

Women's Body Images: The Results of a National Survey in the U.S.A.

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This investigation was a representative survey, conducted in 1993, of the body images of 803 adult women in the United States. Included in the survey instrument were selected subscales from the standardized Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire, which had been used in a U.S. survey in 1985. The results indicated substantial levels of body dissatisfaction, possibly surpassing levels observed in the 1985 survey. Nearly one-half of the women reported globally negative evaluations of their appearance and a preoccupation with being or becoming overweight. Whereas age effects were minimal, significant race/ethnicity effects were found, with clearly more positive body images among African American than Anglo or Hispanic women. The social and clinical implications of the findings were discussed.

Body image is a psychological construct of growing scientific and clinical interest. Having been diversely conceptualized throughout its long history, body image is currently regarded as multidimensional self-attitudes toward one's body, particularly its appearance (Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990). Body-image attitudes consist of self-perceptions, cognitions, affect, and behaviors vis-a-vis one's physical attributes. As a salient facet of self-concept, body image bears a moderate relationship to self-esteem and psychosocial adjustment (e.g., eating disturbances, depression, social anxiety, and sexual functioning) (Cash & Deagle, 1995; Cash & Grant, in press; Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990; Cash & Szymanski, 1995; Thompson, 1990).

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Although much of the contemporary literature on body image consists of studies of college students and eating disordered patients, large-sample surveys of body image were conducted in *Psychology Today* magazine in 1972 and 1985 (Berscheid, Walster, & Bohrnstedt, 1973; Cash, Winstead, & Janda, 1985, 1986). To date, these remain the most extensive surveys of Americans' body images. Both were mail-in surveys from which a stratified random sample was taken to represent the sex-by-age distribution in the U.S. population. Comparisons of these surveys' results provided evidence that from 1972 to 1985 both men's and women's body images had become more negative (Cash et al., 1986).

These and other data have indicated further that, in many respects, women possess more negative body-image attitudes than do men (Cash & Brown, 1989; Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990; Jackson, 1992; Muth & Cash, 1995). The greatest gender differences pertain to women's affect-laden concerns about their shape and weight, particularly fears about being or becoming fat, which foster widespread dieting (Brownell & Rodin, 1994; Cash & Hicks, 1990; Cash et al., 1986; P. Fallon, Katzman, & Wooley, 1994; Muth & Cash, 1995; Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984; Silberstein, Striegel-Moore, Timko, & Rodin, 1988; Silberstein, Perdue, Peterson & Kelly, 1986). These differences occur across the life span, and the adolescent years may be notably associated with a more negative body image (Cash et al., 1986; Pliner, Chaiken, & Flett, 1990). As body-image experiences often mirror the cultural context, inter-cultural and racial/ethnic diversity has been observed in body satisfaction (A. Fallon, 1990; P. Fallon et al., 1994; Furnham & Alibhai, 1983; Huffine, 1991; Rucker & Cash, 1992; Smith & Krejci, 1991).

Of course, magazine surveys risk self-selection biases on the variables under study. The current study of body-image attitudes among adult women in the United States was based on a larger consumer survey and used the preferable methodology of a more randomly selected, representative sample. To provide comparisons with previous survey results, portions of the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (MBSRQ; Cash, 1994b) from Cash et al.'s 1985 survey were included in the survey instrument. Sampling also permitted an examination of the relationships of age and race with body image.

METHOD

Participants

The sample of 803 women, ranging in age from 18 to 70 years, resided in 19 cities in five regions (i.e., Northeast, Southeast, Southwest, West

Coast, and Midwest). Sampling was carried out in 1993 by a survey research organization to represent the U.S. population of adult women in terms of age, race, income, education, and geographical region based on 1990 census data. Among the women sampled, 84% were White, 58% were employed, 60% were married, and 44% were educated beyond high school.

Procedure

Experienced interviewers called door-to-door and selected respondents based on pre-established demographic quotas. The research was presented generally as a consumer survey, and the instrument consisted of a variety of measures of personality, consumer-product attitudes, and body image. Survey booklets were left with suitable respondents, to be completed anonymously and collected on the next day. Respondents received monetary compensation for their participation, which took about 1 hour.

Data entry was performed by the research organization. Accuracy was independently audited and verified.

Body-image Assessments

The survey instrument included three well-validated subscales of the MBSRQ (Brown et al., 1990; Cash, 1994b; Cash et al., 1986): (1) Appearance Evaluation consists of seven 5-point Likert items to assess the global evaluation of one's appearance. (2) On the Body Areas Satisfaction Scale (BASS; Cash, 1989, 1994b) subjects give 5-point dissatisfaction-satisfaction ratings of eight physical areas/attributes (i.e., height, weight, hair, face, upper torso, mid-torso, lower torso, and muscle tone). (3) Overweight Preoccupation consists of 5-point ratings of weight vigilance, fat anxiety, current dieting, and eating restraint (Cash, Wood, Phelps, & Boyd, 1991).

RESULTS

Negative Body Images: Descriptive Findings

Initial analyses provided descriptive results for the MBSRQ subscales. Internal consistencies (alphas) were acceptable for the 8-item BASS (.82), 7-item Appearance Evaluation (.84), and 4-item Overweight Preoccupation (.70). Table I presents means, standard deviations, and percentage of respondents having a *negative* body image on each subscale. This determination was based on the percentage with composite mean scores below the

Table I. Sample Means and Standard Deviations, and the Percentages of American Women with an Overall Negative Body Image^a

MBSRQ Body-Image Index	M	SD	Percentage with a negative body image ^a
Appearance Evaluation	2.93	0.50	47.9
Body Areas Satisfaction	3.23	0.74	35.6
Overweight Preoccupation	2.85	0.91	48.5

^aRefers to the percentage of respondents whose mean scores on these MBSRQ indices were in the unfavorable direction relative to a 3.0 (neutral midpoint) on the 1-5 response scale (i.e., <3.0 on Appearance Evaluation and BASS and >3.0 on Overweight Preoccupation).

Table II. Percentage of American Women Dissatisfied and Not Satisfied with Specific Physical Areas/Attributes on the BASS

Physical area/ attribute	Percentage dissatisfied	Percentage dissatisfied or neutral ^a
Face	11.7	30.4
Height	13.4	30.2
Hair	16.3	28.0
Upper torso	25.1	47.3
Muscle tone	36.9	63.9
Weight	46.0	63.3
Lower torso	47.4	64.2
Mid torso	51.0	69.8

^aIncludes dissatisfied respondents (ratings of 1 or 2) as well as those indicating "neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" (rating of 3) on the BASS's 1-5 response scale.

neutral midpoint of 3.0 on the BASS and Appearance Evaluation and above 3.0 on Overweight Preoccupation.

Evident from the data is the fact that a sizable minority of women reported an overall negative body image. Over one-third expressed whole-sale (mean) body dissatisfaction on the BASS. On the Appearance Evaluation scale, which measures one's global body-image evaluation, nearly half of the women held an unfavorable view of their appearance. Similarly, almost half revealed dieting and concerns about being or becoming overweight.

To identify specific foci of women's body-image discontent, descriptive analyses were conducted on the individual BASS items. Table II shows two breakdowns of the data: (a) the percentage reporting *dissatisfaction* with each attribute (i.e., ratings of 1 or 2 = "very or mostly dissatisfied"), and (b) the percentage who were *not clearly satisfied* with the attribute (i.e., ratings of 1, 2, or 3, where 3 "neither satisfied nor dissatisfied").

Table II lists the physical areas/aspects in ascending order of dissatisfaction. Less than 20% of the sample expressed discontent with their face, height, or hair. In contrast, over 45% indicated wholesale displeasure with their weight, lower torso (hips, buttocks, thighs, and legs), and mid-torso (waist and stomach). The percentages who were either discontented or neutral indicated that about two-thirds of women lacked clear satisfaction with their muscle tone, weight, lower torso, or mid-torso. A tabulation of the percentage of women who were satisfied on *all* eight BASS items (i.e., ratings of 4 or 5) evinced only 16% to be content with all physical aspects.

The Prediction of Global Appearance Evaluation from Satisfaction with Discrete Body Areas

Several studies (Cash, 1989; Cash & Szymanski, 1995; Jacobi & Cash, 1994) have verified that the evaluative body-image gestalt is determined by incrementally additive satisfaction with discrete physical characteristics. To re-examine this finding, a stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted, with Appearance Evaluation as the criterion and BASS items as predictors and *F*-to-enter set at $p < .01$. In descending order of magnitude, the simple *rs* of BASS items with Appearance Evaluation were: .57 for weight, .51 for mid-torso, .46 for lower torso, .45 for upper torso, .43 for muscle tone, .28 for face, .24 for hair, and .22 for height ($ps < .001$). Similar to earlier findings, Appearance Evaluation was optimally predicted by satisfaction with weight (beta = .56), upper torso (beta = .24), face (beta = .13), mid-torso (beta = .16), and muscle tone (beta = .09), $R = .63$, $F = 99.42$, $p < .001$. The surprising fact that satisfaction with lower torso did not enter was simply because the items for weight and mid-torso sequentially attenuated the initial zero-order *r* of .46 between lower-torso satisfaction and Appearance Evaluation.

Demographic Comparisons: Age and Race/Ethnicity

One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with post-hoc Newman-Keuls tests evaluated body-image differences as a function of respondents' age and race/ethnicity. Age was categorically reported on the survey as 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, or 55-70 years (with cohort *ns* = 128 to 198). Sufficient sample sizes were available for White, Black, and Hispanic groups (*ns* = 672, 76, and 50, respectively). Table III summarizes the results.

Age-cohort differences were significant on Appearance Evaluation, $F(4, 773) = 3.46$, $p < .01$, but not on the BASS ($p > .20$) or Overweight Preoccupation ($p > .50$). The post-hoc test for Appearance Evaluation re-

Table III. Body-Image Comparisons as a Function of Age and Race/Ethnicity^a

Demographic variables and groups	MBSRQ Body-Image Index		
	Appearance Evaluation Mean (SD)	Body Areas Satisfaction Mean (SD)	Overweight Preoccupation Mean (SD)
Age			
18-24 years (<i>n</i> = 128)	3.07 _a (0.48)	3.37 (0.69)	2.95 (0.97)
25-34 years (<i>n</i> = 198)	2.94 _b (0.47)	3.22 (0.74)	2.87 (0.89)
35-44 years (<i>n</i> = 168)	2.92 _b (0.52)	3.18 (0.74)	2.83 (0.91)
45-54 years (<i>n</i> = 150)	2.88 _b (0.49)	3.18 (0.71)	2.86 (0.92)
55-70 years (<i>n</i> = 159)	2.86 _b (0.52)	3.22 (0.80)	2.77 (0.88)
Race/ethnicity			
Black (<i>n</i> = 76)	3.20 _a (0.56)	3.65 _a (0.80)	2.57 _a (0.85)
Hispanic (<i>n</i> = 50)	2.95 _b (0.51)	3.29 _b (0.86)	2.83 _b (0.95)
White (<i>n</i> = 672)	2.90 _b (0.49)	3.18 _b (0.71)	2.89 _b (0.91)

^aFor each demographic variable, groups (columns) with different subscripts are significantly different ($p < .05$).

vealed that 18-24 year-old women had a more favorable body image than did each of the four older age groups ($ps < .05$), who did not differ from one another.

The ANOVA comparing the three age-equivalent racial/ethnic groups produced significant differences on Appearance Evaluation, $F(2, 770) = 12.06$, $p < .001$, the BASS, $F(2, 753) = 13.56$, $p < .001$, and Overweight Preoccupation, $F(2, 786) = 4.02$, $p < .02$. On each measure, Black women had a more favorable body image than Anglo and Hispanic women ($ps < .01$), who did not differ.

Temporal Comparisons: 1985 versus 1993

The items of two of the survey's MBSRQ scales, Appearance Evaluation and Overweight Preoccupation, were identical to those in Cash et al.'s 1985 survey. Subsequent changes in the BASS's content and scaling precluded its comparison between surveys. The 1985 survey respondents selected were 18- to 70-year-old women ($n = 973$). Table IV shows the inter-survey comparisons for Appearance Evaluation and Overweight Preoccupation.

Relative to the 1985 sample, the women in 1993 reported a more negative global Appearance Evaluation ($p < .001$), yet indicated less Overweight Preoccupation ($p < .001$). An examination of η^2 coefficients to discern the relative strengths of these differences indicated that the magnitude of

Table IV. Body-Image Comparisons: 1985 vs. 1993 Surveys

MBSRQ Body-Image Index	1985 Survey		1993 Survey		F ratio
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Appearance Evaluation	3.37	0.87	2.93	0.50	157.65 ^a
Overweight Preoccupation	3.05	0.95	2.85	0.91	20.41 ^a

^a*p* < .001.

the decline in Appearance Evaluation was much greater than the reduction in Overweight Preoccupation ($\eta^2 = .08$ vs. $.01$, respectively).

DISCUSSION

The present survey offers the most representative recent evidence that attests to the substantial dissatisfaction American women feel about their physical appearance. Once again, we see the extent to which body dissatisfaction represents a "normative discontent" among women in our society (Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990; P. Fallon et al., 1994; Rodin et al., 1984). Nearly one-half reported globally negative evaluations of their looks and concerns with being or becoming overweight. Over one-third expressed body-image discontent averaged across eight discrete physical areas or aspects. The majority of women were not satisfied with their middle or lower torso, weight, or muscle tone. A sizable minority were not pleased with their upper torso, facial features, height, or hair. Replicating previous findings (Cash, 1989; Cash & Szymanski, 1995; Jacobi & Cash, 1994), we found that the evaluative body-image gestalt is a weighted, additive composite of discontent with most of these aspects of one's appearance.

Relative to magazine survey data collected in 1985, the present survey indicated that women's global body-image evaluations seem to have worsened appreciably. A decade ago, 30% of women between 18 and 70 years old had an unfavorable MBSRQ Appearance Evaluation score. Currently, this percentage is 48%. Of course, given the disparate survey methodologies, one cannot be absolutely certain that the decline in Appearance Evaluation is a valid shift. If not, it would imply that respondents with a less negative or more positive body image self-selectively responded to the earlier survey. On the other hand, if the decline is valid, it would reflect a further diminution of women's body images relative to the decline observed between 1972 and 1985 with comparable magazine-survey methodologies (Berscheid et al., 1973; Cash et al., 1986). The most likely

self-selection variable on the 1985 survey would be the degree of motivational investment in appearance, which is relatively independent of body-image evaluation (Brown et al., 1990; Cash, 1994a; Muth & Cash, 1995) and might explain the slight reduction in overweight preoccupation between the 1985 and 1993 surveys.²

Body-image attitudes were relatively uniform across age groups. Although the sole apparent exception was that Appearance Evaluation was more positive among 18-24 year-olds relative to older cohorts, this effect size was quite small. The minimal age-cohort differences seemingly contradict evidence of a more *negative* body image among younger women (Cash et al., 1986; Pliner et al., 1990). However, in these earlier studies, the greatest body-image discontent actually occurred among female teenagers. Even though the present survey of adults cannot shed light on this issue, adolescence poses salient physical, social, and psychological challenges to body-image development, especially for women (Attie & Brooks-Gunn, 1989; P. Fallon et al., 1994; Freedman, 1986; Pruzinsky & Cash, 1990).

Reliable body-image differences emerged between Black women and Whites (both Anglos and Hispanics). The former reported significantly more favorable appearance evaluations, more body satisfaction, and less overweight concern. This confirms findings based on college-student samples (Rucker & Cash, 1992) as well as on analyses of Cash et al.'s 1985 survey data (Huffine, 1991). Such differences may stem, in part, from African American culture's broader latitude of acceptance of women's body size (P. Fallon et al., 1994; Rucker & Cash, 1992). A more positive body image among African American women occurs even at the heavier mean body weight that is typically observed relative to Caucasian women (Kumanyika, 1987). Unfortunately, the absence of body-mass measurement in this study precludes an evaluation of its relationship to body image among the racial/ethnic groups.

In conclusion, this national survey indicates that body-image concerns continue to be prevalent among American women. The findings offer little evidence that the recent economic, occupational, and political gains of women in the United States have brought improvements in their body images. Comparative data for men would be valuable, as men have been found to experience considerable body dissatisfaction, albeit less so than women (Cash, 1990; Cash & Brown, 1989; Cash et al., 1986; Jackson, 1992; Jacobi & Cash, 1994; Muth & Cash, 1995; Silberstein et al., 1988). It is

²An individual examination of the four items of the Overweight Preoccupation confirms this interpretation. The reduction in the composite mean scores from 1985 to 1993 was attributable to differences on only one item—namely “weight vigilance,” which refers to the importance of (i.e., one's alertness to) small weight fluctuations. Items assessing fat anxiety, current dieting, and history of eating restraint had comparable means in the two surveys.

well-established that a negative body image is linked to eating disorders and other psychosocial difficulties (Cash & Deagle, 1995; Cash & Grant, in press; Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990; Thompson, 1990). The needs for social change, preventative education, and effective therapies remain crucial (Brownell & Rodin, 1994; Cash, 1995; Rodin, 1992; Silverstein et al., 1986; Wolf, 1991). With respect to the latter, structured cognitive-behavioral intervention programs, even when largely self-administered, are efficacious in the promotion positive body-image changes (Cash, 1995; Cash & Grant, in press; Cash & Lavallee, 1995; Grant & Cash, 1995; Rosen, Orosan, & Reiter, 1995).

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