



# Correlates of appearance and weight satisfaction in a U.S. National Sample: Personality, attachment style, television viewing, self-esteem, and life satisfaction



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## ABSTRACT

We examined the prevalence and correlates of satisfaction with appearance and weight. Participants ( $N = 12,176$ ) completed an online survey posted on the *NBCNews.com* and *Today.com* websites. Few men and women were very to extremely dissatisfied with their physical appearances (6%; 9%), but feeling very to extremely dissatisfied with weight was more common (15%; 20%). Only about one-fourth of men and women felt very to extremely satisfied with their appearances (28%; 26%) and weights (24%; 20%). Men and women with higher body masses reported higher appearance and weight dissatisfaction. Dissatisfied people had higher Neuroticism, more preoccupied and fearful attachment styles, and spent more hours watching television. In contrast, satisfied people had higher Openness, Conscientiousness, and Extraversion, were more secure in attachment style, and had higher self-esteem and life satisfaction. These findings highlight the high prevalence of body dissatisfaction and the factors linked to dissatisfaction among U.S. adults.

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## Introduction

Body dissatisfaction is a prevalent problem among women and men in industrialized settings across the world (Frederick, Forbes, & Berezovskaya, 2008; Frederick, Jafary, Daniels, & Gruys, 2011). The majority of women in these settings wish to be thinner (Swami, 2015; Swami et al., 2010; Swami, Tran, Stieger, & Voracek, 2015) and many are dissatisfied with their weight and appearance (Forbes & Frederick, 2008; Frederick, Kelly, Latner, Sandhu, & Tsong, 2016). Dissatisfaction with body fat level and muscle tone is common in national samples of adult men (Frederick & Essayli, in press) and among college men (Frederick, Buchanan, et al., 2007; Gray & Frederick, 2012; Smith, Hawkeswood, Bodell, & Joiner, 2011). In a national sample of U.S. adults (Fallon, Harris, & Johnson, 2014), many women and men reported preoccupation with their weights (47% women vs. 39% men) and a small percentage reported negative overall evaluations of their appearances (13% women vs. 9% men) based on their scores on the Overweight Preoccupation and

Appearance Evaluation subscales of the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (Brown, Cash, & Mikulka, 1990; Cash, 2000). In a separate national sample of adults, many women and men felt self-conscious about their weights because they were too heavy (61% women vs. 41% men), rated their bodies as unattractive (21% women vs. 11% men), and avoided wearing a swimsuit in public because of their feelings about their bodies (31% women vs. 16% men; Frederick, Lever, & Peplau, 2007).

These findings are concerning because people who are more dissatisfied with their bodies are more likely to exhibit a compulsive need for excessive exercise (White & Halliwell, 2010), discomfort with sex lives (Peplau et al., 2009), interest in cosmetic surgery (Frederick, Lever, & Peplau, 2007; Swami, 2009), and development of potentially life-threatening eating disorders (Stice & Shaw, 2002). Given these negative outcomes, researchers have also turned their attention to factors promoting positive feelings about the body (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). This view encourages researchers to bring attention to the factors underlying women's and men's high evaluations of appearance (53% women vs. 67% men; Frederick, Forbes, Grigorian, & Jarcho, 2007), satisfaction with weight (35% women vs. 40% men), and satisfaction with appearance (61% women vs. 63% men; Fallon et al., 2014). These positive feelings about the body are known to be associated with subjective happiness (Swami et al., 2015).

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Large-scale studies of body image among adults have been relatively rare. In this investigation, we relied on a large national sample of men and women to examine the prevalence and predictors of body satisfaction (specifically, satisfaction with weight and overall appearance). The key question of interest in this study was how personality, attachment style, and self-esteem were associated with body satisfaction. These three key aspects of human psychology potentially have profound effects on body satisfaction. The internal working models of self that underlie personality, attachment styles, and self-esteem help to organize responses to events and experiences in the social and material environment (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). These aspects of human psychology can impact how sensitive people are to appearance-related pressures and how concerned they become with their appearance. As described below, we were particularly interested in whether Neuroticism and anxious attachment style are independent predictors of body dissatisfaction, and whether people who are high in both Neuroticism and anxious attachment style are at higher risk for body dissatisfaction. Finally, given the important role that body satisfaction plays in psychological well-being, we explored the extent to which appearance and weight satisfaction are linked to overall satisfaction with life.

In addition to examining these questions, this dataset provided a rare opportunity to examine body image in bisexual men and women, who remain an underrepresented population in the body image literature (Atkins, 2012). We also examined how body mass and frequency of viewing different TV genres were associated with appearance and weight dissatisfaction because these have been implicated as important predictors of body image in past research.

### Correlates of Body Image

**Personality.** Broad consensus among psychologists indicates that personality can be classified into five broad domains labeled the “Big Five” (John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & Costa, 1999). This five-factor framework consists of five bipolar factors: Openness to Experience (intellectual, imaginative, unconventional), Conscientiousness (dependable, controlled, constrained), Extraversion (energetic, sociable, positive emotionality), Agreeableness (altruistic, cooperative, trustful), and Neuroticism (negative affect, nervousness, self-consciousness). A wealth of research suggests that personality is linked to important life outcomes, including general mental health (for a review, see Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006).

People who are high in Neuroticism are more sensitive to evaluations by others and feel a stronger desire for social approval (Kvalem, von Soest, Roald, & Skolleborg, 2006). This places more neurotic men and women at greater risk for negative body image. Consistent with this idea, women with higher Neuroticism report poorer appearance evaluation (e.g., Davis, Dionne, & Shuster, 2001), higher weight preoccupation (Davis, Shuster, Blackmore, & Fox, 2004), greater self-objectification (Miner-Rubino, Twenge, & Fredrickson, 2002), greater actual-ideal weight discrepancy (Swami, Taylor, & Carvalho, 2011; Swami et al., 2013), and greater social physique anxiety (Swami & Furnham, *in press*). In men, Neuroticism has been associated with greater drive for muscularity (Benford & Swami, 2014). In both genders, Neuroticism has been linked to lower body appreciation (Swami, Hadji-Michael, & Furnham, 2008) and higher body weight misperception (Hartmann & Siegrist, 2015; Sutin & Terracciano, 2016).

Associations between body image and the other Big Five traits are less clear. For example, studies have found that people higher in Extraversion report greater body appreciation (Benford & Swami, 2014; Swami et al., 2008), more positive appearance evaluation (Kvalem et al., 2006), and lower social physique anxiety (Swami & Furnham, *in press*), but also greater dissatisfaction with facial

appearance (Thomas & Goldberg, 1995). A limited set of studies have found that people higher in Conscientiousness report healthier eating habits and better health in general (Bogg & Roberts, 2004; Lodi-Smith et al., 2010), which may translate into more positive body appreciation (Swami et al., 2008, 2013). Swami and Furnham (*in press*) have noted that the links between Extraversion and body image should vary depending on the specific body image outcome of interest (e.g., stronger associations with Extraversion should be expected for outcomes that have a social component, such as social physique anxiety). Swami et al. (2013) further note that only Neuroticism has emerged as a reliable predictor of body image across studies, but that conclusions are limited because of the relatively small sample sizes used in existing studies.

**Attachment styles.** In addition to personality, attachment styles play an important role in psychological well-being, and could contribute to body image. Bowlby (1979) proposed that attachments to others play a powerful role in adults' emotional lives, and Hazan and Shaver (1987) applied attachment theory to understand attachment styles in adult romantic relationships. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) assessed four attachment styles in adults: secure (feeling comfortable becoming close to others and depending on them), preoccupied (anxious; wanting complete emotional intimacy with others but worrying that others do not want to become as close to them), fearful (a form of avoidance where people want close relationships but are uncomfortable trusting or depending on others), and dismissing (a form of avoidance where people do not want close emotional relationships). Attachment style was later conceptualized along two dimensions: anxiety (fear of rejection and abandonment) and avoidance (discomfort with closeness and depending on others; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998).

Considering that attachment theory is one of the most influential and well-researched perspectives in psychology, there has been surprisingly little attention paid to the links between attachment style and body image, particularly for men. In a study of college students (Cash, Theriault, & Annis, 2004), both men and women with more preoccupied attachment styles reported poorer body image across three different measures ( $r_s = .25$  to  $.48$ ). More secure men reported positive body image across all three measures and more secure women reported positive body image in two of the measures. Fearful and dismissing attachment styles were unrelated to body image. The link between greater anxious attachment and body dissatisfaction has been identified in samples of college women (Cash et al., 2004; Cheng & Mallinckrodt, 2009; DeVille, Ellmo, Horton, & Erchull, 2015; Hardit & Hannum, 2012; Keating, Tasca, & Hill, 2013; Lev-Ari, Baumgarten-Katz, & Zohar, 2014; Patton, Beaujean, & Benedict, 2014). Results for attachment avoidance and body image are less clear, with some studies finding no association (Cash et al., 2004; Lev-Ari et al., 2014) and others finding that women with more avoidant attachment styles reported poorer body image (DeVile et al., 2015; Keating et al., 2013).

**Self-esteem and life satisfaction.** How people feel about their bodies likely plays an important role in their overall self-esteem and satisfaction with life. There is likely a bidirectional relationship between self-esteem and body satisfaction, and body satisfaction may be a component of self-esteem. Men and women with higher self-esteem report more body satisfaction (Frederick, Bohrnstedt, Hatfield, & Berscheid, 2014; Johnson & Wardle, 2005; Swami, von Nordheim, & Barron, 2016), and adults who report greater body satisfaction and healthier eating behaviors also report greater life satisfaction (McCreary & Sadava, 2001) and subjective happiness (Swami et al., 2015). Furthermore, many people report that their feelings about their bodies have a negative impact on their overall quality of life (Cash & Fleming, 2002; Peplau et al., 2009). The extent to which body image is an important predictor of overall life

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