

## Self-worth based on weight increases drive for thinness among white women: study

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(PhysOrg.com) -- White women who define their self worth based on weight are highly motivated to achieve thinness, regardless of their body mass index or appearance-related self esteem, a University of Michigan study finds.

The findings indicate the pervasiveness of wanting to be thin among young [white women](#) because—based on the study's respondent's answers—their BMI levels fell in the "normal" weight range. This indicates a pattern for those who don't need to lose weight for health purposes, said the study's author Natalie Sabik, a doctoral candidate in psychology and women's studies.

Sabik and U-M researchers looked at how feelings of self-worth were influenced by feelings about body weight and the interactions with ethnic groups other than one's own as factors in [body dissatisfaction](#) and poor [eating habits](#) among white, African American and Asian American women. Women link feelings of self-worth to their appearance more often than men, they said.

"Consequently, for many women, feelings of self-worth are tied to feeling about the body, and it is likely that changes in weight or appearance may affect overall self-esteem," Sabik said.

The study involved responses from 905 college women between the ages of 17 and 24. In two surveys completed in the early 2000s, the women disclosed their height and weight to calculate BMI. The women were

asked about their appearance esteem, ethnic identity, weight-based self-worth, interactions with other ethnic groups and a drive for thinness.

White women reported the highest on measures of drive for thinness and feelings of self-worth influence body weight, but their scores did not differ significantly from Asian Americans, the study indicated.

Asian American women had the lowest BMI average, but their low scores on appearance esteem indicate considerable [body](#) dissatisfaction, the study said.

African American women had the highest scores for BMI, appearance esteem and ethnic identity, as well as the lowest scores for drive for thinness and weight-based contingency of self-worth.

But Sabik noted that African American women who are mainly engaged with the predominant group (whites) and who scored the lowest in appearance esteem did experience a high drive for thinness. Thus, this appears "to render them vulnerable to preoccupation with dieting and weight," she said.

[African American women](#) who did not consider their overall worth as contingent on their weight were less likely to invest much thought and effort monitoring their diet and exercise regardless of their appearance esteem. This buffered the drive for thinness, she said.

Sabik co-authored the study with Elizabeth Cole, an associate professor of women's studies and psychology, and L. Monique Ward, an associate professor of psychology.

The findings appear in the recent issue of *Psychology of [Women Quarterly](#)*.

Provided by University of Michigan

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