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UNDERSTANDING BODY IMAGE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AFRICAN
AMERICAN AND WHITE WOMEN

by

Dominique L. Watson

A Thesis

Submitted in Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Major: Sociology

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DEDICATION

I would like to first express my sincere gratitude to God for making this all possible and for granting me the strength and courage to successfully complete an exceptional accomplishment, a Master's thesis. To my son Darius, on October 9, 2000 you changed my life by giving it meaning and purpose. This thesis I dedicate to you us an accomplishment of my academics. Writing this thesis challenged me in many ways, but through perseverance, hard work, and determination, I conquered these challenges. I hope these are principles in which you will live by and utilize to excel in your academics. It would not have been possible to write this Master's thesis or pursue my academia without the help and support of my mother, Stephanie and stepfather William. I would like to acknowledge my church family at Morning View Baptist Church for providing with me spiritual guidance and offering invaluable support to me throughout my academic journey. I am most grateful to my grandmother Lottie, for instilling in me values that encouraged me to be smart, strong, and bold despite my life's circumstances. I would also like to thank my friends, Chrystal, Lakina, Alizah, and Nikki for your immeasurable support, encouragement, and motivation when my commitment to this program was growing bleak. Also, I would like to thank my love, Red for showing me the true definition of love. Over the years, you have supported me, guided me, and more importantly, showed me steadfast love. I am forever grateful for you.

I would like to express my deepest heartfelt appreciation to my thesis chair, Dr. Wesley James, who introduced me to sociology, and whose passion for teaching

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ABSTRACT

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"Understanding Body Image Differences Between African American and White
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Recent empirical studies have examined sociocultural factors that affect women's development of body dissatisfaction including the roles of media, peer influence, and racial\cultural standards. This study examines the influence of racial socialization, mass media, family, and peers in influencing African American and White women's body dissatisfaction. Specifically, focus groups are used from a sample of 25 African American and White women college students between the ages of 18 and 22. This study draws on a social comparison theoretical framework which argues that individuals evaluate their self-concept based on their ideas, values, and attitudes of those similar to them. This study finds that African American women are vulnerable to White standards of beauty. However, they are more resilient to these standards because of how they are racially socialized. Further, White women were more susceptible to conform to normative ideals of beauty that equate beauty with thinness.

Keywords: mass media; women; body weight; body dissatisfaction; sociocultural influences; African American and White, racial socialization

INTRODUCTION

Body image is the subjective understanding of one's own body weight and physical appearance as negotiated by hegemonic ideas of what is acceptable along these dimensions. In Western society, previous research has suggested that there are major differences in body dissatisfaction among women (Cohen 2006; Demarest and Allen, 2000). Body dissatisfaction among African American and White women is a direct result of media, peers, and racial socialization that pressures women to conform to overarching standards of beauty (Hesse-Biber, Howling, Leavy, & Lovejoy 2004; Milkie 1999; Mueller 2010; Parker et al. 1995). Because of this pressure, women are compelled to conform to sociocultural expectations of beauty norms. These dominant cultural norms of beauty are a reflection of patriarchal norms of thinness and Whiteness. Some women internalize the message that being thin is synonymous to the ideal beauty standard of physical attractiveness. The overwhelming pressure society exerts on women to attain such an ideal drives women to engage in a practice referred to as beautyism (Cash 2004), which is an assumption that physical attractiveness prevails over intelligence, value, and knowledge. Craig (2002) reinforces this claim by arguing that in a male supremacist society, women are valued by their physical appearance. These oppressive ideals of physical attractiveness serve as a major disadvantage for women because it affects their self-concept. "Women are taught to view their bodies from the outside, as if they were commodities, which cause a distortion of body image and a disjuncture from their own bodies, which are objectified and continually monitored for faults" (Grogan &

Wainwright 1996: 665). Beauty norms are determined and reified by men's views of women as property and objects of pleasure.

A growing body of literature examining racial differences in body image has documented that African American women are less likely to experience body image dissatisfaction than are women of other races. Also, African American women exhibit higher levels of resiliency to the negative effects of the media, peers, and socialization compared to their White counterparts (Evans & McConnell 2003; Hesse-Biber et al. 2004). Flowers et al. (2012) contend that African Americans who positively internalize their Blackness reports higher self-esteem. Hesse-Biber et al. (2004:60) reinforces this claim by stating that:

Self-esteem exists in a cultural context. Self-esteem varies on an individual basis in any given culture and/or society because it is mediated through status, role, and other culturally based variables. In many ways this increased self-confidence that arises out of a strong *racial identity* translates directly into an acceptance of one's own body and appearance. In a Eurocentric culture in which women are valued as bodily objects, self-esteem is intrinsically linked to appearance.

This suggests that race matters for how women receive messages and internalize beauty ideals. Also, racial socialization is a major structuring identity system that affects how African American women experience body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, African American women who are racially socialized into a different set of beauty ideals are in some ways insulated from White hegemonic ideals by African American culture's broader acceptance of a heavier silhouette (Lovejoy 2001), suggesting that African

American women may experience a different hegemonic standard than that of White women. By contrast, White women are more susceptible to internalizing the more dominant cultural hegemonic ideals of beauty being thinness, and this higher rate of susceptibility is evident in their higher incidences of eating disorders (Cohen 2006; Patton 2000).

Though race clearly has an effect on how women receive cultural messages and internalizes beauty ideals, the literature on body image does not sufficiently engage Black women's specific body image issues, either through comparison to White women or in comparison to other Black women. This thesis attempts to bridge this gap by exploring race specific ways in how women are exposed to and negotiate cultural messages about their bodies. It also explores how two equally hegemonic but distinct ideals of beauty developed for Black and White women, and examines the different meanings of body satisfaction for each. Previous research has examined several factors that are associated with body dissatisfaction, but this research offers a unique approach that examines simultaneously mass media, racial socialization, peers, and family. I draw on in-depth focus group data from a sample of 25 African American and White women to explore the following research questions: 1) How do Black and White women negotiate two different but overlapping standards of beauty? 2) How does race affect the likelihood that women will emulate the ideals, thoughts, and behaviors of others? 3) Are African American young women more or less likely than White young women to construct their body image based on how they anticipate others (peers, media, family, or culture) perceive them?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Hegemonic Beauty Standards

　　　Research has indicated that White women strive to attain the ultra-slender body that is consistent with the hegemonic standard (Lovejoy, 2001). This claim is consistently supported in that White women were significantly more likely than minority women to have higher drives for thinness and body dissatisfaction (Bissell and Zhou 2004; Botta 2000). According to Harrison and Cantor (1997) such representations of feminine beauty reinforces the desirability of extreme thinness. While Black women have less striving for thinness, they often strive to meet hegemonic standards within the Black community, including the ideals of long, straight hair and lighter skin. Although long hair and light skin are part of hegemonic ideals of Whiteness, as deployed in Black communities these ideals take cultural meanings. Moreover, Black beauty standards call for shapely women that are not necessarily coke bottles but pears.

　　　The Miss America Beauty Pageant demonstrates the divergent legacies of African American and White women objectification and commodification of their bodies. For example, in 1921 the Miss America Beauty Pageant, a competition based mainly on physical beauty, revolutionized American beauty ideals for all women, specifically White women, by requiring contestants to be over 5'4 and weigh less than 130 pounds (L'Pree 2013). This reflected new patriarchal beauty norms and compelled White women to conform to these norms while excluding African American women. Additionally, the pageant negatively affected women's ideals of physical attractiveness by subscribing to rigid notions of beauty that suggests being blue-eyed, blonde, thin, and White is

considered beautiful (Patton 2006). After the inception of the pageant, body measurements and weight of Playboy centerfolds and Miss America contestants decreased dramatically, especially between 1959 and 1978 (Garner 1980). During that same period, mass media progressively depicted thinner representations of the female body (Cohen, 2006).

White women are more susceptible to hegemonic patriarchal norms of beauty (Hebl and Heatherton 1998; Patton 2006). White women "face the pitfall of being seduced into joining the oppressor under the pretense of sharing power; African American women cannot afford to try to conform to patriarchal defined White notions of femininity and beauty" (Lovejoy 2001: 249). These practices influence how beauty standards require all women, particularly White women to self-evaluate their bodies to unrealistic beauty ideals (Bryant 2003; Craig 2002). This is proliferated in the media, which emphasizes a message of ultra-thin, blonde hair, and blue eyes, reinforced male supremacy and perpetuated rigid and unattainable White images of beauty (Craig 2002; Dittmar and Howard 2004; Lovejoy 2001). I argue that White women's standards of beauty are partly formed to conform to beauty ideals that men idealize as desirable and physically attractive. Thus, influencing White women to internalize negative notions of physical attractiveness that suggest beauty is exclusively defined by women's appearance. As a result, White women's bodies are increasingly scrutinized because they are socially and culturally expected to measure up to such rigid notions of beauty. Jacobsen and Mazur (1995) support this assertion by arguing that such oppressive notions of beauty, particularly for White women, assume a self-conscious perspective where

individuals evaluate themselves through the censorious eyes of others (Jacobsen 1995). Clearly, White women's standards of beauty are largely influenced and constructed by cultural norms that are continuously reinforced in a patriarchal society/culture.

Black Women's Hegemonic Beauty Standards

Historically, Black women have received disparaging feedback regarding their bodies including hair texture and skin tone. "Since 1619, African American women and their beauty have been juxtaposed against White beauty standards, particularly pertaining to their skin color and hair" (Patton 2006: 26). Racist notions of beauty standards reinforced White beauty ideals and cultural norms that excluded Black women from the beauty ideal (Craig 2002). To challenge White beauty standards and stereotypical racist depictions of beauty, Black women initiated the Miss Black America pageant. Miss Black America Beauty pageant symbolized racial pride and "celebrated Black women by creating an all-Black contest while maintaining that its goal was to protest the exclusionary practices of the Miss America pageant (Craig 2002:4). Although this social movement counteracted White beauty ideals, Black women's standards of beauty continued to be influenced by White beauty standards, but reformulated in some ways that are specific to Black culture, especially hair and skin color. Yet, while White beauty standards focus mostly on body size, Black beauty standards focus mostly on skin color and hair texture. Within the Black community, Blacks' developed their own unique standards of beauty that counteracts mainstream ideals that often devalued Blackness. Yet, these standards also reinforced some implicit standards of beauty that equate beauty with Whiteness, including White skin and straight hair. According to Patton (2006),

Black women have created and reified their beauty standards by accepting more diverse ideals of beauty and by being generally more accepting of different body types and ideals. Hesse-Biber, Howling, Leavy and Lovejoy (2004) support this assertion by arguing that Black women embrace a more egalitarian notion of beauty. This egalitarian notion of beauty allows Black women to adopt more diverse forms of beauty and redefine social meanings of Black beauty.

According to Maya Angelou, "Hair is a woman's glory." Historically, Black women have shared a unique relationship with their hair. During the Black is beautiful social movement, Black women's hair was a social marker that represented racial pride, and to some, it meant a rejection of White hairstyles and the chemical processes it took to achieve them. "During this time period hair was not only a cosmetic concern, but its social, aesthetic, and spiritual significance has been intrinsic to [Black women's] sense of self …" (Patton 2006: 28). Empirical studies suggest that Black women's self-esteem is partly associated with their hair (Patton 2006). For instance, Hesse-Biber, Howling, Leavy, and Lovejoy (2004) argue that the fact that hair is compared with other physical attributes (e.g., body weight) demonstrates the beauty struggles faced by Black women. This suggests that Black women deemphasize body image, particularly their weight, and that hair is a prerequisite for being seen as physically attractive. "African American women when styling their hair must attempt to do so as a means of verifying their roles in both Black and White cultures" (Hesse-Biber, Howling, Leavy & Lovejoy 2004: 68). Therefore, Black women's hair entails a social meaning that on one hand represents the

rejection of mainstream standards of beauty, while on the other hand, it is a symbol of racial pride.

Another body image issue that is largely influenced by hegemonic standards is skin color. Black women, especially those of darker skin, are vulnerable to the adverse effects of hegemonic standards of beauty, specifically because these standards of beauty emphasize hair type and skin color (Bryant 2003). Previous literature has indicated that for African American women, skin color is connected to feelings of self-worth, self-esteem, and attractiveness (Thompson & Keith 2001). The "Doll Test" clearly demonstrated how Black children were negatively affected by hegemonic standards of beauty. The study indicated that Black children favored the White dolls and associated them with positive attributes, as opposed to the brown tone dolls with disparaging comments. "The European beauty standard is the notion that the more closely associated a person is with European features, the more attractive he or she is considered; these standards deem attributes that are most closely related to Whiteness, such as lighter skin, straight hair, a thin nose and lips, and light colored eyes, as beautiful" (Bryant 2003: 81). Moreover, Black women, especially those of darker skin experience a devalued feeling of self-worth. Thus, in a male supremacist society where women are valued because of their looks, Black women who do not meet White beauty standards can be seen as a failure (Craig 2002).

Light skinned women and women with long, straight hair accrue social advantages that are not readily available to darker skinned Black women. Previous literature has indicated that lighter skinned Blacks experience concrete advantages e.g.,

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social mobility, higher rates of employment, and increasing number of opportunities for marriage (Craig 2002) Overall, Black women's beauty standards are deeply embedded in White beauty standards specifically in terms of hair and skin color. In contemporary society, this racist legacy has continued to influence Black women's beauty standards. Many Black women, especially those of darker skin, therefore internalize racist notions of beauty standards. Although Black women's ideals of beauty are largely defined by White beauty standards, though not exclusively, their beauty ideals are still different from that of White standards.

Racial Socialization: How Family and Peers Influence Body Image in African American Women

Racial socialization is the transmission of values and attitudes by which individuals acquire the behaviors, perceptions, values, and attitudes of a racial group (Phinney & Rotheram 1987). It is a process by which African Americans counteract the negative effects of living in an anti-African American society. Racism significantly affects African American's social experiences because it yields varying degrees of oppression. "Because of their racial identity, the normal, everyday life of Black people in this country encompasses a reality, both subtle and overt, of prejudice, discrimination, and devalued and depreciated status and opportunities" (McAdoo 2002: 57). In a racist society, African American families must socialize their children to counteract dominant ideas that devalue Blackness and see it as negative. Thus, African American families must develop a cultural value system that establishes their own racial identity and self-worth. In doing so, African American parents communicate to their children a range of

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racial socialization messages (e.g., individualism, we-ness, and participation in racial/ethnic group activities (McAdoo 2002). Further, research has established that African American parents instill and continually reinforce positive racial socialization messages to their children to convey a positive sense of Black identity (Marshall 1995). Rosenberg & Simmons support this claim by arguing that African American children live in an environment in which social comparisons emphasize positive aspects of group membership while limiting exposure to negative aspects" (Rosenberg & Simmons 1971). African American children who are racially socialized are more likely to be secure in their self-identities (Marshall 1995), to report higher levels of self-esteem, (Flowers, Levesque, and Fischer 2012) and to report less psychological stress (Granberg, Simons and Simons , 2004).

Racial socialization serves has a protective effect on Black children, which instills in Black children the importance of Blackness that is often devalued. In terms of body dissatisfaction, Black parents transmit positive messages to their children that promote a strong sense of group identification. This positive sense of group identification reinforces to Black children values, attitudes, and beliefs, of their racial identity, while simultaneously rejecting ideals of dominant culture (Hesse-Biber et al. 2004). In terms of body dissatisfaction, racial socialization protects women from internalizing White beauty ideals of body weight, but does not necessarily protect them from Black beauty ideals. Studies have indicated that Black women are less vulnerable to emulate or internalize images in the media. Most studies fail to take into consideration that mainstream media is predominately White and that Black women are underrepresented in the media.

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Furthermore, studies have not sufficiently addressed how Black images in the media influence Black women's ideals of beauty. This gap is addressed in this thesis.

In direct relation to body image, African American women are more likely to exhibit positive self-images and experience less body dissatisfaction compared to White girls (Evans & McConnell 2003; Granberg et al. 2004). Studies have indicated that African American girls are less vulnerable to internalizing negative notions of beauty due to their positive sense of racial identity. Hesse-Biber et al. (2004:57) asserts in the following quote that the family and racial socialization in the family are primarily responsible for African American girl's positive self-image of their bodies:

The Black family, extended family and the Black community are critical players in this process in that they convey through their words and actions, a positive sense of Black identity to young girls which mediates the values and attitudes of the dominant culture concerning women's role and body image. Black girls' gender identity is shaped as it intersects with girls' race and social class positionality to produce a different sense of gender identity that challenges dominant White culture's definition of womanhood.

This suggests that racial messages that African American girls' receive from the Black community/culture reinforce positive self-images of their physical appearance. While obesity/being overweight is more salient among African American girls' (Krauss, 2012) they are more likely to exhibit higher levels of self-esteem and are less vulnerable to stigmas associated with obesity in dominant culture. Further, Strauss (1999) demonstrates that African American girls report higher incidences of positive feelings about their bodies and less concerned with their body weight than White girls, meaning that African American girls racial identity mediates the relationship of body image dissatisfaction and serves as what Hesse-Biber et al. (2004) refers to as "internalized self-

assessment", which is the relative protection that African American girls receive through positive emotional support.

Conversely, the positive racial socialization that serves as a protective factor in some cases can have negative consequences. One such contradictory message is the "Strong Black Woman" cultural norm. African American girls are socialized into a central message of strong Black womanhood. The strong Black woman is portrayed as an African American woman who "struggles to 'make a way outa no way', who single-handedly raises her children, works multiple jobs, and supports an extended family" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2003: 113). Many African American women resist the oppressive image of the Mammy, but readily identify with the cultural image of the strong Black woman (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2003). This is consistent with previous literature that Black girls de-emphasize external beauty characteristics and emphasize personality, attitudes, and poise (Lovejoy 2001). Not only does Black culture de-emphasize external beauty, but it also reveres in some ways larger bodies-the opposite of the thin ideal. "In spite of the high premium placed on culturally exalted images of White female beauty and the comedic exploitation that surrounds the large Black woman, many African American women know that the most respected physical image of Black women, within and outside the community, is that of the large woman"(Gilkes 2001: 83). The strong Black woman ideology challenges African Americans to reject normative standards of beauty and to be more accepting of larger bodies as they are less stigmatized (Flowers et al. 2012; Hesse-Biber et al. 2004), and it allows Black women to exert greater agency (Lovejoy 2001), racial pride, and self-worth in their bodies (Craig 2002).

Black is Beautiful

The Black is beautiful cultural movement that arose in tandem with the Black power movement was one of the most significant cultural movements for Black women's "natural" beauty of the 20th century. The Black is beautiful social movement arose to counteract dominant beauty standards that favored light skin and long straight hair (Craig 2002). The movement served as an impetus for changing beauty ideals for Black women which led to many women accepting their bodies, including their hair texture and skin color. Despite the Black is beautiful movement, pressures to conform meant disadvantages that accrued to Black women who were far outside the beauty norms (dark skin, "nappy hair" and etc.). For example, lighter skinned individuals continue to be at an advantage socially and economically, and have increased marriage opportunities compared to dark skinned African Americans (Craig 2002), and experience less discrimination in the workplace (Patton 2006).

In conjunction with the Black freedom movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the Black is beautiful movement led to transformations in the valuation of hair texture and skin color among Black people. This was a unique moment in the history of Black beauty standards in which positive ideas about natural Black characteristics and self-acceptance were important. Before this moment, Black women often straightened their hair and some used skin lighteners. After the Black is beautiful social movement, Black women returned

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to relaxers. Today, there is a natural hair resurgence. But straight hair is still valued as is making natural hair look acceptable to Whites.

Though Black women have always been excluded from dominant ideas of beauty they have historically challenged and redefined their standards of beauty and self-worth. Their bodies were not seen as objects of beauty but of labor for White society. Their skin, hair, and body size were seen as contrary to Whiteness, and thus contrary to beauty. Still, the civil rights movement paved the way for widespread public cultural acceptance of Black standards of beauty. Prior to this, Black women were portrayed with racist images that depicted them as fat, dark-skinned, domineering, and sexually promiscuous (Craig 2002).

A persistent controlling image of Black womanhood is that of the Mammy. Designed to make the exploitation of Black women appear 'natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life, the large, dark-skinned, sexless Mammy was central to the rationalization of slavery, as a 'peculiar institution' of human bondage. A 'passive nurturer, a mother figure who gave all without exception of return, who not only acknowledged her inferiority to Whites but who loved them', Mammy was rewarded and elevated for being, simultaneously, a capable, domesticated woman and a dutiful, grateful slave. Physically removed and distinguished by her size, skin, color, and a 'dark heaviness' that allowed a slaveholding society to see itself as 'benign' in both its exploitation of Blacks and its domestication of women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2003: 112).

In a patriarchal society where women are continuously valorized because of their physical appearance, Black women's bodies, including hair, skin tone, size, etc. were intensely scrutinized. Hair and skin color are prevalent issues that affect African American girl's body image dissatisfaction (Hesse-Biber et al. 2004) as they are not the standard of beauty in the dominant culture. "African American beauty is the antithesis of

White beauty, "White" hair, and "White" norms (Patton 2006: 36). Despite these facts, African American women have always resisted negative constructions of their beauty and have always exercised their right to be seen as women, as ladies, and as beautiful.

Historically, hair straightening was a normative practice for Black women. Black women generally viewed this practice as female grooming and as racial pride (Craig 2002). As discussed earlier, Black women's hair is a controversial issue, because some view it as assimilating to the dominant culture while others view it rejecting cultural norms of beauty ideals. Dating back to slavery, Black women have adopted uniqueness in their creativity with hairstyles. According to Wallace, creativity in hairstyles can be a challenge to assimilationist notions of beauty (regardless of style worn) because it can challenge perceived expectations" (Patton 2006: 27). Due to the varying degrees of oppression Black women face, they experience a complicated relationship with their hair. On one hand, they are compelled to conform to mainstream ideals of beauty by straightening their hair for social mobility and job opportunities. However, this does not mean that all Black women assimilate to the dominant culture to achieve upward mobility or other social opportunities. In the 1960s, controversy regarding Black women's hair persisted as unstraightened hair symbolized signified racial pride to the younger generation and bad grooming practices to the elder generation (Craig 2002). By 1965, hair straighten was viewed as racial shame and disowning Blacks as their racial group. But by 1980, hair straightening was socially accepted for Blacks. In conjunction with the Black freedom movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the Black is beautiful social movement led to transformations in the valuation of hair texture and skin among Black

people. This was a unique moment in the history of Black beauty standards in which positive ideals about natural Black characteristics and self-acceptance were important and social indicators that one embraced their natural Black characteristics traits (e.g., "nappy" hair, big lips, etc.). Before this movement, Black people returned to relaxers and hair straightening was the norm for Black women. Today, there is a resurgence of natural hair, but straight hair is still valued as is making natural hair look acceptable to Whites.

In a racist oriented society, skin color, specifically those of lighter skin experienced social advantages that were not available to darker skinned Blacks. Light skinned Blacks have privileges that equate to social value. Previous literature has indicated that lighter skinned Blacks are more likely to be married, employed, and experience upward mobility that darker skin Blacks (Craig 2002). Sociologists refer to this ideology as pigmentocracy or colorism, which refers to individuals who receive privileges based on their skin color (Craig 2002). Previous literature in the 1960s examining the trajectories of lighter and darker skinned Blacks indicated that dark skinned Blacks with less than a high school education were significantly more likely to be unemployed compared to their lighter skinned counterparts with the same level of education (Thompson & Keith 2001). Similarly, an exploration of the significance of skin color at the intersection of race and gender and found that darker skinned Black women were at a disadvantage compared to lighter skinned women. These studies highlight that White beauty ideals adversely affect the beauty ideals of women of color by suggesting that light skin is synonymous to being beautiful. This automatically excludes darker skinned women from being seen as beautiful. Existing literature examining body

dissatisfaction among Black women generally focuses on social factors at the micro to macro level (e.g., mass media, family, peers, etc.) but does not address how White beauty standards affect Black women's standards of beauty and the devastating psychological consequences that result from internalizing White beauty standards.

I argue that African American women's beauty ideals are deeply embedded in the hegemonic culture which makes African American women vulnerable to White standards of beauty. In a White patriarchal society where "Black" implies negative connotations and often as devaluation, specifically African American women internalize racialized beauty standards that perpetuate and reinforce White beauty ideals (Bryant 2003). Empirical evidence has suggested that constant pressure to conform to meet certain beauty standards has increasingly led to devastating psychological consequences, particularly internalized self-hatred and internalized racism (Bryant 2003; Craig 2002). In terms of body image, this suggests that body image disturbance for African American women leads to increasingly oppressive ideals of feminine beauty.

Race Differences in the Effect of Media on Body Image

Mass media project unrealistic standards of feminine beauty, which has a powerful effect on how women perceive their bodies. Mass media is a socialization agent that transmits sociocultural messages to women regarding their bodies (Tiggemann and Slater 2004). These sociocultural messages that women receive concerning their bodies exert pressures on them to conform to societal beauty norms. In the U.S. culture that emphasizes and even at times rewards anti-fat attitudes, girls (women) often experience

pressure to conform to normative ideals that equate being thin with being beautiful (Mueller 2010: 64).

Zhang, Dixon, and Conrad (2010) make a compelling argument that Black women are less vulnerable to subscribe to images in the media because images in the media does not reflect Black beauty standards and thus Black women reject White beauty ideals. Furthermore, the authors highlight that Black women compare themselves to other Black women as it more reflects their reference group compared to White women. Therefore, Black females represented in the media would have the most effect on Black women's beauty ideals. Frisby (2004) concluded that "Black women are not affected by or impervious to images of White models and White representations of beauty, but they can be negatively affected by images of Black models" (Poran 2006: 740). My argument here is that racial socialization protects Black women from mainstream beauty ideals, but does not all the time protect them from Black beauty ideals. For example, rap videos typically depict Black women who are thin, long, and straight hair, and light skin. Black women are more vulnerable to conceptualizing these beauty standards as ideal as opposed to White images viewed in the media. While Black oriented media emphasizes Black women's physical appearance and this influences Black women to emulate these beauty standards and become increasingly dissatisfied with their bodies when they fail to measure up to such standards. Thus, Black women receive social pressures not only from hegemonic culture to attain an ideal body, including hair texture and skin color, but they also receive social pressures within the Black community to attain the ideal body. The underlying problem with existing literature is that it has not systematically established or

fully addressed how White beauty standards influence Black beauty standards. Also, literature seems to not capture how Black culture redefines beauty standards, which creates and maintains beauty ideals that affect Black women's beauty standards of physical attractiveness.

"It must be yo' ass cause it aint yo' face" and " I like her round ass thick red bone" represent common themes in Black oriented media about Black men's preferences for Black women's bodies. Rap music videos are considered a predominately Black form of music and these videos glamorize Black women who are full figured, a strong media image of Black female physical characteristics of attractiveness. A number of studies examining the effect mass media have on Black and White women's body image has suggested that Black women are less vulnerable to social pressures to attain the thin ideal body (Milkie 1999). Due to differences in social constructions of beauty standards in the media, Black and White women experience varying levels of body dissatisfaction in opposite directions. White women compared to Black women are more vulnerable to the thinness ideal due to their hegemonic normative standards of beauty that equates being thinness with being beautiful. Black women, however, do not necessarily strive for the same ideal. Lovejoy (2001) supports this notion by asserting that Thus, unlike White women…who face the pitfall of being seduced into joining the oppressor under the pretense of sharing power, according to Hill Collins, Black women cannot afford to try to conform to patriarchally defined White notions of beauty of femininity and beauty; they must create their own models (249). In terms of weight, Black women compare themselves to other Black women and White women compare themselves to other White

women. Black women's frame of reference is other Black women as opposed to White women because people tend to make social comparisons to others who are similar to themselves on relevant characteristics (Zhang, Dixon, & Conrad 2010).

Previous literature has suggested that the thin ideal body that is continuously proliferated in the media has led to progressively higher incidences of drives for thinness. Harrison and Cantor (1997) supports this assertion, by arguing that thinner representations of what is considered feminine beauty will reinforce the desirability of extreme thinness, and thus exacerbated the drive for thinness. However, the media's perpetuation of the thinness ideal affects African American and White women differently. For instance, Bissell and Zhou (2004) reported that although African American children watch more television than White children, White women were significantly more susceptible to higher levels of disordered eating, higher drives for thinness, and higher body dissatisfaction. Similarly, Milkie (1999) examined the effects of media on ones' self-concept and concluded that White girls generally viewed the images in the media as their reference group to evaluate themselves, especially their physical appearance. Conversely, African American girls did not emulate the images in the media and unlike their White counterparts, did not regard the images in the media as a reference group. Moreover, the African American girls considered the images portrayed in the media as belonging to "White girls" (Milkie 1999).

As highlighted in my discussion in the Miss America Beauty Pageant, White women represent the reigning definition of beauty which reinforces cultural norms that

excludes African American women. One plausible reason why African American women are less likely to emulate these stringent images of feminine beauty is attributed to the underrepresentation of women of color in the media (Craig 2002). Patton (2006) extends this thesis by suggesting that White women view their bodies through the lens of media. By contrast, research on African American women and the media indicates that African American girls are more likely to orient themselves with Black images portrayed in the media. For example, Gordon (2008) indicated that Black girls significantly identified with Black music and television and that hair texture and skin tone were central to describing Black images in the media. Similarly, African American women responded more positively to stereotypical beautiful Black women who were most often light skinned, making darker skinned Blacks more vulnerable to negative images in the media concerning physical appearance (Townsend 2010).

Collectively, these findings suggest that the media perpetuates stringent ideals that compel women, especially White women, to conform to mainstream ideals of beauty. However, these mainstream ideas are approached differently for Black women and even many White women cannot measure up to hegemonic standards (Patton 2006). Although Black media images of beauty are becoming more diverse, the media have increasingly *glorified* women who closely emulate White standards of beauty such as lighter complexion, straight hair, and slender bodies. Furthermore, with the increase of technology (e.g., Photoshop and digital enhancements) the media (e.g., L'Oreal and Clairol) has received a backlash for digitally lightening African American women's hair and skin color. Patton (2006) suggests that images of Black women who reflect lighter

skin and straighter hair is socially acceptable precisely because the patriarchal and racial culture promotes and accepts such form of beauty.

In sum, the hegemonic standards of beauty for White and Black women are complex. In some instances there are overlapping expectations and in others they are quite different. This is important when studying how young women develop their expectations of body image, their comparison groups that affect their satisfaction level, and the outlets and images through which body image expectations are developed.

Theoretical Framework: Social Comparison Theory

Women's self-concepts of body image are largely influenced by social comparisons. Studies have shown that some women develop their self-images of their bodies by emulating the ideals, values, and attitudes of those they deem relevant (Mueller 2010). The social comparison theoretical approach offers some level of explanation to understanding how women develop their self-concept concerning their physical appearance. Previous studies examining body dissatisfaction among adolescent girls have reported that social comparisons are primary social sources in which adolescent girls assess their bodies (Granberg, Simons and Simons 2009). For instance, one study reported that White girls used the images and ideas projected in the media to assess their self-image (Milkie1999). Similarly, Evan and McConnell (2003) indicate that social comparisons is underlying factors in which adolescent girls' evaluate their bodies. "Social comparison refers to the process that occurs as an individual observes those around her, identifies comparison within the social context, and decides how she

measures up" (Mueller 2010: 66). There are two types of social comparisons: downward and upwards. A downward comparison is when an individual compares him or herself to those who are perceived as worse off (Cohen 2006). In contrast, an upward comparison is when an individual compares him or herself to those they regard to as superior. Studies have linked downward comparisons with higher levels of self-esteem and positive self-images (Morrison et al. 2004). By contrast, downward comparison is more likely to trigger elevation of mood levels (Tiggemann and Slater 2004).

There are many different driving mechanisms (e.g., peers, family, and media) in which women can make assessments for social comparison. Particularly for women, mass media is a salient target for social comparison (Evan and McConnell 2003; Mueller et al. 2010). In the media, ideals of feminine beauty that suggest the "ideal body" as thinness drives women to conform to the ideas, attitudes, and values with whom they self-evaluate. The pervasiveness of the ideal body represented in the media compels women, especially White women, to emulate dominant standards of socially acceptable bodies even when the actual body does not match the ideal body (Dittmar & Howard 2004). As a result, many women experience heightened levels of body image dissatisfaction and higher levels of disordered eating (Lovejoy 2001).

Undoubtedly, social comparison influences women to conform to the ideals of normative standards of beauty. As discussed earlier, women's self-concept of their bodies are partly attributed to how the media depicts beauty, but much of what women understand about their bodies are ideas filtered through the lens of social references (e.g., peers, media, culture). Because images in the media are pervasive, women are intensely

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vulnerable to social comparisons. Also, Black and White women often have different

social comparisons within what is defined as beautiful by their own racial standards,

which is a product of racial socialization. The similarities and differences of beauty and

body image in this research are discussed in the following sections.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

      Data for this analysis was drawn from five in-depth focus groups. Twenty-five

women were recruited for the study. I utilized this approach because it is more likely to

elicit in-depth information explaining body image disturbance in these groups of women.

For instance, this methodology will result in detailed accounts of the primary factors that

have shaped young women's opinions of themselves. These factors, as introduced earlier

in this thesis, include family, media, peers, and racial culture and socialization. The

detailed accounts from the twenty-five respondents bring to light how each of these

factors are experienced differently by race, bringing to bear the broader issue of what

race means in a White dominant American culture. Furthermore, focus groups allow me

to capture the lived experiences of these women which provide valuable insight and

information to examine possible explanations of why and how socialization, peers, and

media influence body image. In sum, this methodology is beneficial to understand the

unique experiences of young women at the U of M and the environments and racial

contexts in which they live.

The participants in the study consisted of 13 African American women and 12 White women. The sample size of 25 allowed for a diverse yet representative number of women to be included in the study. I created the most diverse sample possible for two reasons; 1) Racial differences in the construction of body image is a unique contribution of this study in the overall body of literature, and 2) The U of M is a racially diverse student body and an even distribution of Black and White participants roughly represents that of the U of M demographic make-up. Additionally, focus groups not only provide rich and detailed information about lived experiences, but it also allows for an examination of non-verbal cues, most notably body language to provide further nuanced information to these women's answers.

Data collection took place at The University of Memphis. Interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. Data was transcribed with express scribe, a qualitative computer software program that allowed me to upload the recordings for text retrieval. During focus groups, the researcher used memo writing to sort data into reoccurring themes and to further identify key issues related to the study. Once data was transcribed, interviews were read to evaluate emergent and recurring themes. The memos were useful in coding the focus groups because it synthesized data that identified sub-themes. All participants took part in the study on a volunteer basis and gave written consent to participate in an audio-taped interview. To protect the participant's identity, the researcher used pseudonyms and only disclosed the sex of the participant. Participants for this study were solicited from The University of Memphis by flyers that were distributed around the campus giving specific details on the study.

Focus group discussions were led by a series of open-ended questions. Focus groups were recorded using a digital recorder. The questions were centered around the themes of media, racial socialization, family, peers, and social comparison. At the beginning of each focus group, participants were shown a YouTube video to stimulate the groups' discussion concerning ideas of body image dissatisfaction. The video focuses on the role of the media and how it influences girls and women's views of what is attractive. This was an effective tool for the participants to have a strong understanding of the material that will be discussed, and served as an effective springboard for motivating them to talk about such issues. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour in duration. Groups consisted of 4-6 African American and White young women, between the ages of 18-22. During each focus group, I played the role of moderator to facilitate each focus groups discussion. To keep the discussion going I gave examples of body dissatisfaction to help them to feel more comfortable with sharing their experiences. I also probed for further information by asking for more depth of information when the respondents were vague or confusing in their answers.

RESULTS

With this study, there were several similarities and differences in how African American and White women experienced body dissatisfaction. Consistent with previous literature, I find that African American and White women are susceptible to experience body dissatisfaction. However, racial differences predispose women to varying levels of body dissatisfaction. For example, African American women generally exhibited positive self-images of their bodies compared to White women who held negative attitudes

regarding their self-images, in comparison to the White dominant cultural hegemonic standard of beauty and thinness that currently exists in the United States. The following sections discuss the main themes that emerged from the focus groups and how they uniquely affected Black and White women.

Racial Socialization and Body Dissatisfaction

This study indicates that African American women are less vulnerable to social pressures to attain mainstream standards of beauty because the positive reinforcement they receive from their parents as a primary form of socialization. This promoted increased levels of self-esteem and self-confidence about their bodies. Although many of the African American bodies did not reflect cultural norms of beauty, they were more resilient when they did not meet those standards. This is partly attributed to African American women's positive sense of racial identity which mediates the normative standards of beauty of the dominant culture (Hesse-Biber et al. 2004). Conversely, White women did not have this protection to resist dominant standards of beauty because they are socialized in a way that encourages them to meet such standards. A great deal of this socialization comes from their families, as will be discussed further later. Granberg (2009) supports this assertion by arguing that body dissatisfaction is more salient among White women because they do not have the social support that African American girls draw from when self-assessing their bodies. An explanation of this can be drawn from social comparison theory. White girls are more likely to compare themselves to a standard of beauty that is difficult to achieve, whereas Black girls accept a standard of

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beauty that is more common and achievable, thus serving as a protective mechanism

against American cultural standards. My research has further proven these assertions to

be true. There is a clear protective effect that Black girls benefit from that result in them

not feeling the social pressure to be as thin as many of the models and celebrities seen on

television. The fact that Black girls are socialized to not only accept larger body sizes

(pear shaped as referenced earlier), but that this is in itself an image of beauty and

desirability, is a protective mechanism (in comparison to White girls) against the

unrealistic and dangerous American norm that is unattainable for many girls and young

women.

Natasha (African American): I wrote a paper in my racial and ethnic minorities class on this topic and my theory is that it is much more accepted for African American women especially to be heavier, what I equated is a power thing whereas in a Black community women are built to be strong. The way I was raised, I am independent about everything. I never in my life depended on a man for anything I can't foresee me completely being dependent on another person to take care of me so when you come with that kind of responsibility is placed on you it's a little more accepted for you to have other flaws. It's like a man you know most men you look at him and he is the provider, he is working hard, so you imagine this big six foot strong man and that's why I feel like it's more acceptable for us to be a bit thicker and heavier. On the flip slip, White women are seen as homemakers, very docile type women and so you know you have to be in comparison to how you look at your man as.

Alizah (African American): My family didn't place any emphasis about being overweight. Because I am overweight, you have to decide to do it for yourself to lose weight and there is not support when your family is overweight. Now we place emphasis on getting hair done and dressing nice to offset being overweight. I want my hair to be longer because you can do more with it.

According to Patton (2006) African Americans standards of beauty is deeply

embedded in hegemonic standards of beauty. Another component of body image that is

understood differently across race is that of hair and skin color/tone. For many of the

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African American women in the sample, straight hair and light skin were synonymous to being beautiful. For African American women, hair is heavily emphasized compared to White women who de-emphasized hair as a beauty standard. Historically, for African American women, hair was more than a cosmetic concern; it was a status marker of social, aesthetic, and spiritual significance (Patton 2006). One subject suggested that there is unique historical importance in hair for African American women:

Raven (African American): I think it's something that has remained out of slavery that has been internalized. Back in the day, you were favored by your master or White people. White people might feel more comfortable around you if you are a certain skin tone. You can't be too Black; your hair can't be too nappy. So it's just something that has been perpetuated into modern day culture.

One woman commented that she is proud of her look as it is different from her family members, and this has a lot to do with her hair:

Natasha (African American): Almost everyone is my family is light, and I am like the exotic one (she is dark skinned) and I have natural hair and I love my hair.

This research finding is parallel to Parker et al. (1995:108) that African American females stress the importance of "looking good or got it goin' on entails making what you've got work for you, by creating and presenting a sense of style." This suggests that hair is an important attribute in African American women's self-assessed physical appearance, even compensating in some way for being overweight:

Alizah (African American): Because I am overweight, you have to decide to do it for yourself to lose weight and there is not support when your family is overweight. Now we place emphasis on getting hair done and dressing nice to offset being overweight.

Hair is also important for White women, but in a different way. In this instance, it is not that it necessarily offsets being overweight, but is a part of the overall depiction of beauty that is expected of them, as illustrated in this quote:

Patty (White): I've heard that if you want to pull off White, you have to have a certain hair color. I know it sounds weird, but it's to offset your complexion. Some people are very fair skin and if they got in the sun, they turn red.

The quote above is an example of a synthesis of hair and skin color, and how they combine to create definitions of beauty in young women. Clearly skin color, or skin tone, is an important cultural marker of beauty, another common theme from the focus groups is that many women expressed discontent with these aspects of themselves. Specifically, some of the African American women in the study preferred to have longer hair and lighter skin. Studies have indicated that this is indeed an important component of African American women's self-esteem, attractiveness, and self-worth (Granberg, Simons & Simons 2004). Historically, lighter skinned African Americans receive greater opportunities (e.g., upward mobility, husbands, and higher rates of employment) than darker skinned African Americans (Craig 2002). This theme emerged from the focus groups as summarized by the following passage:

Alizah (African American): I want to be in the women's section, I don't really need a big butt. I want my hair to be longer because you can do more with it. I like my skin tone (she is really light-skinned), probably because you can get more compliments and I get more attention, which boosts my ego. You really get more status being light-skinned. My pastor's wife always compliments me. You get more hit on because you are light-skinned.

However, there was a discussion suggesting that some African American women value darker skin, although this was not a prevalent opinion throughout all subjects in my sample:

Patty (White): Well I worked with someone who was African American and dark-skinned and she didn't consider herself dark enough. So she would come and say look "I have a bathing suit mark".

Skin color issues were not limited to African American women. Many White respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with their skin color by emphasizing the advantages and disadvantages of tanning. The issue in this circumstance is the notion of being "too White", in other words, young women are socialized to believe that tan skin is more attractive than pale, or "pasty" skin, and even that tan skin gives the illusion of not being overweight.

Sarah (White): I have a huge issue with skin color. I don't tan at all, I burn, and I am still peeling because I have already burned this year. I wish I could tan, because I have been told before, I am un-dateable because I am too White.

Julia (White): growing up in California, it would be cool to have your tan line show. That was like your status that suggested I got to go to the beach this weekend and you didn't. Let's just say we both lay out in the sun for four hours and I got darker, and she was still this color. For White women, we feel like if you are tanned, it hides your negative qualities better. So like if you are tanned, you don't have to wear as much makeup and if you are fat and tanned, you look better because you are tanned. We feel like our love handles look better if we are tanned. If it's light, it's like it's fat and nasty, and when it's tanned, it almost conceals that it's fat.

Patty (White): You get away with being heavier if you are tanned. My skin is more pinky skin and it tends to look better if I tan, not to mention there is a lot of stigma so if your bathing suit line, it implies that you have been out and had fun.

Caitlyn: Yeah, I think the reason tanned fat looks better than pale fat for me is that especially considering that I've dealt with cellulite since 4th grade, and if you are tanned than the contour of the cellulite is not as apparent. Veins and stretch marks are not as visible either.

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These results show an obvious theme of the critical importance of skin tone, and to a slightly lesser degree hair, for both Black and White women in their subjective views of beauty and body image. It is critical for both races but for vastly different reasons. The sociological implications of this result are elaborated on in the next section of this thesis.

Racial socialization, in general, effects African American and White women differently because of differing norms of physical attractiveness, but both are largely related to Whiteness. As shown in the study, White women are more vulnerable to internalizing the thinness body ideal compared to African American women, especially in terms of how skin color and hair interact with body size to determine an overall picture of attractiveness. Furthermore, White women are less resilient to these norms when they do not meet them. As discussed earlier, White women are continuously scrutinized about their bodies in the media, peers, and by their parents. This has resulted in higher incidences of eating disorders in White women (Cohen 2006). In contrast, existing literature has suggested that White beauty standards can have detrimental effects primarily in the form of internalized self-hatred (Bryant 2003), self-loathe (Patton 2006), and internalized racism on African Americans. An example of White girls internalizing these standards and altering their own body to match these expectations is evident in my sample:

Heather (White): Growing up, my sister was anorexic and she was 18 months younger than I am and it was one of those things like the first time I saw her getting out the shower, she wasn't bone thin, but she was always watching it, and she had some mental issues to go along with that. She thought the thinner she was the more men would like her. She still to this day has problems with that. She is not anorexic, and for the first time in her life she is dealing with weight issues. She had breast enhancements and was upset

with my father. She went from a B cup to a DD and was upset that my father acknowledged that she has altered her body. But then she turned that around and said, men are looking even my father noticed that I was different. I associate that desire to be super thin as her mental issues. I think a lot of the issues I have with my weight are because of her, she was the one who would tell me things like that.

Influence of Males in Body Dissatisfaction

In this study, women's standards of beauty were largely influence by male assessments of their bodies. Many of the women expressed their frustrations with the overwhelming amount of pressure received by men regarding their bodies. In a patriarchal society, to be beautiful is the realization that men emphasize physical attractiveness when choosing a sexual or romantic partner" (Albright 2009: 106). Many women in the sample have ideals of beauty that were partly shaped by how they think men wanted them to look. This suggests that women are vulnerable and dependent on male's assessments of their bodies (Craig 2002). According to Craig (2002), male ideas of physical attractiveness for women are defined and reinforced by racialized standards of beauty. These ideals reflect Black culture norms of physical attractiveness. Hesse-Biber et al. (2004) contends that heavier bodies in the African American communities are generally socially and culturally accepted and are viewed as physically attractive. While there were cultural variations in preferences for the appearance of women's bodies between African American and White men, most women's body dissatisfaction were partly attributed to males assessments of their bodies and a reflection of what men find desirable. Tameka's comment indicates how it is culturally accepted for African American women to have larger bodies and how African American men reinforce cultural norms of Black women's bodies.

Tameka (African American): Well, it is accepted for us to be bigger because I always say to my friend jokingly that if Black men did not like us bigger and they were not as vocal you bet your ass we would lose all the weight… whereas White men are less intolerant to fat.

Natasha (African American): For me personally all my experiences have been positive. I had one bad experience. In the winter time, I tend to gain more weight. But, I guess he (referring to her boyfriend) was in a stinky mood we were wrestling and I pushed him down and he couldn't get back up and he was like "Mane get your fat ass off me" and I said "Pump the brakes, it just got real." So he said it again and I was like when did this become an issue and he said he was just playing. I never had anyone to say that about me. That was a shocker for me. So for someone that I am romantically involved with…that shocked me a little bit. I am a person with high self-esteem and never have experienced something like that.

Nicole (African American): They affect it a lot especially the boys. They were always the first ones to say "Oh, your breasts are small." I use to get made fun of my feet because I have long skinny feet and big nose.

Erica (African American): my story started in the 5th of 6th grade, but guys in those grades would say "oh, she is thick" but I was considered a thick girl. I considered myself really skinny because I was like a size 3 or 5 and I wore glasses as I still do. Most of the boys went for girls who were light-skinned, good hair, big booty didn't wear glasses.

As discussed earlier, men reinforced racialized standards of beauty. Erica's comment highlights that African American boys favored the light skinned, good hair, girls with a bigger butt. Historically, darker skinned women have accrued many disadvantages economically and socially. Before the Black is beautiful social movement arose, darker skinned African Americans were stigmatized and excluded from being beautiful. Furthermore, beauty standards emphasized hair, specifically straight hair which also excluded African American women from being seen as beautiful. For African American women, they de-emphasize the importance of body weight/size and place more emphasis on hair and skin color. Alizah's personal experience with hair and skin color

also highlights a racist notion of beauty which is a "pattern of privilege based on skin color in Black communities what has been called "pigmentocracy" (Craig 2002: 43).

Natasha (African American): Almost everyone is my family is light, and I am like the exotic one (she is dark skinned) and I have natural hair and I love my hair.

Alizah (African American): I like my skin tone (she is really light-skinned), probably because you can get more complements and I get more attention, which boosts my ego. You really get more status being light-skinned. My pastor's wife always compliments me. You get more hit on because you are light-skinned.

White male's assessments of physical attractiveness reflect mainstream standards of beauty. Males serve as a socialization agent that transmits and reinforces sociocultural messages to women regarding their bodies. The majority of the White women in this sample expressed that males generally emphasized thinness. As a result, White women were generally dissatisfied with their bodies in part because of the negative feedback they receive regarding their bodies from males. Consequently, many of the women internalized these rigid notions of beauty which affects White women's self-concepts of their bodies.

Alexis (White): We saw in the video White women always want to be super thin, but just like every other White girl, I probably want to be thinner, but not tiny.

Rebecca (White): I actually had a boyfriend buy me a gym membership once for a birthday. I was like okay, thank you. I went to the gym, but we are no longer dating.

Kimberly (White): I feel like men really have a lot to do with this. It's really interesting to see the impact that men place on women's bodies. I remember in junior high in Texas it was like noooo, you have to be super thin and guys would say stuff like "You must date Black guys cause you are too thick" and at that time I wasn't even dating. White guys would hide girls that are like overweight. I had a few friends who were same size as me, overweight or whatever. This one guy, he really liked one of my best friends and he would go see her at her house and take her to movies out of town. It was such a small town, and so everyone knew everyone's business. Word got around school that they were dating and he was like "No, I would never date her" and she found out and it tore her

apart because she was overweight. Everyone thought she was really nice and everyone loved her, but she was overweight and it was like shame, like he couldn't be seen with her. That was something portrayed as often in junior high. I would always date guys outside of my school and guys at my school would say that I was too fat to date any guys there or if you want to date someone here, you would have to date someone of the lower class because you are too fat. Guys would straight up say that to you. You couldn't get a boyfriend or you weren't worthy of dating if you were fat.

According to Krauss et al. (2012), in Western White culture, the thin ideal body type is an important marker of physical appearance, success, and life satisfaction. This suggests that White women are more vulnerable to conform to White beauty standards because thinness is a status marker of class (Albright 2009). For White women, being obese or overweight is viewed as deviating from normative standards of beauty. According to Granberg et al. (2009), obesity can influence both self and social acceptance due to the varying degrees of stigma attached to obesity in the United States. Consequently, White women internalize these decreased feelings of self-worth and self-esteem.

The Influence of Parents on Body Dissatisfaction

This study finds significant differences in how African American and White women experience body dissatisfaction. While African American women have established their own standards of beauty that counteracts White beauty standards, African American women's notions of beauty are deeply rooted in hegemonic ideals of beauty. Specifically, African American women are particularly vulnerable to the effects of White standards of beauty because dominant ideals of beauty emphasize hair and skin color which excludes African American women from being seen as beautiful.

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Furthermore, this suggests that African American women's norms of physical

attractiveness counteract White beauty standards, but are largely defined and reinforced

in White culture. The majority of the African American women in the sample indicated

positive assessments of their bodies and happiness with their bodies. These positive self-

images were linked to the positive feedback they received from their families concerning

their bodies. Monica's response is typical of how African American women in the study

expressed their self-assessments of their bodies:

Monica (African American): Me being a Black woman I don't worry about people telling
me I need to lose weight. I don't care what people think. I know what looks good on me.
I guess with me growing up my mother never made comments about my weight, and with
me being married my husband never says anything about my weight. I go to him and say
I need to lose weight and he says whatever you need to do.

This shows that African American women do not internalize negative messages

concerning their bodies because of the protective effect of positive messages received

from their families, thereby making them more resilient to dominant ideals of beauty

standards. Furthermore, since many African American women are racially socialized to

counteract dominant ideals of beauty, their self-esteem and their self-confidence

regarding their bodies is high. Previous research has indicated that this notion of having a

strong racial identity is associated with acceptance of one's body and appearance (Hesse-

Biber et al. 2004). The African American women in this sample experienced less body

dissatisfaction because of their increased level of racial identity that is transmitted

through Black culture. "The Black family, extended family and the Black community are

critical players in this process in that they convey through their words and actions, a

positive sense of Black identity to young girls which mediates the values and attitudes of

the dominant culture concerning women's role and body image" (Hesse-Biber et al. 2004:57). Natasha's comment indicates positive emotional support received from her mother concerning her body:

Natasha (African American): According to my mother, I am perfect. I have been having problems with high blood pressure and some numbness in my fingers which is associated with high blood pressure. She did not tell me anything about losing weight, but she did say that we would start walking. It didn't make me feel like I did this to myself because I am fat.

This reinforces (Granberg 2009) the claim that overweight African Americans girls (women) positive self-images are associated with the relative protection of their social experience.

White women in the study experienced higher levels of body dissatisfaction because they are more vulnerable to dominant standards of beauty that equates thinness with being beautiful, and their families reinforced this notion. This study shows that White women's ideals of physical attractiveness reflect dominant norms of beauty which compels them to conform to rigid measures of beauty. Many of the White women expressed how their parents negatively influence how they feel about their bodies. Haley's comment shows how White mothers influence their children to internalize the thinness body ideal, and thus affecting their satisfaction with their bodies.

Haley (White): My parents are so tiny, and they both are smaller than me and so my whole life they would say that I need to be skinnier even when I was 97 pounds. My dad will make comments like "suck in your gut." I could have gained five pounds and my dad would tell me I look skinnier and I could've lost ten pounds and my dad will tell me I am fat. So that definitely has affected my perception.

Amy (White): My mom was small when she was younger, then got pregnant and got bigger and then got liposuction. She would say that I need to lose weight because I am fat and that I am not pretty. My sister is very active and does all the stuff I use to do before I broke my leg and my mom tells me my sister is thin and why can't I be thin. Everyone is small in my family and she also got diabetes and she is constantly telling me I am fat. It has never bothered my dad and he has high blood pressure so he says if I lose a little weight I might be better.

Jennifer (White): I remember my mom running to the door telling me I couldn't go outside without makeup on. She forced me to put on mascara and my dad offered to pay me money to lose 20 pounds over the summer. I worked in a factory for one summer with my grandmother. I went to work without a lot of makeup on and my grandma went and cried and said I let her down because of it. I get left out of family pictures because they are all skinny and I'm not.

These quotes show how powerful the family influence is for many of the White girls in the sample, and in most cases, this influence is damaging. Further, it is clear that parents serve as a primary socialization agent in transmitting sociocultural messages to women regarding their bodies. In this sample, these sociocultural messages being transmitted to daughters are drastically different by race. For White women, being thin is a social norm and a cultural expectation of their bodies. These differences in cultural standards of physical attractiveness among African American and White women affect how they experience body dissatisfaction. These results highlight that body dissatisfaction is less salient among African American women due to how they are racially socialized, most notably from their family members. The positive messages African American women receive regarding their bodies from their parents rejects the dominant culture's standards of beauty which promotes positive self-evaluation of their bodies. Undoubtedly, White women emphasize the importance of body weight as social markers of beauty, as evidenced in Albright's (2009:121) research on reality television, body image, and body dissatisfaction among college students who found that for girls in

Los Angeles "being thin and attractive is a social norm, a status marker indicative of their higher social status; for them being overweight, obese, or unattractive may be seen as a kind of deviance from these class-based norms." In terms of body dissatisfaction, research indicates White women are more susceptible to conform to mainstream ideas of beauty because of social comparisons (Mueller 2010). Social comparison is a direct result of pressure that influences women to assess their bodies. Specifically, White women engage in upward comparison that influences them to internalize the thinness body ideal, and thus conforming to their comparison targets (e.g., peers, celebrities, and ultra-thin models) (Mueller 2010; Cohen 2006). My research supports these assertions of racial differences in the pressure to live up to such standards, and that the role of family is vital in creating and reinforcing these standards.

Mass Media and Body Dissatisfaction

Mass media was a salient theme associated with some of the women's issues with their bodies. According to Milkie (1999) the media has the power to frame, define, and neglect aspects of the social world. The media serves as a primary source which transmits messages to women concerning the ideal body. Many of the women criticized images of the ideal body in the media and viewed them as unrealistic. However, when asked to describe a celebrity body they would want to have, many of the women mentioned celebrities which reflected their reference groups. These ideals proliferated in the media influenced some women in the study to turn to weight control practices that are advertised such as Weight Watchers, Nutrisystem, and Quicktrim.

Most African American women in this sample were not vulnerable to the social pressures in the media concerning their bodies because the underrepresentation of women of color in the media. Black women also viewed the images in the media as unattainable and were primarily beauty ideals for White women.

Alizah: I think if you want to be pretty to White people you would be thin even if you are White and want to be prettier to Black people, you would have a bigger butt. There is the video on Facebook and this girl is talking about her botched butt and she is White and her butt looks like it had a bowl in it. It was like she could readjust her butt. She was showing how she could move her butt and I was like you don't look pretty to White people when you have this big butt.

Julia: I feel this stupid reality shows. My best friend is always about Housewives of Atlanta or Orange County or whatever it is. But there are a million of them and she is always like well, they wear a size 2 and they are my height but weigh less than forty pounds less than me, should I lose weight. And I say "No, that means they are anorexic" I feel like, ummm, there is all these women to make it seem like these are American women and that's not what we look like. I feel like it tries to make it seem like this is reality and this is not. Those alone with images in the magazines are just screaming that White women have to be thin. It's considered somewhat acceptable for Black women to have meat on their bones and White women it's considered fat.

Raven: With the video that we watched I was waiting the entire time…where is the Black girls. You are bombarded constantly with images of skinny blonde White girls all the time. There are Black girls that look like Tyra Banks, light skinned, Eurocentric features. You are bombarded with these Eurocentric standards of beauty that you have to be this one size, certain hair, eyes, facial features, which is really frustrating. I mean it's like this constant thing.

Nicky: When we look at the media, people always pointing out Black women has to meet this certain standard, but a lot of times I see music artist or for me personally from what I have been told was that skinny was not in and if you had a big butt, so a lot of guys would say I don't like skinny women, I like thicker women only because if you look at the music videos, the women have small waist, and big butts. That's something I've found interesting because it went from I want a size 0 to I want a size whatever with a big butt, small waist. I think that's all funny.

These quotes are quite revealing in terms of how young women believe that media depictions women are salient in their lives. There is in many ways a sense of

disgust with the fact that so many girls care so much about what is on television. Many of the women in the sample have recognized how unattainable these standards are, and while feeling frustrated with it, they also brush it off as not all that important. The theme that Black women have their own particular beauty standard to meet, and White people have a different, more culturally dominant and visible beauty standard to meet, continues to prevail in this final section. In general, the girls in this sample, both Black and White, are comfortable with the assertion that expectations are vastly different depending on the race and cultural background that you come from. Undoubtedly, the images portrayed in the media play a major role in this issue of body image expectations.

CONCLUSION

With this study, I examined the differences in how African American and White women experience body dissatisfaction. Consistent with existing literature, I find that African American women do not experience body dissatisfaction to the degree White women experience body dissatisfaction. African American women's standards of beauty are redefined within Black culture, which counteracts White beauty standards. The African American women in the sample generally held positive self-images of their bodies because of increased levels of self-esteem, self-worth, and self-confidence. Because they exhibited higher levels of self-esteem, they did not internalize rigid notions of beauty, which decreases their vulnerability to White standards of beauty. The majority of the African American women in the study received positive messages regarding their bodies from their family, especially mothers. These positive messages promoted a strong racial identity that influences one's acceptance of body and appearance; "A strong sense

of group identification causes one to internalize the group's values, attitudes, and beliefs, while simultaneously rejecting those held by the larger society" (Hesse-Biber et al. 2004: 72). This confirms that African American women's racial identity (of those in this sample), often termed the "Strong Black Woman" ideology, serves as a protective effect from internalizing White standards of beauty through a self-concept characterized as strong, resilient, and self-efficacious (Flowers et al. 2012).

Existing literature has indicated that African American women are less susceptible to emulate media images of the ideal body (Milkie 2000). Many of the African American women in the study regarded the images portrayed in the media as unrealistic and unattainable. While Black women in the study did not identify with White beauty standards in the media, they oriented themselves to media images that reflected Black beauty standards that were largely reinforced by Black males, i.e. "thick" women (e.g., big thighs, big butt, and small waist). These race specific images affected how Black women self-assessed their bodies (Hesse-Biber et al. 2004). Similarly, I find that White women's beauty ideals are also largely influenced by males, specifically White males assessments of physical attractiveness. For White men, heavier bodies are seen as unattractive and contrary to dominant standards of physical attractiveness. This led to White women having increased levels of body dissatisfaction and decreased levels of self-esteem. This is consistent with existing literature that White women are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction because they are more vulnerable to internalize dominant pressures of beauty (Patton 2006).

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For African American women, hair (length and texture) and skin color were perhaps more important standards of physical attractiveness than body size. Historically, African American women have received disparaging messages regarding their hair. On one hand, African American women's unstraightened hair signified racial pride and rejection of dominant norms of beauty, while on the other hand, straightened hair represents assimilation into dominant culture (Hesse-Biber et al. 2004). As African American women are confronted with constant pressure to meet hegemonic expectations of beauty, this may lead them to loathe their unique features (e.g., hair texture, broader facial features, and darker-skin) and assimilate to dominant notions of beauty to be as attractive (Patton 2006). "This racist legacy and African American internalization of this White supremacist racial classification brought about what Jones and Shorter-Gooden have termed 'The Lily Complex'. This complex is defined as altering, disguising, and covering up your physical self in order to assimilate, to be accepted as attractive" (Patton 2003:177). Studies have indicated that African American women's hair and skin color is associated with self-esteem, self-worth, and attractiveness (Thompson and Keith 2001). African American women in my sample exhibit some differences however, as they de-emphasized body weight and placed more emphasis on character and appearance concerns over hair and skin color. Moreover, the respondents asserted in several instances that light skin and straight hair were markers of beauty. Undoubtedly, African American women affirm their ethnic heritage as it relates to their hair and skin color. However, because African American women's beauty ideals are formed within dominant culture they have not been able to fully reject White standards of beauty.

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Discussion

In contemporary society, Black beauty ideals are largely influenced by White beauty standards specifically hair and skin color. White beauty ideals has established and maintained the reigning definition which in turn has marginalized Black women, especially those of darker skin. This study highlights the importance media has on Black beauty standards and demonstrates how oppressive beauty ideals are perpetuated in the media, in interpersonal interactions, and through institutional contacts. White women are also affected from oppressive beauty ideals perpetuated in the media. Consistent with existing literature, White women are more likely to engage in social comparison with other White women (Frisby 2004). This offers a plausible explanation for why women, specifically White women are particularly vulnerable to internalizing the thin body ideal. This also provides an explanation for why some groups of women are susceptible to the detrimental effects of the media, while other groups exhibit higher levels of resiliency (Zhang, Dixon, and Conrad 2010). Because Black women are underrepresented in mainstream media, Black women tend to reject dominant standards of weight and embrace more diverse standards of beauty. However, few studies have indicated that Black women compare themselves to other Black women as opposed to White women. As discussed earlier, it is likely that Black women social comparisons to other Black women may have the most effect on their self-image.

In the critically acclaimed documentary "Good Hair" Chris Rock intimately explores sociocultural pressures Black women are faced with to have *good hair*. Rock's documentary sheds light on how there is a common misconception among Black women

that straight hair is synonymous to good hair. "If your hair is relaxed, White people are relaxed" (Stilson 2009), supporting this notion that many people within the Black community equates straight hair with good hair and that long, and straight hair to white people is viewed as good hair. This reinforces my argument that White beauty standards of long, straight hair influences Black beauty standards which distorts how Black women establish beauty expectations. These rigid notions of beauty deeply affect Black women who chose to wear unstraightened hair because of the negative stigma attached to naturally textured hair. Numerous studies have indicated that Black women's hair is deeply embedded in their hair and skin color which affects their self-esteem and self-confidence (Bryant 2003). "In this regard, hair that is straightened often becomes the compromise for African American women" (Hesse-Biber et al. 2004: 68). However, not all women who desire to straighten their hair are attempting to assimilate to White notions of beauty. Because of Black women's unique hair textures, they invented their own standards of beauty which tends to be represented through the creativity of their hairstyles (Patton 2006).

Skin color is another central issue that was a common theme among Black and White women in the current study. Historically, Black women, particularly those of darker skin often experience lower levels of self-esteem, self-devaluation, and other associated devastating psychological consequences (Hooks1993). The color-caste hierarchy within Black communities has adversely affected Blacks in many ways. In the documentary "Dark Girls" it critically explores the discrimination, colorism, and racism that dark skinned Black women outside and within the Black American culture

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experience. It discussed how dark skinned Black women receive negative messages, though not exclusively regarding their skin color, mostly from within the Black communities which is a direct backlash of racism. The "Blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice," followed by "Say it loud, I'm Black and I'm proud" were rather short term challenges that rejected stereotypical notions of beauty ideals for Black women, especially those of darker skin. The "Snow and Blow" which means if your skin is White and if your hair blows and the "Paper bag" contention which meant if you are lighter than the paper bag then you were seen as beautiful and if you were darker, you were seen as not physically attractive (Stilson 2009) perpetuates colorism among the Black community. Consequently, darker skinned Black women are seen as inferior to their lighter skinned counterparts. Furthermore, this can lead them to develop utterly devastating consequences (e.g, self-loathing, devaluation, self-hatred, and internalized racism) that often times persist through adulthood. It is important to address that skin color is not exclusively an issue for Black women, but women of other racial groups as well. According to Matthew Shenoda (2013) skin Whitening products is one of the most popular products in 3rd world countries (Media and Berry 2013). Women in other countries are exposed to Western beauty ideals that negatively influence their ideas of beauty. In some countries, Western media is inhibited due to negative affects Western standards of beauty ideals have on women. For instance, three years after television was introduced in 1995, represented by predominately Western broadcast programs and motion pictures, Fijans noticed a significant increase in eating disorders and increasing levels of discontentment in women concerning their physical appearance (Sepúlveda and

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Calado 2012).These issues were not apparent prior before Fijan women were exposed to Western beauty ideal standards. More similarly, literature has documented that Thailand women engage in skin bleaching practices to achieve the highest pigmentation of "White" skin. Clearly, skin color is a global issue that influences women's psyches of conforming to normative standards of beauty. Black women's hair may continue to be a controversial issue because making choices about one's hair in White supremacist society that denies Black women agency is revolutionary.

Implications

Understanding the mechanisms that contribute to body image disturbance from this intersectional approach provides a unique understanding of how complex systems operate in shaping individuals social constructions of body image. Moreover, this study sheds light on understand the underlying fundamental processes operating in body image disturbance. The traditional approach in body image disturbance literature does not capture the ways that other aspects of appearance (e.g., hair, skin color, and body shape) negatively affect women almost exclusively. These findings highlight the importance of racial socialization in providing African American women with positive assessments of their bodies. These findings also highlight how African American women are particularly vulnerable to White standards of beauty, although many exhibit a remarkable resistance to the pressures of dominant cultural standards. Collectively, this study shows differences in the conceptualization of standards of beauty which influence how African American and White women self-perceive their bodies.

In light of these findings, this study suggests that cultural messages, not individualistic messages, influence how beauty standards are defined, similar to the findings from previous research (Hesse-Biber et al. 2004). These cultural messages transmitted through socialization agents (e.g., peers, family, and media) distort women's ideas of what constitutes beauty in a historically racialized context. It is important for women to challenge cultural norms of beauty and embrace more diverse notions of beauty. Examining body dissatisfaction using a qualitative design and social comparison theoretical approach provided important insight into the social sources (e.g., racial identity, self-esteem, and racial pride) that are deemed meaningful to how African American women assess their bodies. Women will continue to experience body dissatisfaction as the media continues to present more and more problematic and stringent representations of beauty ideals for women. These images disseminated in the media will have a progressively detrimental effect on Black women because these beauty standards emphasize hair, skin, and body weight which will exclude many Black women, especially darker skinned women (Bryant 2003; Patton 2006). I suggest that programs aimed at promoting healthy body images for women should instill a positive body image in women that de-emphasizes physical appearance.

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