

## **PREDICTORS OF BODY IMAGE DISSATISFACTION IN ADULT MEN AND WOMEN**

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SHARIN PALLADINO GREEN  
*Miami University, OH, USA*

MARY E. PRITCHARD  
*University of Evansville, IN, USA*

Disordered eating and body image have been widely studied in college students and children. However, few studies have examined body image dissatisfaction in adulthood. Therefore, this study sought to determine the prevalence of body image dissatisfaction in adult men and women. One hundred and thirty-nine adults were surveyed on body dissatisfaction and possible relating factors. It was found that media influence predicted body dissatisfaction in women and that age, family pressure and self-esteem predicted body image dissatisfaction in both men and women. Because adults' views about their bodies can have an impact on those of their children, it is important that researchers continue to examine body image dissatisfaction and comparable issues within adult populations.

Body image dissatisfaction and body distortion are prevalent among today's youth, as evidenced by recent studies examining the relationship between disordered eating and body image in college men and women (Mintz & Kashubeck, 1999) and in the adolescent population (Phelps et al., 1993). In addition, researchers have examined also body dissatisfaction in college populations of both men and women (Vartanian, Giant, & Passino, 2001). Although no one can argue against the need for continued research on adolescent (see Schur, Sanders, & Steiner, 2000) or college populations (see Mintz & Kashubeck), research needs to broaden its spectrum by examining adult populations to determine what influences body image dissatisfaction in adulthood. Below we discuss several factors that research on college students suggests may play a key role in body

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Sharin Palladino Green, Miami University, OH, USA; Mary E. Pritchard, University of Evansville, IN, USA.

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Please address correspondence and reprint requests to: Sharin Palladino Green, Miami University, Department of Psychology, 136 Benton Hall, Oxford, OH 45056. Phone: (office) (513) 529-2447; Fax: (513)-529-2420; Email: <palladsm@muohio.edu> or <mp43@evansville.edu>

image dissatisfaction such as gender, self-esteem, media influence, and family pressure (see Abell & Richards, 1996; Gleason, Alexander, & Somers, 2000; Heinberg & Thompson, 1995).

### **GENDER**

Body dissatisfaction typically is characterized as an issue faced predominantly by the female population. Research has shown that compared to men, female undergraduates have more negative body image evaluations, stronger investments in their looks, and more frequent body image dysphoria (Muth & Cash, 1997). In contrast, other studies have found no gender differences in body attitudes (Wilcox, 1997), which may relate to a recent increase in body image dissatisfaction in males (Cash, 1997; Raudenbush & Zellner, 1997), as men are now complaining about being "too skinny" as well as being "too fat" (Muth & Cash). In addition, a recent study examining body satisfaction in college men and women found that women show lower body satisfaction on average than do men. However, men were also dissatisfied with body image, wanting to be either thinner or more muscular as suggested by Muth and Cash, whereas the majority of women desired a thinner physique (Vartanian et al., 2001). Because there is conflicting information on body dissatisfaction in various populations, this study was planned to explore whether or not there are gender differences in body dissatisfaction among adult men and women.

### **MEDIA INFLUENCE**

Media pressure to be thin influences individuals to have negative feelings about their appearance. A recent meta-analysis found that after viewing thin media images, female participants' body images were significantly more negative than after viewing average or plus size models (Groesz, Levine, & Murmen, 2002; see also Heinberg & Thompson, 1995). Another study determined that how often individuals view media, particularly media believed to promote thinness, predicts drive for thinness, body dissatisfaction, and disordered-eating symptomatology in a sample of undergraduate women (Harrison & Cantor, 1997). In addition, Vartanian et al. (2001) found that media influence was the most important predictor of overall body satisfaction in college women. The influence of media is beginning to affect men as well, as research is showing the impact of media on body dissatisfaction in both undergraduate women and men (Vartanian et al. 2001). In addition, a recent study has shown that although men believe the media have little influence on their behavior, the media do in fact have a significant impact on how men feel about themselves (Kennedy, 2000). Because the majority of research has focused on the media's influence on college students and women, it is important to assess whether or not the media have an impact upon adult men and women.

## **FAMILY INFLUENCE**

In addition to media exposure, studies have shown that family environment can play a role in the development of eating disorders in college students (Pauls & Daniels, 2000; Twamley & Davis, 1999), as well as in adolescents (Felker & Stivers, 1994). Similarly, weight- or shape-related criticism by family members or others has been found to contribute significantly to body dissatisfaction (Fabian & Thompson, 1989; Gleason et al., 2000). However, most research has focused on both younger populations and predominantly female populations, leaving research on adult males very limited. Therefore, this study examined whether or not pressure from family members predicts body image dissatisfaction in adult men and women.

## **SELF-ESTEEM**

A recent study found that body image and self-esteem are positively related in younger populations, showing that a decrease in self-esteem contributes to a poorer body image (Abell & Richards, 1996; Gleason et al., 2000) and bulimic symptoms (Vohs, Bardone, Joiner, Abramson, & Heatherton, 1999). In contrast, other research has found that weight dissatisfaction is not associated with self-esteem for women (Silberstein, Striegel-Moore, Timko, & Rodin, 1988). Whereas self-esteem is a widely studied topic among young women, it is surprising that the relationship between body image dissatisfaction and self-esteem has not been extensively studied in adult women, and specifically in adult men. Thus, this research attempted to determine the relationship between self-esteem and body dissatisfaction in adult men and women.

## **GOALS OF THE CURRENT STUDY**

Although much research has been conducted to determine what factors relate to body image dissatisfaction in younger – primarily female – populations, research on body dissatisfaction in adults is scant. Based on previous research examining factors relating to body dissatisfaction in young males and females, we expected that media influence, family influence, and self-esteem would have an impact on body dissatisfaction in adult men and women. Given previous research suggesting a diminishing influence of gender as one ages (Feingold & Mazzella, 1998), we did not expect gender to be an influencing factor in our study.

# **METHOD**

## **PARTICIPANTS**

One hundred and thirty-nine adults (94 females, 45 males) from the community were recruited. Adults were from area businesses and universities. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 68 years, with a mean age of 42 years ( $SD = 11.65$  years).

## PROCEDURE

Approximately two hundred questionnaires were sent out by mail or handed out directly to individuals. Participants had approximately two weeks to send back the completed survey and consent forms in the addressed stamped envelope provided. Consent forms were separated from the questionnaires as soon as they were received to maintain anonymity. The return rate for the questionnaire was approximately 70%.

## MEASURES

**Body image** Body image was assessed by asking participants 14 questions concerning how they feel about their body (e.g., "I'm happy about the way I look"). Responses were rated on a 5-point scale (1=*never*, 5=*always*). The Body Esteem Questionnaire (Mendelson, Mendelson, & White, 2001) was used, and demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .95) in this sample.

**Media influence** The influence of the media on body image was assessed by the Mass Media Influence Subscale of the Socialization Factors Questionnaire (Vartanian et al., 2001). This 10-item scale inquires about the influence of magazine, television, and models on individuals' perceptions of themselves (e.g., "I feel bad about my own body after seeing attractive models in magazines and on TV."). Participants responded on a 5-point scale (1=*strongly agree*, 5=*strongly disagree*). Questions were averaged to create a mass media influence scale (Cronbach's alpha = .85).

**Family influence** Family influence was assessed by a series of yes/no questions (e.g., "Have you ever felt pressured by family members to lose weight?" and "Does this pressure to diet still influence your opinions about yourself?"). Questions were averaged to create a scale score. This series of questions showed adequate reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .68) in this sample. These questions were utilized in order to address specific instances of family pressure rather than the more broadly defined area of family teasing and criticism.

**Self-esteem** Levels of self-esteem were measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965). This 10-item scale uses a variety of questions assessing personal feelings about oneself as well as positive and negative emotions (e.g., "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself."). Responses were measured on a 4-point scale (1=*strongly agree*, 4=*strongly disagree*). This scale showed high reliability with the current sample (Cronbach's alpha = .91). The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is a widely used scale to assess self-esteem, and continues to be one of the best measures for self-esteem (for reviews, see Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991).

## RESULTS

Before analyzing the factors that predict body dissatisfaction in males and

females, we wanted to determine whether or not there were any gender differences in body dissatisfaction. Women reported less satisfaction with their bodies ( $M = 2.86$ ,  $SD = .72$ ) than did men ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = .71$ ),  $t(185) = 5.72$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### PREDICTORS OF BODY DISSATISFACTION

To determine which factors predicted body dissatisfaction in male and female adults, we ran separate simultaneous regressions for men and women. For women, the combined influence of the predictor variables had a significant effect on body dissatisfaction,  $F(4, 91) = 27.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .55$ . As displayed in Table 1, media influence, family pressure, age and self-esteem made a significant contribution to body dissatisfaction in women. For men, the combined influence of the predictor variables had a significant effect on body dissatisfaction,  $F(4, 43) = 10.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .51$ . As displayed in Table 1, age, family pressure and self-esteem made a significant contribution to body dissatisfaction for men.

TABLE 1  
FACTORS PREDICTING BODY DISSATISFACTION IN MEN AND WOMEN

Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$
<i>Women</i>			
Age	-.01	.01	-.16*
Media Influence	-.20	.08	-.19*
Self-esteem	-.67	.10	-.50***
Family Pressure	-.65	.12	-.41***
<i>Men</i>			
Age	-.02	.01	-.31**
Media Influence	-.24	.16	-.17
Self-esteem	-.55	.18	-.36**
Family Pressure	-1.09	.30	-.42***

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

## DISCUSSION

Research continues to focus on younger populations such as children, adolescents, and young adults, neglecting to examine body image in adult populations. Therefore, the goal of this study was to determine whether or not factors known to predict body dissatisfaction in younger generations would predict body dissatisfaction in adults. Several factors were examined, including gender, family pressure, media influence, and self-esteem. We found gender differences in body image dissatisfaction. Media influence predicted body dissatisfaction in women and age, family pressure and self-esteem predicted body image dissatisfaction in both men and women, as will be discussed below.

**GENDER**

Feingold and Mazzella (1998) found that the differences between the sexes in adulthood were much less pronounced than in adolescence because of greater variability in women's levels of satisfaction with their bodies as adults. However, we found gender differences in body image dissatisfaction in adults. This is likely to be due to the fact that we did not find a great deal of variability in women's body dissatisfaction. Our results are more in line with those of Vartanian et al. (2001), who found that women scored lower than did men on measures of body satisfaction, but that men are experiencing some body image issues that differed from women's concerns of a thin physique. It is interesting to note that issues with body dissatisfaction continue well into adulthood.

**MEDIA INFLUENCE**

Media influence displayed a strong relationship to body image dissatisfaction in women in our sample. This supports previous research on college students (Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Vartanian et al., 2001). However, media influence did not predict body image dissatisfaction in men, which is contrary to results obtained by Vartanian et al. (2001), who found that media influence was a predictor of men's body satisfaction. This result could be due to the differing populations. Perhaps college males are influenced by media due to an excess consumption of television and movies whereas adults are not swayed by media messages because these entertainment outlets are not actively sought.

**FAMILY INFLUENCE**

Consistent with results in Fabian and Thompson's study on adolescents (1989) and previous work on college students (Twamley & Davis, 1999), we found that if a family member pressured an individual to diet, he or she was more likely to have a poor body image, regardless of gender. Because children's dieting behaviors are predicted by the dieting habits of their parents (Abramovits & Birch, 2000), as well as by their parents' body dissatisfaction (Stice, Agras, & Hammer, 1999), families need to be aware of the negative impact of the pressures they place on their children.

**SELF-ESTEEM**

Self-esteem predicted body dissatisfaction in both men and women. Our results are in contrast to those of other studies, which have suggested that the normative nature of weight satisfaction may contribute to a lack of association between weight dissatisfaction and self-esteem for women (Silberstein et al., 1988). There could be multiple reasons for these contrasting results including the twelve-year difference between the studies and varying scales used to measure weight or body dissatisfaction. In addition, our results were similar to those

found on a previous study of male and female college students (Green & Pritchard, 2002). Regardless, it is apparent that future studies should not neglect self-esteem when examining body dissatisfaction.

The results of our study showed that age, family pressure, and self-esteem were significant predictors of body dissatisfaction in both adult men and women. In addition, adult women report a significant level of media influence similar to that found in younger women. With the emphasis of media persuading males to engage in bodybuilding and other such activities, even if they do not believe the media influence them, more research needs to be conducted on the adult male population. Future research should investigate other factors (e.g., influence of friends or coworkers) that may contribute to the staying power of body image dissatisfaction in adults, as it is evident that body image dissatisfaction is not strictly an issue faced solely by younger generations. Such research contributions could aid in the development of programs geared towards increasing body satisfaction in adults.

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