

Academic Achievement and Body Image in Undergraduate Women

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Introduction

Women attend college to further themselves through education, but are confronted with traditional concepts of beauty and stereotypes regarding physical appearance. College and university women also receive mixed messages regarding their value as students and the importance of attractiveness (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990). An individual's sense of self-worth can be connected to their weight and body shape (Fairburn & Beglin, 1994). For many women, college is a paradox between the serious nature of intellectual curiosity and the pull to conform to societal expectations. These expectations can be powerful forces as they define themselves mentally and physically. This quest for recognition of a physical definition presents many problems, particularly as female students attempt to conform to often distorted views of beauty and self-image (Bergstrom & Neighbors, 2006).

An alarming number of women engage in self-destructive, unhealthy behaviors to conform to broad and societal-driven concepts of beauty (Sapia, 2001). Eating disorders can be found in 0.5% to 3% of the general population; in terms of eating disorders, women outnumber men 10 to 1 (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). This is particularly true on college campuses (Levitt, 2004); four percent to twenty-two percent of college-age women have reported participating in behaviors indicative of bulimia or anorexia (Collins, Kreisberg, Pertschuk, & Fager, 1982; Harrison & Cantor, 2006; Pyle, Neumann, Halvorson, & Mitchell, 1990; Thompson & Schwartz, 1982).

Regardless of how the societal definition of physical beauty has been developed, many college women seek conformity with the pages of magazines (Hawkins, Richards, Granley, & Stein, 2004). Individuals may also be susceptible to eating disorders because of the idealization of thinness in the media (Harrison & Cantor, 2006). They may exercise fanatically, to almost unhealthy levels, and engage in eating disorders in the quest for some vision of beauty. Other women may decide that the images they see are physical impossibilities. Instead of working to conform to what they see as unattainable, these women may choose to abandon healthy lifestyles completely.

Students often make unhealthy food choices when in college. College may be the first time students have to decide what to eat on their own. They also must balance responsibilities, manage their time, and learn to cope with stress. The combination of increased pressure, eating late at night, and eating fast food can lead to unhealthy eating that lasts beyond the college years (Baker, Boland, & Laffey, 2006).

Without proper nutrition and exercise, women may develop lower self-esteem, be unsatisfied with their physical appearance, and may not have the energy needed to pursue their desired lifestyles. Individuals who are overweight are considered less attractive and are sometimes discriminated against in areas such as employment, housing, and education (Allon, 1982; Crandall, 1995; DeJong & Kleck, 1986; Karris, 1977; Larkin & Pines, 1979; Quinn & Crocker, 1999; Richardson, Goodman, Hastorf, & Dornbusch, 1961). This lack of satisfaction could affect all of their roles, including those of students, campus and community leaders, friends, daughters, sisters, employees, and mentors.

The current study was conducted to determine if a correlation exists between body image and academic achievement in undergraduate college women. Extensive research

has been conducted regarding traditional-aged college students and body dissatisfaction (e.g., Forrest & Stuhldreher, 2007). A successful academic experience, however, is the goal of students when they enter institutions of higher education. Knowing if a connection exists between body-image and academic success could be beneficial to individuals charged with creating environments in which students succeed. Individuals who could put this information to use may include student affairs practitioners, health educators, and academic advisors.

Body Image and Undergraduate Women

Women enroll in college at different times of their lives. While some enroll immediately following high school, more and more women attend later. Regardless of life experience, women change the way they see themselves throughout their college careers. The undergraduate experience includes learning inside the classroom and outside of the classroom. They must adjust how they see themselves in relation to other students, faculty, and staff. They also need to learn a new vocabulary and adjust to a new set of expectations. These women must learn to use technology, to study, and to make a place for themselves. These experiences and challenges can be an opportunity for women to reinvent themselves. Consistent with Rudd and Lennon (2000), Trautmann, Worthy, and Lokken (2007) found that individuals may attempt to conform to a culture's physical ideal through diet, exercise, clothing choices, and surgery.

Body image can be defined as how an individual perceives her body (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002) and attitudes an individual has regarding the size and shape of her body (Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990). Women who are dissatisfied with their bodies when they

begin college are likely to engage in more severe disordered eating behaviors throughout their years in college (Cooley & Toray, 2001).

Hawkins, Richards, Granley, and Stein (2004) studied how college women were affected by images of thin women in magazines. Hawkins et al. found that viewing images of the thin-ideal caused an increase in body dissatisfaction, negative mood states, and eating disorder symptoms. They also determined that viewing the images was also associated with a decreased sense of self-esteem.

Body image disturbance has been associated with developing eating disorders (Bergstrom & Neighbors, 2006). College women are at risk of developing eating disorders because of a variety of factors, including excessive exercise, social isolation, body dissatisfaction, high levels of anxiety, and disturbed eating and dieting patterns (Levitt, 2004). Cooley and Toray (2001) found that changes in bulimia were related to psychological measures and figure dissatisfaction.

Research Methods

The current study was conducted in order to determine if a correlation exists between academic achievement and body image in college women. The McCroskey Image Fixation Questionnaire was chosen for this study. McCroskey's Image Fixation Questionnaire was designed to determine an individual's fixation with his or her physical appearance; the instrument can be used to ascertain if an individual's self-image is healthy. The instrument includes 30 true-false items. Indicating "True" to 0-10 items indicates that an individual is handling the North American fixation on physical appearance well; 10-15 true statements signifies that the respondent is very sensitive to the North American fixation on appearance; and more than 15 true statements indicates

that the individual is very sensitive regarding his or her appearance and may be dissatisfied with their physical appearance (Richmond & McCroskey, 2004).

Questionnaires were distributed to undergraduate college women at three mid-western institutions of higher education. The institutions were selected due to (1) their willingness to participate, (2) their homogeneity in the mid-west, and (3) their consistent academic reputation as first and second tier institutions in the U.S. News and World Report rankings. The institutions included the following: a public, research-focused university; a public, comprehensive university; and a private, liberal arts college.

Six hundred eighteen surveys were used in the analysis. Participants were asked to self-report their grade point average; this was correlated with the student's image fixation score. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation demonstrated an inverse relationship between academic performance and body image, suggesting that a healthier body image was positively linked to a higher grade point average.

Findings

Surveys were distributed to undergraduate college women during the fall of 2007 at three different institutions in the mid-western region of the United States. Surveys were distributed to undergraduate female students at student organization meetings. Six hundred eighteen surveys were used in the analysis.

Students were asked to complete the McCroskey Image Fixation Questionnaire and provide demographic information. In addition to demographic information, students were also asked to provide information indicating academic achievement. The additional information students were asked to provide included cumulative grade point average

(GPA); career goal (full-time professional employment, part-time employment, or full-time wife and mother); and intention to attend graduate or professional school.

The McCroskey Image Fixation Questionnaire consists of 30 true-false items. Zero to ten true statements indicates an individual is handling culture fixation well. Ten to fifteen true statements indicates an individual is very sensitive to image fixation. Fifteen or more true statements indicates an individual may not be satisfied with, and is fixated on, her appearance. The higher the fixation score, the less satisfied an individual may be with her appearance (Richmond & McCroskey, 2004).

Students could indicate their GPA in one of five ranges: 1.9 or below; 2.0-2.4; 2.5-2.9; 3.0-3.4, and 3.5-4.0 (see Table 1). The average image fixation score was determined for each of the five GPA categories (see Table 2). Women who reported a GPA of 1.9 or below had an average image fixation score of 10.6. Respondents who indicated a 2.0-2.4 GPA had an average image fixation score of 12.4. Those reporting a 2.5-2.9 GPA had an average image fixation score of 11.8. Students indicating a 3.0-3.4 GPA had an average image fixation score of 11.48. In the final GPA category, 3.5-4.0, the average image fixation score was 11.41.

Women who reported that their GPAs were in the top two ranges, 3.0-3.4 and 3.5-4.0, had a lower image fixation score than those indicating 2.0-2.4 and 2.5-2.9 GPAs. This finding indicates that women with higher GPAs may be less fixated on their appearances. The category with the lowest image fixation score, however, was 1.9 or below. Only three of the six hundred eighteen respondents, however, indicated a GPA of 1.9 or below.

In the career goal category, respondents were asked to indicate one of three goals: full-time professional career, part-time employment, or full-time wife and mother (see Table 3). The average image fixation score for students indicating a full-time professional career as a goal was 11.6. Women who chose part-time employment as a career goal had an average image fixation score of 12.4. Women who indicated their career goal as that of a full-time wife had an average image fixation score of 11.8.

The average lowest image fixation score for the career goal category was 11.6. This score was found for students who want to pursue a full-time professional career. Women who indicated the other two choices, part-time employment and full-time wife and mother, had average image fixation scores of 12.4 and 11.8 respectively. This may indicate that undergraduate college women who plan on pursuing professional careers have a healthy body-image and may not be concerned about how their physical appearances are viewed by others. The findings also may indicate that women who plan to work part-time and women who plan to be full-time wives and mothers are more fixated on their physical appearances.

In the graduate or professional school category, students were asked if they planned to attend graduate or professional school (see Table 4). Students who indicated “yes” had an average image fixation score of 11.7. The students indicating “no” had an average image fixation score of 11.5. This may indicate that women who want to further their education beyond a bachelor’s degree are more concerned about their body image than those who do not plan on pursuing a graduate or professional degree.

Discussion

Women enroll in college for a number of reasons. Women may decide to pursue college degrees for career preparation and for the sake of learning, but the years in college can also offer women opportunities for personal growth and development. This development can be both intellectual and emotional. As undergraduate women are fulfilling their academic requirements and pursuing their degrees, they are also developing as individuals and making decisions about their future goals and aspirations.

A high GPA is an indicator of academic success. Desire for a full-time professional career and plans to attain an advanced degree may also be associated with academic achievement. The assumption can be made that students who want to pursue full-time professional employment and graduate or professional school are successful students. The findings indicate that women with higher grade point averages and women interested in full-time professional employment may be less fixated on their physical appearance. The findings also indicate, however, that women who plan to pursue advanced degrees are more fixated on their appearance than those who do not plan to pursue post-graduate study. Qualitative research may be warranted to gain a better understanding of why this connection may exist.

Future research may explore why women who have achieved academic success are less fixated on their body image. Additional studies may also examine if participation in higher education leads to less concern about an individual's appearance and what society deems attractive. Women are continually barraged with images of the ideal feminine body-type in film, television, magazines, and advertising. The ideal feminine body is portrayed as thin and conventionally beautiful. With access to higher education,

women can take steps to educate themselves, pursue the careers they desire, and earn money. This type of success may lead to women feeling confident about their appearance. Conversely, perhaps women who pursue academic and professional success already possess confidence about their bodies and lack of concern regarding how others view them.

Understanding possible links between a positive body-image and academic success can affect programs offered at colleges and universities. This information could be helpful to health educators, academic advisors, faculty, student affairs professionals and others involved in creating environments in which students can succeed. Further research is needed to explore the connection between academic success and lack of concern regarding society's fixation with the beauty ideal.

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Table 1.

Self-reported Cumulative Grade Point Averages of Sample Population
N=618

GPA	N	%
1.9 or below	3	.49%
2.0-2.4	45	7.28
2.5-2.9	151	24.43
3.0-3.4	271	43.85
3.5-4.0	148	23.95

Table 2.

Image Fixation Score by Self-reported Cumulative Grade Point Averages of Sample Population

GPA	Image Fixation Score
1.9 or below	10.6
2.0-2.4	12.4
2.5-2.9	11.8
3.0-3.4	11.48
3.5-4.0	11.41

Table 3.

Image Fixation Score by Career Goal

Career Goal	Image Fixation Score
Full-time professional career	11.6
Part-time employment	12.4
Full-time wife and mother	11.8

Table 4.

Image Fixation Score by Intention to Attend Graduate or Professional School

Do you plan to attend graduate or professional school?	Image Fixation Score
Yes	11.7
No	11.5
