



## Body image and face image in Asian American and white women: Examining associations with surveillance, construal of self, perfectionism, and sociocultural pressures



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### ABSTRACT

Asian American women experience sociocultural pressures that could place them at increased risk for experiencing body and face dissatisfaction. Asian American and White women completed measures of appearance evaluation, overweight preoccupation, face satisfaction, face dissatisfaction frequency, perfectionism, surveillance, interdependent and independent self-construal, and perceived sociocultural pressures. In Study 1 ( $N = 182$ ), Asian American women were more likely than White women to report low appearance evaluation (24% vs. 12%;  $d = -0.50$ ) and to be sometimes-always dissatisfied with the appearance of their eyes (38% vs. 6%;  $d = 0.90$ ) and face overall (59% vs. 34%;  $d = 0.41$ ). In Study 2 ( $N = 488$ ), they were more likely to report low appearance evaluation (36% vs. 23%;  $d = -0.31$ ) and were less likely to report high eye appearance satisfaction (59% vs. 88%;  $d = -0.84$ ). The findings highlight the importance of considering ethnic differences when assessing body and face image.

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### Introduction

Body dissatisfaction is widespread among women in the United States (Fiske, Fallon, Blissmer, & Redding, 2014; Frederick, Jafary, Daniels, & Gruys, 2012; Frederick, Peplau, & Lever, 2006; Swami et al., 2010) and in many industrialized settings across the world (Frederick, Forbes, & Berezovskaya, 2008; Swami et al., 2010). In one national study of U.S. adults, many women reported dissatisfaction with physical appearance (23%) and weight (45%; Frederick, Sandhu, Morse, & Swami, 2015). In another national study, many women reported feeling self-conscious about their weight because they were too heavy (61%), rated their body as unattractive (21%), and avoided wearing a swimsuit in public (31%; Frederick et al., 2006). Overall negative evaluations of appearance have been reported by 26% of adult women (Fallon, Harris, & Johnson, 2014)

and 27% of college women (Frederick, Forbes, Grigorian, & Jarcho, 2007) on the widely used Appearance Evaluation subscale of the Multidimensional Body Self-Relations Questionnaire (Brown, Cash, & Mikulka, 1990; Cash, 2000).

Women who are more dissatisfied with their bodies experience more social anxiety (Cash, Theriault, & Annis, 2004), compulsive need for excessive exercise (White & Halliwell, 2010), discomfort with sex lives (Peplau et al., 2009), interest in liposuction (Frederick, Lever, & Peplau, 2008), disordered eating patterns (Cash & Deagle, 1997), and greater risk of developing potentially life-threatening eating disorders (Stice & Shaw, 2002).

The negative consequences of poor body image make it critical to identify demographic and sociocultural factors placing people or groups at risk for body dissatisfaction. A study of 41 sites in 26 countries revealed that women in Asia desired bodies as thin or thinner than women in North America (Swami et al., 2010). Asian American women face sociocultural pressures that could lead to poor body image (Kawamura, 2011). In qualitative research, Asian American women report their body dissatisfaction emerges from Asian cultural emphases on thinness, family criticism of weight, and comparison to other Asian women (Smart & Tsong, 2014).

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The first goal of this study was to examine whether Asian American women (AAW) report poorer body image than White women (WW), and if this difference can be explained by the different sociocultural pressures that Asian American women face. We examined ethnic differences in two specific aspects of body image. The first was *appearance evaluation*, which refers to the extent to which people like their looks the way they are, believe they are attractive and sexually appealing and think that other people find them attractive. The second was *overweight preoccupation*, which refers to fat anxiety, weight vigilance, and eating restraint. Both of these constructs are measured through subscales of the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (Brown et al., 1990; Cash, 2000). The second goal of this study was to examine if Asian American women were more dissatisfied with aspects of their faces than White women, and if differences in face dissatisfaction explain differences in appearance evaluation between Asian American and White women. We focused our attention on body image among Asian women drawn from regions of the United States with sizable Asian populations where Asian cultural values and sociocultural pressures are influential (Southern California and Hawaii).

### Cultural Factors Promoting Lower Appearance Evaluation and Greater Overweight Preoccupation Among Asian American Women than White Women

Asian Americans living in the United States are exposed to two sets of cultural values: those of the local community and those of the broader U.S. culture (Berry, 1997). This means that Asian American women experience appearance-related pressures not only from peers and from popular U.S. media, but also from family, peers, and media of their own ethnic group. Noel Duan (2012) illustrated the effects of these multiple cultural pressures when describing her own experiences as an Asian American woman, stating “I wasn’t skinny or tall enough to look like a fashion model or busty enough to be a swimsuit model, and I wasn’t petite and cute enough to look like a Korean pop star.” Women who internalize these media ideals by accepting and endorsing the thin-ideal are more likely to report body dissatisfaction (Schaefer et al., 2015; Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004).

Objectification theory proposes that one reason media has negative effects is that widespread sexual objectification causes women to become particularly concerned with how their bodies are judged (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This leads them to routinely monitor how they look to others, a process termed “surveillance,” which causes women to identify or imagine flaws in their appearance. Frederick, Forbes, et al. (2007) proposed that the negative effects of surveillance on body dissatisfaction would be stronger for heavier and minority women because surveillance brings awareness of how they differ from the ubiquitous slender White ideals. Surveillance could also bring greater awareness of discrimination and devaluation of physical attributes associated with Asians (Nadal, 2011; Yoo, Steger, & Lee, 2010), and greater awareness that Asian American women are routinely portrayed as submissive, exotic sexual objects in popular media (Kim, Seo, & Baek, 2014; Museus & Truong, 2013; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007).

These sociocultural pressures might influence Asian Americans more strongly than Whites because Asian Americans come from more collectivistic cultural backgrounds. In collectivistic cultures, subordinating personal goals to achieve the greater good is more valued than in individualistic cultures (Triandis, Bontempo, & Villareal, 1988). Developing a more interdependent construal of self and less independent construal of self is one outgrowth of living in a relatively collectivistic culture (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). People with independent self-construals emphasize their uniqueness as individuals and internal attributes. In contrast, people with

interdependent self-construals emphasize the importance of being connected to others and public features such as roles and fitting in with the group. Interdependent self-construal places greater pressure on women to adhere to appearance norms because their qualities reflect not only on themselves but also on their families. Based on clinical interviews, researchers concluded that “the meaning of thinness for some Asian American women may involve deeply rooted beliefs of honoring the family through one’s presentation and achievement” (Smart, Tsong, Mejia, Hayashino, & Braatten, 2011, p. 312). Consistent with this perspective, Asian American college students higher in interdependent self-construal and lower in independent self-construal reported greater body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness (Chang, Yu, & Kahle, 2014).

Consistent with these collectivistic norms, Asian Americans experience more pressure from parents to achieve academically (Chao, 1994) and tend to have relatively high perfectionist tendencies, particularly when it comes to concerns over meeting parental expectations (DiBartolo & Rendón, 2012). Perfectionism is a multidimensional construct (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). It can be adaptive when it consists of holding high personal standards, but maladaptive when it leads people to engage in excessive self-criticism, harbor significant concerns about making mistakes, or to be overly concerned with parental criticisms and expectations (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993). One aspect of perfectionism is greater need of approval from others (Hill et al., 2004), which could take on greater importance as a predictor of body image for Asian American women due to their relatively more interdependent construal of self. Higher levels of perfectionism place Asian Americans at greater risk of developing body dissatisfaction because women with more perfectionist tendencies are more likely to have poorer body image (Boone, Soenens, & Luyten, 2014; Bulik et al., 2003).

Additionally, Asian American women living in areas with sizable Asian and sizable White populations have potential for increased in-group social comparisons along with out-group social comparisons. Asian Americans are much less likely to be classified as overweight or obese than Whites (38% vs. 61%; Wang & Beydoun, 2007), which increases pressure to live up to the stereotype of Asian women being slender. Another physical difference is breast size. Many women are dissatisfied with their breasts (Frederick, Peplau, & Lever, 2008; Gray & Frederick, 2012), and Asian American women report smaller breasts than White women (Forbes & Frederick, 2008). Therefore, it is important to include body mass index (BMI) and breast size as predictors in regressions when comparing Asian American and White women.

### Ethnic Differences in Body Satisfaction and Appearance Evaluation

These cultural factors provide reason to expect that Asian Americans will develop more appearance concerns than Whites. A meta-analysis of the literature in the United States, however, found no differences in overall body satisfaction between Asian American and White women ( $d = 0.01$ ; Grabe & Hyde, 2006). In contrast to the results of the meta-analysis, several studies conducted in regions with large Asian American populations found that Asian American women reported lower evaluations of their appearance than Whites (in Southern California: Frederick, Buchanan, et al., 2007; Forbes & Frederick, 2008) and lower body satisfaction (in Vancouver: Kennedy, Templeton, Gandhi, & Gorzalka, 2004). In the study by Frederick, Buchanan, et al. (2007) in Southern California, Asian American women were less likely than White women to report overall positive evaluations of their appearance (46% AAW vs. 65% WM) and were more likely to report neutral (23% AAW vs. 14% WW) or negative evaluations (31% AAW vs. 21% WW) (Frederick,

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