

# African-American women less vulnerable to media-driven body dissatisfaction

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It's no secret that media images of the “ideal” body type can lead women to be critical of their own bodies and can even contribute to eating disorders.

However, with the start of National Eating Disorders Awareness Week today, a University of Florida researcher points to a study showing that African-American women are less susceptible to media-driven body dissatisfaction.

While previous studies have shown the negative influence of thinner-than-average models on body image, the UF study by exercise psychologist Heather Hausenblas shows that race can have a moderating effect.

“We’re bombarded with media images of what’s considered ideal. We wanted to measure the influence of race on how that makes women feel about their bodies,” said Hausenblas, who co-authored the research with doctoral student Ninoska DeBraganza. “We know that African-American women report less body dissatisfaction overall than Caucasian women, who are the most affected of all ethnicities. But to my knowledge, no study on media influence had ever taken the ethnicity of the models into account.”

In the study, published in the March 2010 issue of the *Journal of Black Studies*, Hausenblas showed two sets of photographs to 31 Caucasian and 30 African-American undergraduate students.

Both sets of slides showed images of white female models from magazines and catalogs. One set represented the slender “media ideal,” while the other models’ figures were more representative of average build. After viewing the “ideal” slides, white women reported more body dissatisfaction than they had felt before viewing them. After white women viewed the “average” models, however, they felt better about their bodies. African-American women, in contrast, reported no change in their body satisfaction after viewing either set of slides.

The study used Caucasian models to reflect the majority of images in magazines and catalogs. The resulting impact on the white women’s body dissatisfaction may suggest that they were more inclined to compare themselves to the models than the African-American women were, Hausenblas said.

Kevin Thompson, a psychology professor at the University of South Florida, said the study poses some intriguing questions.

“This innovative investigation suggests that one reason that African-American women have lower rates of body dissatisfaction is that they don’t compare themselves to Caucasian models or use them as a reference point for determining how they feel about their appearance,” he said. “If comparisons with same-ethnicity models are provided, African-American women might be affected in the same manner as Caucasian women. Or, if they continue to be unaffected, then it would be even more fascinating, suggesting a general strategy among African-American [women](#) of resisting the negative influences of unrealistic images of attractiveness as perpetuated by the media.”

Hausenblas would also like to study images portrayed in music videos, movies and television shows.

“What’s important is to find out the driving force behind body

dissatisfaction. We don't want to take a cookie-cutter approach and assume that media images affect all races equally."

Body dissatisfaction is the leading precursor to eating disorders, and understanding the factors that drive it could help in targeting effective treatments, Hausenblas said.

"We're hoping to make people more aware that media images can have a negative effect, and not just generalize about it," she said. "If we don't know the effects of ethnicity, interventions for [body dissatisfaction](#) might not work."

Provided by University of Florida

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