories about the lengths we go to look the way we do. I would like answers for myself, but hopefully the information I will generate will be a beginning to help others and could possibly be something I could continue researching in graduate school.

SAMPLING STRATEGY AND PARTICIPANTS

Nonprobability sampling was used because there was not enough time to get a random sample in which all females would have an equal probability of being in the study. Since this was a small, non-random sample, there was no reason to test for statistical significance, because no inferences to the population could be made. However, as an exploratory study this will give a framework for studying these issues and how to construct a large scale survey. Women were sampled by the availability method and the quota method. A five question survey was issued to each participant, complete with a cover letter. All surveys were identical. There were a total of 60 women in the survey. In the availability method, women whom I knew and also women in different classes at IUSB were asked. This method is based on convenience, because it was convenient for me to ask my friends and family members, as well as going into a classroom and getting a number of responses. The quota method was also used to ensure that women of different ages and races were represented. White to nonwhite women were compared in my survey, so an equal representation of white and nonwhite women were tried for. There were 39 white women and 20 nonwhite women represented. Young women and older women were also compared. The age ranges of women surveyed in years were 18-29 (28 participants), 30-39 (7 participants), 40-49 (14 participants), and 50+ (11 participants). Women of both race and age were purposely asked to fill the quota. Both methods made the study a nonprobability study because it was not

random.

CONCEPTS AND SURVEY

Five concepts were chosen: body image, exposure to fashion magazines, contact with peers concerned with body image, age and race. Included for each concept below is the nominal definition, the variable, the variable's attributes, and the level of measurement. The five question survey consisted of these concepts, but did not include the hypothesis.

Concept 1: Body image

Nominal definition: The perception (mental image) of one's overall body, which includes emotions and evaluation, especially when weight is concerned.

Variable: The level of satisfaction a woman has with her body overall.

Attributes:

1. Very satisfied
2. Satisfied
3. Unsatisfied
4. Very unsatisfied

Level of measurement: ordinal

Concept 2: Exposure to fashion magazines

Nominal definition: The looking at, but not necessarily reading of, fashion/beauty magazines, complete with articles and advertisements defining beauty and fashion.

Variable: The frequency with which a woman views fashion/beauty magazines in an average month.

Attributes:

1. 0 times a month
2. 1-2 times a month
3. 3-4 times a month
4. 5 or more times a month

Level of measurement: Ordinal

Hypothesis: The more times per month a woman views fashion magazines, the lower her satisfaction with her body overall.

Concept 3: Contact with peers concerned with body image

Nominal definition: the people you spend your leisure time with, particularly friends.

Variable: The amount of leisure time a woman spends with her friends talking about their bodies in an average visit.

Attributes:

1. Never
2. Part of the time
3. A lot of the time
4. All of the time

Level of measurement: Ordinal

Hypothesis: The more time a woman spends with friends who talk about their bodies in an average visit, the less satisfaction she will have with her body overall.

Concept 4: Age

Nominal definition: The chronological category

Variable: How old a woman is according to her chronological category.

Attributes:

1. 18-29 years
2. 30-39 years
3. 40-49 years
4. 50 years and older

Level of measurement: Ordinal

Hypothesis: The younger a woman is, the less satisfaction she will have with her body overall.

Concept 5: Race

Nominal definition: Ethnicity

Variable: The ethnicity of a woman

Attributes:

1. White
2. African American
3. Latino
4. Asian
5. Other

Level of measurement: Nominal

Hypothesis: A white woman will have less satisfaction with her body image than a woman of another ethnic background.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The following section lists the hypotheses and relates them to the results of the surveys. The table below shows how many responses were given for each question asked. N equals the number of people who answered each question. Missing data are those who chose not to answer a particular question.

Statistics

		How many times a woman views fashion/beauty magazines	How much a woman talks about her body to coworkers, friends...	Her age	Her ethnicity	Level of satisfaction with body
N	Valid	60	60	60	59	59
	Missing	0	0	0	1	1

The next five tables are frequency tables. These show how often respondents answered each question. For example, in the first table, for the response of 0 times a month the number 33 appears in the frequency column. This means that 33

women viewed fashion magazines 0 times a month. Thirty-three women were 55% of the sample population. All of these tables can be interpreted in the same way.

How many times a woman views fashion/beauty magazines

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 0 times a month	33	55.0	55.0	55.0
1-2 times a month	18	30.0	30.0	85.0
3-4 times a month	4	6.7	6.7	91.7
5 or more times a month	5	8.3	8.3	100.0
Total	60	100.0	100.0	

How much a woman talks about her body to coworkers, friends...

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Very often	12	20.0	20.0	20.0
Often	8	13.3	13.3	33.3
Not very often	35	58.3	58.3	91.7
Never	5	8.3	8.3	100.0
Total	60	100.0	100.0	

Her age

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 18-29	28	46.7	46.7	46.7
30-39	7	11.7	11.7	58.3
40-49	14	23.3	23.3	81.7
50 years or older	11	18.3	18.3	100.0
Total	60	100.0	100.0	

Her ethnicity

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid white	39	65.0	66.1	66.1
other	20	33.3	33.9	100.0
Total	59	98.3	100.0	
Missing 99.00	1	1.7		
Total	60	100.0		

Level of satisfaction with body

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid satisfied or very satisfied	30	50.0	50.8	50.8
unsatisfied or very unsatisfied	29	48.3	49.2	100.0
Total	59	98.3	100.0	
Missing System	1	1.7		
Total	60	100.0		

Hypothesis 1

The more times per month a woman views fashion/beauty magazines, the lower her satisfaction with her body overall.

The crosstab results suggest that women who view fashion magazines more times a month are less satisfied with their bodies. For example, Table 1 suggests that 80% of women said they were "unsatisfied" or "very unsatisfied" with their bodies when they viewed fashion magazines 5 or more times a month, while only 53% of women who view fashion

magazines 0 times a month said they were "unsatisfied" or "very unsatisfied".

This supported the hypothesis, but only in the extremes. For women who viewed fashion magazines 1-2 times a month 39% were "unsatisfied" or "very unsatisfied," while women who viewed fashion magazines 3-4 times a month only 25% were "unsatisfied" or "very unsatisfied". If the hypothesis was completely supported, numbers would be expected to consistently increase as the number of times per month the women viewed fashion magazines increased.

Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
How many times a woman views fashion/beauty magazines * Level of satisfaction with body	59	98.3%	1	1.7%	60	100.0%

Shows the number (N) and the percent of missing and valid responses (cases) for Hypothesis 1.

Table 1: Cross Tabular Analysis Between Respondents' Frequency of Viewing Fashion Magazines and Level of Body Satisfaction.

			Level of satisfaction with body		Total
			satisfied or very satisfied	unsatisfied or very unsatisfied	
How many times a woman views fashion/beauty magazines	0 times a month	Count % within How many times a woman views fashion/beauty magazines	15 46.9%	17 53.1%	32 100.0%
	1-2 times a month	Count % within How many times a woman views fashion/beauty magazines	11 61.1%	7 38.9%	18 100.0%
	3-4 times a month	Count % within How many times a woman views fashion/beauty magazines	3 75.0%	1 25.0%	4 100.0%
	5 or more times a month	Count % within How many times a woman views fashion/beauty magazines	1 20.0%	4 80.0%	5 100.0%
Total:		Count % within How many times a woman views fashion/beauty magazines	30 50.8%	29 49.2%	59 100.0%

Hypothesis 2

The more times a woman spends with friends who talk about their bodies in an average visit, the less satisfaction she will have with her body overall.

The crosstabs results suggest that the more frequently women talk about their bodies with their coworkers, friends, or partners, the more satisfied they are with their bodies. In Table 2, of the women who talked "very often" to someone about their bodies, 58% were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" compared to only 41% who were "unsatisfied" or "very unsatisfied." This would suggest that those who "never" spoke about their bodies would be "unsatisfied" or "very unsatisfied," but the statistics were almost identical to those

who talked "very often" about their bodies. Of the women who said they "never" spoke about their bodies, 60% were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" and 40% were "unsatisfied" or "very unsatisfied." Therefore, there is no real relationship between those who spoke about their bodies and those who did not.

This information refutes the hypothesis because those who spoke more often about their bodies were predicted to have a lower satisfaction with their bodies. It showed that those who spoke "very often" were more satisfied with their bodies than not satisfied. It showed almost the same information of those who "never" spoke about their bodies, suggesting that there is no relationship.

Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
How much a woman talks about her body to coworkers, friends... * Level of satisfaction with body	59	98.3%	1	1.7%	60	100.0%

Shows the number (N) and the percent of missing and valid responses (cases) for Hypothesis 2.

Table 2: Cross Tabular Analysis Between Respondent's Talking About Her Body and Level of Body Satisfaction.

			Level of satisfaction with body		Total
			satisfied or very satisfied	unsatisfied or very unsatisfied	
How much a woman talks about her body to coworkers, friends...	Very often	Count % within How much a woman talks about her body to coworkers, friends...	7 58.3%	5 41.7%	12 100.0%
	Often	Count % within How much a woman talks about her body to coworkers, friends...	3 37.5%	5 62.5%	8 100.0%
	Not very often	Count % within How much a woman talks about her body to coworkers, friends...	17 50.0%	17 50.0%	34 100.0%
	Never	Count % within How much a woman talks about her body to coworkers, friends...	3 60.0%	2 40.0%	5 100.0%
Total		Count % within How much a woman talks about her body to coworkers, friends...	30 50.8%	29 49.2%	59 100.0%

Hypothesis 3

The younger a woman is, the less satisfaction she will have with her body overall.

The crosstabs results suggest that younger women are less satisfied with their bodies than older women. Table 3 shows that 57% of women ages 18-29 were "unsatisfied" or "very unsatisfied" with their bodies, while 28% of women ages 30-

39, 46% of women ages 40-49, and 45% of women ages 50 and over were "unsatisfied" or "very unsatisfied."

This supports the hypothesis because the youngest group of women were the least satisfied with their bodies. The number in the age group 30-39 may be lower because of the fact that there were fewer women in that category surveyed. However, when looking at the extremes, my hypothesis is supported.

Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Her age * Level of satisfaction with body	59	98.3%	1	1.7%	60	100.0%

Shows the number (N) and the percent of missing and valid responses (cases) for Hypothesis 3.

Table 3: Cross Tabular Analysis Between Respondents' Age and Level of Body Satisfaction.

			Level of satisfaction with body		Total
			satisfied or very satisfied	unsatisfied or very unsatisfied	
Her age	18-29	Count	12	16	28
		% within Her age	42.9%	57.1%	100.0%
	30-39	Count	5	2	7
		% within Her age	71.4%	28.6%	100.0%
	40-49	Count	7	6	13
		% within Her age	53.8%	46.2%	100.0%
	50 years or older	Count	6	5	11
		% within Her age	54.5%	45.5%	100.0%
Total		Count	30	29	59
		% within Her age	50.8%	49.2%	100.0%

Hypothesis 4

A white woman will have less satisfaction with her body than a woman of another ethnic background.

The crosstab results suggest that white women are less satisfied with their bodies than nonwhite women. Table 5

shows that 64% of white women are "unsatisfied" or "very unsatisfied" with their bodies, while only 20% of nonwhite women were "unsatisfied" or "very unsatisfied."

This supports the hypothesis in this sample size. The sample was 66% white and 33% nonwhite, which may account for slightly higher percentages of white women.

Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
ETHNICIT * Level of satisfaction with body	59	98.3%	1	1.7%	60	100.0%

Shows the number (N) and the percent of missing and valid responses (cases) for Hypothesis 4.

Table 4: Cross Tabular Analysis of Respondents' Ethnicity/Race (White versus Nonwhite) and Level of Body Satisfaction.

			Level of satisfaction with body		Total
			satisfied or very satisfied	unsatisfied or very unsatisfied	
ETHNICIT 1.00	Count		14	25	39
	% within ETHNICIT		35.9%	64.1%	100.0%
2.00	Count		16	4	20
	% within ETHNICIT		80.0%	20.0%	100.0%
Total	Count		30	29	59
	% within ETHNICIT		50.8%	49.2%	100.0%

Note: "1.00" is white and "2.00" is nonwhite.

CONCLUSION

Questioned in the introduction was how viewing fashion magazines, the amount of talking women do about their bodies, age and race affected the level of satisfaction women had with their bodies. After analyzing the data, I have found that of the women in my survey, those who viewed more fashion magazines had less overall body satisfaction than those who viewed them less often. Younger women are less satisfied with their bodies than older women. White women have less body satisfaction than nonwhite women. However, women who talked more about their bodies with others have a higher body satisfaction than those who do not.

The exposure to fashion and beauty magazines does have a negative impact on the satisfaction that women have with their bodies. The image of women in fashion magazines are images that most women cannot achieve, and thus, may lower how they feel about their own bodies. It was also concluded that

younger women are more vulnerable to the "ideal" body. This may be due to the constant comparison of their bodies with others and the environments they find themselves in. Thus, they do have lower satisfaction with their bodies. Finally, white women appear to be more vulnerable to the aspects of society, which contributes to the conclusion that they have less overall body satisfaction than nonwhite women. No conclusions can be based on the information obtained about women's relationships with others and how often they discuss their bodies.

These findings have led to questions of what other factors might influence what levels of satisfaction women have with their bodies. Further research can develop these ideas by exploring issues of relationship status, socioeconomic status and level of education. It would be interesting to see if these are factors that would affect a woman's level of body satisfaction as well.

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SARAH ANN DIPAOLO graduated in May 2001 with a degree in Sociology. This paper was presented at the Midwest Sociology Conference. Sarah is also one of seventeen students in the U.S. attending the American Sociological Association Honors Program in August where she will present this paper again. She plans to attend graduate school in Sociology in the fall of 2002. As for the next year, she is moving to Seattle, Washington to do Habitat for Humanity volunteer work through the AmeriCorps.