



Ethnic differences in the effects of media on body image: The effects of priming with ethnically different or similar models



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ABSTRACT

Media exposure has been positively correlated with body dissatisfaction. While body image concerns are common, being African American has been found to be a protective factor in the development of body dissatisfaction. *Method:* Participants either viewed ten advertisements showing 1) ethnically-similar thin models; 2) ethnically-different thin models; 3) ethnically-similar plus-sized models; and 4) ethnically-diverse plus-sized models. Following exposure, body image was measured.

Results: African American women had less body dissatisfaction than Caucasian women. Ethnically-similar thin-model conditions did not elicit greater body dissatisfaction scores than ethnically-different thin or plus-sized models nor did the ethnicity of the model impact ratings of body dissatisfaction for women of either race. There were no differences among the African American women exposed to plus-sized versus thin models. Among Caucasian women exposure to plus-sized models resulted in greater body dissatisfaction than exposure to thin models.

Discussion: Results support existing literature that African American women experience less body dissatisfaction than Caucasian women even following exposure to an ethnically-similar thin model. Additionally, women exposed to plus-sized model conditions experienced greater body dissatisfaction than those shown thin models.

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1. Introduction

The media presents an ultra thin body as normal and achievable for women (Warren, Gleaves, Cepeda-Benito, del Carmen Fernandez, & Rodriguez-Ruiz, 2005). However, portrayals of women in mainstream media are thinner than the actual female population (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000). When women are exposed to photographs of thin, attractive women, they experience an immediate decrease in body satisfaction (Ferguson, 2013; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Grogan, Williams, & Conner, 1996; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004; Homan, McHugh, Wells, Watson, & King, 2012; Irving, 1990). This study attempted to replicate these findings within an ethnically diverse sample.

Body image is one area where African American and Caucasian women differ. Being African American has been found to be a protective factor in the development of body dissatisfaction among adolescent females (Paxton, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Stzainer, 2006). Some have hypothesized that this protective factor results from less pressure for thinness applied culturally (Gluck & Geliebter, 2002; Malpede et al., 2012; White, Kohlmaier, Varnado-Sullivan, & Williamson, 2003). Studies have shown that Caucasian women experience greater body dissatisfaction (Altabe, 1998; Barry & Grilo, 2002; Cash, Morrow,

Hrabosky, & Perry, 2004; Evans & McConnell, 2003; Kronenfeld, Reba-Harrelson, Von Holle, Reyes, & Bulik, 2010; Miller et al., 2000; Millstein et al., 2008; Nielsen, 2000; Parker et al., 1995; Wildes, Emery, & Simons, 2001) than African Americans. African American women also have been shown to have a larger body ideal than Caucasians (Dounchis, Hayden, & Wilfley, 2001; Gluck & Geliebter, 2002; Kronenfeld et al., 2010; Wildes et al., 2001). Aruguete, Nickleberry, and Yates (2004) found that Caucasians desired a smaller body type than they considered healthy, whereas African Americans desired a body type congruent with what they considered healthy.

When it comes to media portrayals of women, studies have suggested that African American women are not negatively impacted by mainstream media portrayals. Models in magazines targeted for African American women have larger body types than models in magazines for Caucasian women (Shoneye, Johnson, Croker, Steptoe, & Wardle, 2011; Siervo-Lubian, 2004). Evans and McConnell (2003) found that African American women rated a Caucasian model as above average in attractiveness, but found the model less attractive than Caucasian women. It appears that Caucasian females socially compare themselves to all attractive females while African Americans make social comparisons to other African Americans. Further, research has shown that Caucasian women experience a decrease in body satisfaction after exposure to a thin ideal while African American women do not (Claudat, Warren, & Durette, 2012; DeBraganza & Hausenblas, 2010).

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No study to date has examined African American body esteem following exposure to thin African American models. The present study manipulated the ethnicity of models to examine how model ethnicity impacts body dissatisfaction. It was hypothesized that 1) African American women will have less body dissatisfaction across categories than Caucasian women; 2) ethnically-similar thin-models will elicit greater body dissatisfaction from both ethnicities than ethnically-different thin models or plus-sized models; 3) Caucasian women will have more body dissatisfaction when exposed to thin-models regardless of the ethnicity of the model and African American women will not be impacted by ethnically-different thin-models; and 4) the plus-sized model condition will not adversely impact the body image of the women of either ethnicity as found in other studies (Irving, 1990).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 202 women recruited through advertisements. Inclusion criteria for the study included females between the ages of 18 and 45 and self-identifying as African American or Caucasian.

3. Materials

3.1. Images

Advertisements taken from magazines and online publications were judged equally attractive by five independent judges. The study used ten models each of: thin African Americans, thin Caucasians, plus-sized African Americans, and plus-sized Caucasians.

4. Measures

4.1. Body satisfaction

The Contour Drawing Rating Scale was used to assess body dissatisfaction. Subjects are asked to select their ideal body size and rate their current body size. The discrepancy is a measure of body dissatisfaction.

4.2. Eating pathology

The Eating Disorders Inventory Third Edition Referral Form (EDI-3, Garner, 2004) was couched in the present research as a personality measure and used to measure drive for thinness and body dissatisfaction.

4.3. Depression

The Centers for Epidemiologic Studies — Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977) was used to measure depression.

4.4. BMI

Women were asked to self-report height and weight to calculate BMI.

5. Procedure

We modified the methodology used by Mills, Polivy, Herman, and Tiggemann (2002), advertising the experiment as a market research study. Following consent, participants received all measures except the CDRS.

The participants then viewed the stimuli one image at a time. Blocking by participant race, the participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: 1) ethnically-similar thin, 2) ethnically-different thin, 3) ethnically-similar plus-sized, or 4) ethnically-different plus-sized models.

While the participants examined the advertisements, they were presented with a bogus Consumer Response Questionnaire (CRQ) to enhance the credibility of the cover story of a market research study. Once the images were rated, participants were given an opportunity to “complete a few brief questionnaires for another researcher”. They then completed the CDRS rating their current and ideal body and their perception of the average American woman's body. Finally, weight and height were collected.

6. Results

6.1. Demographics

The groups differed on marital status ($\chi^2(5, N = 202) = 23.85$, $p < 0.01$) with more African American women reporting being single (71.0%) than Caucasian women (41.2%), and age ($t(200) = 2.41$, $p = 0.017$). The sample did not differ on education or annual income.

6.2. Potential confounds

African American women reported higher BMIs (mean 27.94 kg/m²) than the Caucasians (mean 24.38 kg/m²; $t(199) = 4.411$, $p < 0.001$). As such, BMI was controlled for in subsequent analyses. Scores on the CES-D or the EDI subscales did not differ by race. African American women who were shown thin Caucasian models had a lower drive for thinness prior to exposures than four of the other seven groups (see Table 1).

6.3. Body dissatisfaction (CDRS)

African American women rated their current body size (6.25) as larger than Caucasian women (5.71; $t(200) = 2.10$, $p = 0.037$) and rated themselves as having a larger body ideal (4.82 and 4.14, respectively; $t(200) = 3.73$, $p < 0.001$).

Supporting Hypothesis 1: African American women reported a mean score of 1.43 for the difference between perceived and ideal body types on the CDRS while Caucasian women had a mean difference of 1.57 ($F(1, 198) = 10.73$, $p = 0.001$).

Hypothesis 2 could not be confirmed for either race (African American: $F(1, 95) = 1.23$, $p = 0.270$; Caucasian: $F(1, 100) = 0.35$, $p = 0.554$). Examining the group as a whole there were no differences between the body image of the women exposed to ethnically similar thin models than all other exposure groups ($F(1, 198) = 1.47$, $p = 0.226$).

Similarly, Hypothesis 3 was not confirmed. When controlling for BMI, there were no differences in body dissatisfaction between African American women exposed to thin models or plus-sized models. The ethnicity of the model did not impact the rating of body dissatisfaction of Caucasian women when controlling for BMI and looking at the entire sample or at only thin models.

With respect to Hypothesis 4, there were significant differences in body dissatisfaction scores between Caucasians exposed to plus-sized models and those shown thin models ($F(1, 99) = 4.23$, $p = 0.042$). Women exposed to plus-sized models reported greater body dissatisfaction (mean = 1.78, SD = 1.33) than those exposed to thin models

Table 1
Drive for Thinness by Exposure Group.

Exposure to	African American Participants	Caucasian participants
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
African American plus-sized models	7.35 (1.33)	8.69 (1.34)*
African American thin models	7.30 (1.42)	8.39 (1.34)*
Caucasian plus-sized models	8.04 (1.39)*	8.04 (1.39)*
Caucasian thin models	3.84 (1.36)†	6.92 (1.34)

Note: each of the items with a * differ from the † at the $p < 0.05$ level.

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