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Peer Influence and Body Dissatisfaction amongst College Sorority Women

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**Abstract:**

Body dissatisfaction is becoming a phenomenon in Western culture. Body dissatisfaction is designed for this study as being unhappy with one's own body, leading to negative mental and physical conditions. In order to test levels of body dissatisfaction and a possible correlation between peer influence and body dissatisfaction, a sample of college sorority women at a southern university were given a survey dealing with peer influence utilizing appearance conversations with friends in one category, and body dissatisfaction in the other. The two scales utilized included The Appearance Conversations with Friends Scales as well as the Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction with Body Parts Scale. Participants anonymously provided responses to these surveys. Descriptive statistics revealed the Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction with Body Parts Scale to have a mean score of 2.9962 showing that over all, the sample had higher levels of satisfaction with body parts versus dissatisfaction. The scale showed a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .899 indicating high reliability. The Appearance Conversation with Friends Scale revealed a mean score of 2.4507 indicating that peers sometimes talk with each other about appearance. The scale produced a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .836 indicating high reliability. Data Analysis led to the discovery of a negative correlation of  $-.197$  between Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction with Body Parts and Appearance Conversations with Friends. This means that as the frequency of conversations over appearance increased, body satisfaction levels decreased. In conclusion, there is a negative correlation between peer influence and body dissatisfaction amongst college sorority women. It is important to understand the life altering concept of body dissatisfaction so health professionals can stop the mental degradation before it progresses to what could be a deadly method of compensation for the "perfect body".

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**Introduction & Literature Review:**

Body dissatisfaction is a growing phenomenon that has made its presence known among the women of Western societies today. The media portrays women of “flawless perfection”, and supply these images on TV, in movies, in magazines, and on billboards. Throughout the course of one day a person can be exposed to dozens of these advertisements that are suggesting beauty and happiness can be obtained if the viewer strives to look like the image presented. It is obvious that the media and all of its outlets have an impact on how women in today’s world view their own bodies. One factor that has not been as strongly researched is that of peer influence and the impact it has on body dissatisfaction. Western culture has transformed into a world where the “perfect body” is something to be desired, and many factors influence how far women will go to achieve it.

In today’s Western culture, being physically attractive is an attribute with significant importance (Calogero, Boroughs, & Thompson, 2007). In fact, some would go as far to say that Americans, in general, are fully consumed with the ideas of being young, thin, and physically attractive to all (Berscheid, Walster, & Bohrnstedt., 1973; Jefferys, 2005; Das, Vermeulen, Laagland, & Postma, 2010). This desire to be physically perfect has made an impact on body dissatisfaction rates among females of all ages (Dohnt & Tiggeman, 2005; Franzoi & Klaiber, 2007; Hutchinson, Rapee, & Taylor, 2010). Previous research has indicated that as many as half of the women in Western societies today express some element of body dissatisfaction (Monteath & McCabe, 1997; Bearman, Presnell, & Martinez, 2006).

Underlying factors that have been explored that relate to body dissatisfaction include that of the media, peers, and parental influence (Park, DiRaddo, & Calogero, 2009; Ferguson, Winegard, & Winegard, 2011). In particular, peer influence and body dissatisfaction have been

shown to have a negative correlation that lends concern for body image problems, as well as the potential for future eating disorders (Dohnt & Tiggemann 2005; Shroff & Thompson 2006; Shomaker & Furman 2007; Clark & Tiggemann, 2008). A study by Jankauskiene and Pajaujiene in 2012 discussed how young women who placed a high value on physique reportedly had higher chances for eating disorders, as well as body dissatisfaction

Peer influence is something that exists on a day to day basis in numerous locations, and has received very little attention for the causes of detrimental behaviors (Meyer & Gast, 2008). For some females, the opinions of fellow peers are something that is valued; especially when it comes to aspects such as body image (Carey, Donaghue, & Broderick, 2010). College students generally spend a significant amount of time with peers in the home, school, and social settings when compared with younger adolescents and children (Gruber, 2008). College campuses are environments where peer pressure is everywhere, body dissatisfaction is common, and the potential for eating disturbances is evident. With this being said, it has been noted that the local environment that young females spend the majority of their time in has a strong influence on the development of multiple body image concerns, thus correlating with overall body dissatisfaction (Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007). Body dissatisfaction has been considered a possible psychological phenomenon (Stice & Shaw, 2002), and has the potential for the life-threatening development of eating disorders (Patching & Lawler, 2009).

With these ideas in mind, previous research has discussed peer influence and a negative correlation to body dissatisfaction. In a study by Shroff and Thompson (2006), it was found that peer influence is a potential risk factor for disturbances in body image, eating disorders, and self-esteem. Research by Shomaker and Furman (2007) found that same-sex peer pressure to be thin had a negative effect on young women's body satisfaction. With same-sex peer pressure in mind,

Dohnt and Tiggemann (2005) studied the relationship between girl's perception of their peer's body dissatisfaction and their own level of body dissatisfaction. Results found that the more their peers were upset with their own body satisfaction, the greater body dissatisfaction the girls had with their own image after regression analysis.

Previous research discusses the pattern of peer influence and the progression to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Meyer & Gast, 2008; Wharton, Adams, & Hampl, 2008; Harring, Montgomery, & Hardin, 2010). A study by Geary (2010) suggests that peers may influence female body dissatisfaction in two possible ways. He believed that peers may intentionally influence females through methods such as verbal comments, discussion of beauty norms, verbal comparisons, and talk of personal value of one's own body. Secondly, peers may provide an unconscious body comparison with others which could potentially cause overall body dissatisfaction. With body perception seeming to be such an important factor for young women, it is reasonable to be concerned for their future well-being.

Comparing oneself to others, or social comparison as some would call it, is a topic of peer group conversation as well as an individual thinking process. Originally developed by Festinger (1954), social comparison theory is the idea that individuals look to outside images or sources to evaluate their own appearance, opinions, or abilities. Some females report that social comparison to either friends or peers is a part of everyday life that fuels weight concern and potential body dissatisfaction (Smith-Jackson & Reel, 2012). Previous research has found that more often than not, people compare themselves to members of their own peer group (Franzoi & Klaiber, 2007), and this comparison could be a potential cause for females to amplify their flaws, thus leading to body dissatisfaction (Morrison, 2004; Gurung & Chrouser, 2007; Hildebrandt, 2008)

Previous research has paved the way for this particular study, however, very little can be found on the impact of peer pressure and body dissatisfaction amongst young college women. A multitude of research exists with young adolescents and adults. Therefore by studying college women, this study was able to bridge the gap between the ages allowing for health professionals to see the psychological effects, and potentially physical risks, today's young adults are taking in college universities in order to achieve body satisfaction. The purpose of this study was to further explore the relationship of peer influence and body dissatisfaction. By utilizing a group of female college undergraduates, the question of a possible correlation between peer influence and body dissatisfaction was examined. After reviewing previous literature and research, a hypothesis was formed stating that there is a negative correlation between peer influence and body dissatisfaction amongst college sorority women.

**Methods:**

For this project an explanatory research design was utilized in order to study a possible correlation between peer influence and body dissatisfaction. Participants included female college undergraduates at a southern university who were members of Greek Life on campus. An institutional review board (IRB) form was submitted to evaluate any ethical dilemmas with regards to participant safety. IRB approval allowed for data collection to take place with the requested sample. In order to obtain the needed sample, convenience sampling was used. Every effort was made to obtain the largest sample possible so as to decrease sampling error during data collection. A cross sectional retrospective procedure was utilized to collect data by use of a paper survey. Multi-site data collection was used across the campus in order to obtain the needed information. Individual packets were created to be distributed to the participants during their organization's weekly chapter meetings. Participants removed the paper survey with the

corresponding scoring sheet, completed the survey according to directions, and resubmitted the packets to the researcher with the information secured safely inside.

The instruments used during the data collection process included two separate scales with one evaluating body dissatisfaction, and the other peer influence. Permission from the authors was obtained before utilizing the scales in the data collection process. The Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction with Body Parts Scale measures a person's satisfaction with their body parts, and can help show signs of possible dissatisfaction (Berscheid, Walster, & Bohrnstedt, 1973). The Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction with Body Parts scale proved reliable with an internal consistency of ( $\alpha$  .44), test-retest reliability ( $r=90$ ), and predictive validity (Stice, Orjada, & Tristan, 2006). This scale had an alpha coefficient of .92 in the sample of 95 college aged women.

The Appearance Conversations with Friends scale is a five item measure that assesses how often peers talk with one another and their expectations for their appearance (Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004). The items in the scale were adapted from previous research (Brown, Cash, & Mikulka, 1990). The scale had factor loadings above .7 in a sample of adolescent girls and a Cronbach's alpha score of .85 for adolescent girls thus supporting adequate reliability. The items in the scale were adapted from previous research (Brown, Cash, & Mikulka, 1990).

Descriptive statistics were used to evaluate the data. No personal information was collected. The surveys remained anonymous as personal identifying factors were not needed in order to successfully complete the research. 500 surveys were distributed and 453 were completed indicating a 90.6% response rate. The surveys were completed on a volunteer basis, and results were safely stored in a locked faculty office.

## **Results:**

The total sample for this study included 453 undergraduate college sorority women from a southern university. Participants were surveyed once during weekly chapter meetings held by their individual organization. Upon data collection, all materials from each meeting were combined. Two variables were discussed in the original design of the research project. The first variable was body dissatisfaction and the other peer influence utilizing appearance conversations with friends.

Results were found through descriptive statistics using the individual scales of Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction with Body Parts and Appearance Conversations with Friends. For both scales the minimum point number assigned was 1 and the maximum point number was 4. With the Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction with Body Parts scale, the higher scores indicated greater satisfaction with individual body parts. With regards to the Appearance Conversations with Friends scale, the higher scores represented a higher frequency of peer conversations.

Table 1 represents data collected using the Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction with Body Parts scale. Results indicate the overall mean score for this topic was 2.9962. With regards to groups of body parts, the mid torso had the lowest level of satisfaction with a mean score of 2.5940. Height, weight, and tone were next to lowest with 2.7957. The extremities were next with a mean score of 3.0631. The category with the highest level of satisfaction was development with an overall mean score of 3.1889. The body part that showed the highest satisfaction rate among college sorority women was the eyes with a mean score of 3.48 and the lowest satisfaction rate was the hips (upper thighs) with a mean score of 2.37. Results indicate that overall, the sample had more levels of satisfaction with body parts as opposed to dissatisfaction. The Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction with Body Parts scale generated a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .899 in this particular study indicating high reliability.

Table 2 represents the data collected utilizing the Appearance Conversations with Friends scale. Results indicate that for this particular scale there was a mean value of 2.4507. According to the data, the highest frequency of conversation dealt with the topic of, “What we would like our bodies to look like” with a mean score of 2.7775. The lowest frequency of conversation dealt with the topic of, “How important it is to always look attractive” with a mean score of 1.9187. Results show that more often than not peers talk with each other about appearance. The Appearance Conversation with Friends scale has a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .836 in this particular study indicating high reliability. A study done by Jones, Vigfusdottir, and Lee in 2004 utilized an adaptation of the Appearance Conversations with Friends scale, which produced a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .85 further supporting the reliability of the scale.

After analyzing each group of data separately, a negative correlation between the two variables was discovered. Data analysis indicated a  $-.197$  correlation between the variables using the Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction with Body Parts scale and The Appearance Conversations with Friends scale. While the correlation is not strong, it is non-the-less significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). This negative correlation shows that as the frequency of appearance conversations with friends increases, the level of body satisfaction decreases. Based on data analysis, the hypothesis of there is a correlation between peer influence and body dissatisfaction amongst college sorority women is supported.

**Table 1:**  
**Descriptive - Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction with Body Parts**

<b>Descriptive Statistics</b>						
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	
Overall Facial Attractiveness	452	1	4	3.17	.636	
Hair	450	1	4	3.34	.747	
Eyes	450	1	4	3.48	.661	
Ears	450	1	4	3.39	.705	
Nose	450	1	4	3.05	.847	
Mouth	449	1	4	3.30	.703	
Teeth	447	1	4	3.16	.786	
Vocie	449	1	4	3.04	.774	
Chin	451	1	4	3.07	.775	
Complexion	450	1	4	2.86	.880	
Shoulders	452	1	4	3.16	.790	
Arms	449	1	4	2.82	.854	
Hands	450	1	4	3.22	.758	
Feet	450	1	4	3.04	.839	
Size of Abdomen	451	1	4	2.46	.907	
Buttocks (seat)	449	1	4	2.68	.863	
Hips (upper thighs)	450	1	4	2.37	.924	
Legs and Ankles	447	1	4	2.85	.905	
Height	450	1	4	3.29	.790	
Weight	449	1	4	2.49	.904	
General Muscle or Tone Development	450	1	4	2.59	.848	
Face	453	1.00	4.00	3.1889	.47136	
Extremities	452	1.00	4.00	3.0631	.61500	
Mid Torso	452	1.00	4.00	2.5940	.72283	
Height, Weight, and Tone	452	1.00	4.00	2.7957	.64349	
Overall Satisfaction with Body Parts (average score of q1 to q21)	453	1.00	4.00	2.9962	.46595	
Valid N (listwise)	438					

**Table 2:  
Descriptives - Appearance Conversations with Friends**

<b>Descriptive Statistics</b>					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
How our bodies look in our clothes	446	1.00	4.00	2.7018	.83375
What we would like our bodies to look like	445	1.00	4.00	2.7775	.86859
How important it is to always look attractive	443	1.00	4.00	1.9187	.83622
the size and shape of our bodies	445	1.00	4.00	2.5258	.86075
what we can do to always look our best	434	1.00	4.00	2.3134	.91861
Appearance Conversations	446	1.00	4.00	2.4507	.67344
Valid N (listwise)	434				

Note: 1-Never; 2-Sometimes; 3-More often than not; 4-All of the time

**Discussion:**

College campuses can be a vital source of information regarding issues such as support for body image concerns, and can help target unhealthy weight management practices amongst its youth (Harring, Montgomery, & Hardin, 2010). Health professionals in student clinics need to be aware of the patterns of behavior that female college students can develop with regards to their negative body image concept (Wharton, Adams, & Hampl, 2008). By decreasing the frequency of body dissatisfaction, and understanding it's potential causes, programs can be developed to help intervene on a path that could very well be potentially devastating. Nurses

could play a critical role in identifying these body image concerns, and provide an intervention that could perhaps save a desperate female's life in her quest for body perfection.

The results in this study involving college sorority women support previous research indicating a correlation between outside factors, such as peer influence, and the level of satisfaction an individual has concerning their body image. Based on the results of this particular research study, a relationship between peer influence and body dissatisfaction within this sample was determined. These results indicate that as conversations with peers regarding appearance and the value of appearance increase in frequency, the overall satisfaction of body image amongst these same peers decrease.

In the nursing profession, nurses care for patients coming into the hospital after suffering through a debilitating eating disorder. If further research was dedicated to understanding the root of these life threatening health problems in addition to treatment of them, the future physical, as well as mental, health of today's youth could be improved. As a nurse, it would be beneficial to understand correlations between behavior such as negative appearance conversations and the outcomes of decreased body image.

The discovery of a correlation between peer influence and body dissatisfaction amongst college sorority women was not surprising. Conversations that focus purely on appearance can outline individual flaws that young women feel they contain. Negativity can have a devastating effect on the way young, impressionable woman view themselves and their self-worth. As nurses, it is important to recognize these patterns when they arise so interventions can be made to prevent a potentially devastating outcome resulting from body dissatisfaction.

Limitations in this study are evident. There was a significant lack of ethnic diversity considering participants were predominantly Caucasian. Also, the sample size, which consisted

of a limited number of sorority women, would be considered a limitation. Although data was collected from 453 participants, it was limited to two of the numerous houses on campus. Also, because the scale was presented as a survey, there is a chance that the participants did not answer truthfully to the questions presented. While many surveys were responded to appropriately, some surveys were not entirely completed thus causing a different number of responses from question to question which would ultimately affect the numerical data.

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