

BODY IMAGE AND SELF PERCEPTION AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN
AGED 18-30

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how African American women think and feel about their bodies. Specifically, this study examined how Black women define beauty by means of variables such as body shape, skin complexion, and hair texture; whether African American women ages 18-30 compared themselves to media images; and if so, did comparison to these media images impact African American women's body satisfaction. In addition, this study explored if African American women felt pressure to adopt beauty standards attributed to the dominant culture, as well as the role of racial identity in forming beauty standards and social comparison behavior.

Twelve African American women were interviewed and findings of this exploratory research illustrated that the Black community has different standards than the traditional beauty standards of the U.S. Even though interviewees articulated standards of beauty for women in the Black community, there was a lack of uniformity in how these women felt about their own attractiveness: some identified with the Black beauty standards, while others did not. In addition, opinions varied regarding Black women's engagement in social comparison behavior and whether it was related to racial identity or body satisfaction.

Limitations of study included: how Black women define social comparison behavior and racial identity, self-identification of participants, and the lack of Caucasian women included in this study. However, this research still provided rich data exploring Black women's perceptions of beauty among other issues within the Black community. Future research is required to better understand influences shaping standards of beauty within this subculture of the United States and recommendations are provided in the last chapter.

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Love Letters to my Village

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Dear Participants,

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Dear Parents,

I cannot describe how blessed I am to have such extraordinary parents in life. Father, you are my mentor and hero. As I have been to many places and met many people, I have never encountered another person with such knowledge, wisdom and character as you. Because of you, I will always live my life with integrity, loyalty, respect and good instincts. Mother, I only wish to be half as patient, kind-hearted and determined as you. I can say with confidence that there is no other person in this world who loves me as much as you do. You both have always been on my side and I will cherish your unconditional love forever.

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They say it takes a village to raise a child. Well, this is my village and I can truly say that I would not be where I am today without the love and support from God, family, friends, professors, mentors and strangers who was willing to take a chance on me. As I start the next chapter of my life, I know that these people will continue to be by my side. I love my life and the people in it!

With love and gratitude,

Shelia F. West

Dedication

“For Attractive lips, speak words of kindness.

For lovely eyes, seek out the good in people.

For a slim figure, share your food with the hungry.

For beautiful hair, let a child run their fingers through it once a day.

For poise, walk with the knowledge that you never walk alone.

People, more than things, have to be restored, renewed, revived, reclaimed, and redeemed.

Remember, if you ever need a helping hand, you will find one at the end of each of your arms.

As you grow older, you will discover that you have two hands, one for helping yourself and the other for helping others.”

--Sam Levenson

This thesis is dedicated to those who read it. May you find a deeper understanding and inspiration about how Black women think and feel about their bodies. Although this thesis is primarily focused on African American women, it also serves to remind the reader that there is beauty in all women. This is an inner beauty that lies from within.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Purpose and Overview

An individual's view of self is known as self-perception (Rudd & Lennon, 2000). In addition, the way an individual perceives, thinks and feels about his or her body is categorized as body image (Yu, Damhorst, & Russell, 2011). According to Cash (2003), "body image refers to the multifaceted psychological experience of embodiment, especially but not exclusively to one's physical appearance...it encompasses one's body related self-perceptions and self-attitudes, including thoughts, beliefs, feelings and behaviors" (p. 2). Cash also found that "individuals' subjective experiences are often more impactful psychosocially than the objective or social 'reality' of the appearance" (p.1). Self-appearance evaluation is influenced by a discrepancy between self-perception and valued body ideals (Yu, Damhorst, & Russell, 2011). In other words, individuals have beliefs regarding three components: who they are (actual), who they want to be (ideal), and whom they think they ought to be (ought) (Bissell & Risk, 2010). A discrepancy within these components can influence an individual's self-evaluation in terms of appearance and social comparison to others. In addition, the degree to which individuals make social comparisons to others and internalize valued body ideals can lead to body satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Yu, Damhorst, & Russell, 2011).

Past research has documented that the media's portrayal of idealized images contributes to women's body dissatisfaction (Bissell & Risk, 2010; Frisby, 2004; Kozar & Damhorst, 2009; Rudd & Lennon, 2000; Stephens, Hill, & Hanson, 1994). Females in U.S. culture have internalized an ideal thinness as the standard of attractiveness that is unrealistic and unattainable for many women (Heinburg & Thompson, 1995; Kim & Lennon, 2007; Mazur, 1986; Stice &

Shaw, 1994; Tiggeman & McGill, 2004). Through social comparison behavior, using media images as a standard measurement of individual attractiveness, women often become dissatisfied with their bodies (Kim & Lennon, 2007; Tiggeman & McGill, 2004).

Studies illustrate that negative body image leads to low self-esteem and harmful eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia (Bissell & Rask, 2010; Frisby, 2004; Kozar & Damhorst, 2009; Rudd & Lennon, 2000; Stephens et al., 1994). While much information exists on the relationship between body image and self-perception, past research has primarily focused on college-aged Caucasian women. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore body image among African American women ages 18-30. In particular, this study examined the degree in which African American women ages 18-30 compared themselves to media images and how it affected body satisfaction.

Past research supports that many African American women have not adopted the ideal thinness as a standard of attractiveness (Allan, Mayo, Kelly, & Michel, 1993; Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Parker et al., 1995). Some studies suggest that the models in idealized images are too different from Black women; that is, relevant standards of comparison are not readily available for African American women (Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Frisby, 2004; Parker et al., 1995). Consequently, African American women are considered to have a more positive body satisfaction than Caucasian women (Allan et al., 1993; Altabe, 1996; Cachelin, Rebek, Chung, & Pelayo, 2002; Demarest & Allen, 2000; Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Hesse-Biber, Howling, Leavy, & Lovejoy, 2004; Miller et al., 2000; Patel & Gray, 2001; Parker et al., 1995).

However, Flynn and Fitzgibbon (1998) criticize many studies for using weight satisfaction as a primary (and only) measurement of body satisfaction. Therefore, it is possible that how Black women define beauty is distinct from traditional standards of attractiveness

(Frisby 2004; Molloy & Herzberger, 1998). Although African American women may not internalize the ideal thinness portrayed in Western culture, Black women may internalize other appearance standards communicated in the media, including skin complexion and hair texture (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Hill, 2002; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). In addition, concepts of self presentation, style and attitude are also found to be important elements of beauty not only within the individual but the Black community as a whole (Parker et al, 1995). For that reason, within this study, the attributes that Black women use in constructing their body satisfaction were defined in addition to the role racial identity plays in Black women's body satisfaction. This look at racial identity also included the examination of the relationship between racial identity and social comparison.

Justification of Study

This study's focus on shared norms and beliefs in respect to beauty within the African American subculture addresses the lack of research on Black women's body image. In addition, this study assisted in synthesizing how African American women self-identify and relate to others not only within the Black community but also within U.S American society as a whole.

Perceived similarity is the observation of whether traits or characteristics are shared (Kozar & Damhorst, 2008). According to the theory of social comparison behavior, social comparison to those who are dissimilar can assist in identifying the spectrum of possibilities. However, those dissimilar individuals are not likely be used as references in defining beauty (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989). As part of this study, social comparison theory was used to track the impact of media ideals on body satisfaction among African American women ages 18-30. Moreover, this study provided a better understanding of the definition and extent of perceived similarity in relationship to standards of beauty. Specifically, this study identified whether or not

Black women identify with models and/or beauty ideals within the American society due to differences of race, body shape, skin complexion, hair texture and/or overall differences in culture.

Definition of Terms

Body image- “the multifaceted psychological experience of embodiment, especially but not exclusively one’s physical appearance...it encompasses one’s body related self-perceptions and self-attitudes, including thoughts, beliefs, feelings and behaviors” (Cash, 2004, p.2)

Body disturbance- Extreme changes to one’s actual body in order to reflect one’s imagination of how the body should look (Rudd & Lennon, 2000)

Ideal Thinness-An ideology or standard of attractiveness that evolved from the late twentieth century suggesting that thinness is considered beautiful, normal, moral, mature, healthy supported by entities such as the media, aesthetics, psychology, medicine and theology (Lennon & Rudd, 1994)

Perceived similarity- the observation of whether traits or characteristics are shared (Kozar & Damhorst, 2008)

Self-discrepancy-when a person encounter disparities with their perceived actual self (who they are) and ideal actual self (who they want to be)—often associated with body dissatisfaction and negative emotions (Kim & Damhorst, 2010).

Self-esteem- how an individual subjectively evaluate themselves; includes feelings of self worth and perception of one’s morals, values and attitudes (Eaton et al, 2008)

Social comparison- people compare themselves to similar others in order to self-evaluate their opinions, attributes and abilities (Wood, 1989)

Subculture-a group of individuals that share, "...values distinct from, subordinate to, and included under the dominant cultural values of the country as a whole" (Halpern, 1965, p.37).

Upward comparison- comparisons to those who are superior than one within a specific dimension of interest—associated with depression and low self-esteem (Cattarin et al., 2000)

Self-perception-the way in which an individual perceives oneself and/or the way in which an individual perceived him or her are being perceived by others (Rudd & Lennon, 2000)

Assumptions of Study

Racial Subculture

This study assumed an ideology in the United States exists, one that holds a general consensus of opinions and conformity is valued. Because the majority race in the United States is Caucasian, they are referred to as the dominant race and/or culture (Halpern, 1965). Moreover, this study assumed that racial subcultures also exist within American society. Halpern (1965) defined a subculture as, "...values distinct from, subordinate to, and included under the dominant cultural values of the country as a whole" (p.37). In addition, Collins (2000) suggested the controlling images of Black women in our society are so pervasive and engrained into existing social institutions to the degree that Black women's portrayal as the "other" persist, even when images change. Furthermore, an overall ideology of domination itself seems to be an overpowering theme among Black women consisting of interlocking elements of race, gender and class oppression (Collins, 2000). Therefore, within this study, the Black community and African American women were viewed as a racial subculture within American society.

Potential Bias

Since the primary researcher of this study is an African American woman, it is assumed that she holds individual beliefs regarding the subject matter. Moreover, the researcher's

perception of Black women's body image may have subconsciously influenced the interpretation of the study. On the other hand, the researcher's identity has also contributed to rich data within this study. Specifically, because the researcher is a Black woman, she was able to relate and better understand the participant's point of view than if the researcher would be of a different race and/or gender. Moreover, participants may have been more comfortable in providing open and honest responses to the interview questions, especially concerning questions of the dominant culture. Specific details on how personal bias was controlled within this study can be found in Chapter three.

Chapter 2 - Review of Literature

Definition of Beauty among African American Women

White women's standards of attractiveness are strongly related to weight satisfaction. However, Black women are less dependent on weight satisfaction when defining standards of attractiveness (Flynn & Fitzgibbon 1998). Flynn and Fitzgibbon (1998) elaborate on the fluidity of Black Beauty: "...attractiveness is based not only on the shape and size of the body, but also on how a woman or girl presents herself. Presentation includes grooming, dress, posture, and whether she walks and moves as though she is proud of herself and her culture" (p. 21). As noted by Parker et al. (1995), "Beauty is defined less in relation to static images and more in terms of performance competence in a multicultural world marked by conflict as well as egalitarian ideals" (p. 111). According to Parker et al., attitude and style are also significantly engraved in the concept of Black Beauty. Within the Black community, beauty is not just about how one looks in comparison to someone else, but instead focuses on self-presentation of style and attitude. Individual style is about being able to express one's sense of self. Style is the communication and presentation to others through appearance and attitude. It involves figuring out what kind of dress complements one's personality as well as having confidence in one's style. Style is a balance between conformity and individuality. Within African American subculture, one must be able to adapt to the latest trends within a social peer group, but ultimately tailor fashions so that they are cohesive with an individual, unique style (Parker et al, 1995).

Although attitude is not often used as a measurement in body image literature, attitude is concomitant with the concept of style and Black beauty. Therefore, external and internal standards of attractiveness must be examined in order to completely understand how African

American women define beauty. As such, as part of this study, the concepts of style and attitude were examined in order to assist in understanding Black women's standards of attractiveness. According to Parker (1995), the attitude of a Black woman plays a significant role in defining appearance and attractiveness. Specifically, "Throwing your attitude entails establishing one's presence, creating a 'certain air about yourself.' Being in control of your image and 'things around you.' Being able to improvise effectively and maintaining poise under pressure" (Parker et al. 1995, p. 108). Among Black women, it is important to be able to reveal an outer as well as inner beauty. Strong, independent, smart, and caring are a few common words that describe the personality of an ideal Black woman (Hesse-Biber, et al., 2004).

African American Female Weight Standards

It is possible that compared to White women, Black women may be less affected by mainstream's ideal standard of thinness and overall attractiveness in the United States. The physical appearance of models in media images are mostly Caucasian Americans (Allan et al., 1993; Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Parker et al., 1995). Parker et al. (1995) suggest that Black women compare themselves to each other, instead of idealized images of thinness. African American woman are more likely to have a heavier body shape than Caucasian women (Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Smith et al., 1997). According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the average weight of Caucasian women between the ages of 20 and 39 years old is 158.9 pounds. On the other hand, African American female average weight within the same age bracket average is 181.6 pounds. (McDowell, Fryar, Ogden & Flegal, 2008).

Additionally, in many instances of poverty, in which a large population of African Americans and other minorities generally reside, heavier body sizes are idealized instead of thinness (Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998). Over 17 million women of all ethnicities in the United

States were living in poverty 2010, compared to 12.6 million men. For African American females, the poverty rate increased to 25.6 percent for Black women (Bennetts, 2011). Within these communities struggling with poverty, heavier body shapes are viewed as symbols of power, wealth, health and ultimately a representation of beauty. Conversely, the ideal image of thinness can be viewed as a symbol of poverty and illness in the Black community. For example, when a person is portrayed as being too thin, he or she is sometimes perceived as being poor, suffering from hunger, a victim of substance abuse, and/or affected by diseases such as AIDS (Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998).

The standard of attractiveness established within the Black community also emphasizes being well-groomed, which means attending to one's hair and skin, and being well-dressed, neat, and clean. Black Beauty revolves around self presentation to the public and overall attractiveness. While weight may remain a predictor of attractiveness, standards of attractiveness are not measured solely on having the "right body" among African American women (Allan et al., 1993; Flynn and Fitzgibbon, 1998; Hill, 2002). Beauty is defined by the way a woman walks, talks, and dresses, illustrating inner and outer confidence. A woman who is ill kempt, out of proportion, and flabby is considered by the Black community to be fat and unattractive (Allan et al., 1993). Parker et al. (1995) qualify, however, that overweight Black women who possess a certain "flavor" are still considered to be attractive in the Black community. For instance, Allan et al. (1993) mention Oprah Winfrey as an example of an attractive woman. Oprah Winfrey has an overweight figure; however, she has great self-presentation, as she is always well dressed, proportional, neat, and confident in her style. Black women may manage to reject ideal thinness standards as media images are not often representative of African American women (Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Frisby, 2004; Parker et al., 1995). The extent to which Black women compare

themselves with media images and the impact this has on their body satisfaction was explored as part of this study.

The Ideal Whiteness: Skin Complexion and Hair Texture

Though Black women may be somewhat impervious to “White” standards of attractiveness concerning weight, it has been noted that Black women may be affected by an idealized skin complexion and hair texture present in media images, as many Black women experience dissatisfaction with their skin complexion and hair texture (Miller et al., 2000). As reported by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003), Black women may internalize an “ideal Whiteness of beauty” with regard to a light-skinned complexion and long, straight, or wavy hair texture. In fact, according to the authors, too often the standard of attractiveness among Black women is determined by hair texture, hair length, and skin complexion (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). According to Hill (2002), skin complexion may actually be a stronger predictor of perceived attractiveness among Black women than weight; a light-skinned complexion may be considered more attractive and ideal than a dark-skinned complexion.

Colorism has become an issue that affects both dark- and light-skinned African American women. Dark-skinned women sometimes feel devalued and/or not as beautiful as light-skinned women (Altabe, 1996). Conversely, some light-skinned Black women do not feel as connected and/or excluded from the Black community for being too light or close to White. The politics of skin complexion and hair texture are complex and embedded into Black culture, originating centuries ago through slavery and racial oppression. White supremacy ideology within the United States suggested that people of color and African decent were inferior to White Americans. As a result, physical features such as skin complexion, hair texture, eye color, etc.—which were obvious dividers between Black and White cultures—became symbols of beauty and

prestige. Whiteness began to evolve as an ideal standard of attractiveness, while Blackness became identified as sinful and ugly. As Black slaves and their White owners began to create light-skinned “mulatto” children, many shades of skin complexion were created among African Americans (Hill, 2002). From the history of slavery to the present, light-skinned African Americans have been viewed as more ideal and attractive than dark-skinned African Americans, and they have received certain skin complexion privileges (Hill, 2002). Even today, studies show that light-skinned African Americans are more likely to have a higher status job, higher salary and more formal education than dark-skinned Black Americans (Hill, 2002; Hesse-Biber et al., 2004).

Many Black women also view straight or wavy long hair as the ideal standard of attractiveness. Straight or wavy long hair is oftentimes referred to as “good” hair, whereas tight, kinky and curly hair (the hair texture of most Black women in its natural state) is considered “nappy.” As some Black women are dissatisfied with the texture and length of their hair, they feel obligated to purchase hair extensions to achieve the ideal look. In the early 1900s, the straightening comb was introduced to the Black community. Many Black women, especially those of dark-skinned complexions with kinky hair, used the straightening comb as a way to obtain certain advantages such as securing a job and/or husband. The straightening comb was a way to help Black women build their confidence because the “ideal beauty of Whiteness” was straight and wavy hair (Byrd & Tharps, 2001).

Hair is often used as a symbol of the struggle between racial identity and assimilation among Black women. Presently, many Black women still straighten or relax their hair. However, some within the Black community negatively view the straightening process because it suggests the adoption of the Ideal Whiteness and rejection of cultural heritage. On the other

hand, maintaining a natural (non-straightened) hairstyle can be viewed as unattractive and undignified in both Black and White cultures (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). This paradox is further illustrated in the following comment:

Dredlocks are sign of radical self-confidence and spiritual consciousness—or is the wearer a ‘radical’? A shorn head is a stroke of boldness, beauty and rebellion—or is it one of insanity? Straightened hair, short and neat or long and styled, is classy and sophisticated —or is it a betrayal? (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 187)

According to Hesse-Biber et al., (2004), Black women are pressured to find balance between assimilation and racial identity within the Black community while still managing to obtain a certain level of attractiveness idealized by society. Although research suggests that Black women may not internalize ideal thinness standards communicated in media images, African American women often compare their skin complexion and hair texture to the predominantly White images in evaluating their perceived attractiveness (Parker, 1995). As part of this study, the internalization of the ideal Whiteness in satisfaction with hair texture and skin complexion among African American women was explored.

The Effects of Media Images on Self-Perception

The Role of Media Images

Due to strong imagery and technological advancements, mediums such as magazine advertisements are considered to be significant sources for product and brand promotion. For example, Cosmopolitan magazine reaches approximately 36 million female consumers through their global publication featuring 110 editions within 28 different languages (Jung & Lee, 2009). The marketing strategy of magazine companies and other media has been known to impact

women's body satisfaction. Specifically, the illustration of thin models in fashion magazines, television, billboards and other advertising mediums have negatively influenced women's satisfaction with their bodies (Bissell & Rask, 2010; Frisby, 2004; Kim & Lennon, 2007; Kozar & Damhorst, 2009; Rudd & Lennon, 2000; Stephens et al., 1994).

Many people view the media as a reflection of social norms and reality. However, the media has become the focal source of creating social standards and ideals (Jung & Lee, 2009). Media images are considered to be idealized because the models presented in advertisements are an unrealistic representation of people and their lives (Kim & Lennon, 2007). Female models portrayed within advertisements are significantly underweight and thinner than the average American woman, and this gap has increased over the decades (Bissell & Rask, 2010). Since 1959, the average weight of Playboy models and Miss America contestants has significantly decreased while the weight of the average woman has increased (Stice & Shaw, 1994). Today, the average American woman is 5'4 and weighs 140 pounds; the average model portrayed in fashion magazines is 5'11 and weighs 117 pounds (Bissell & Rask, 2010). In addition, the average model today is more than 20% underweight (Halliwell & Dittmar 2004). Moreover, technology and the use of digital editing create flawless media images that make them even less realistic (Kim & Lennon, 2007).

Consumers often read magazines as a guide for self-improvement. However, certain cues in magazine advertisements such as idealized images may create motivation for self-improvement individuals were not necessarily seeking. In this case, magazine readers may engage in dissatisfaction in search of self-improvement. Physical beauty is exemplified through "thinness." Women are often judged by their physical attractiveness, which creates pressure to obtain the "ideal thinness" because it is a reflection of beauty that is often reinforced through

media images. It has been found that attractive people are more likely to receive certain benefits than people who are considered unattractive. These benefits can include more job offers, higher earnings, dating partners, and work partners. In addition, they are more successful with social interactions such as selling products, influencing others, and persuading others. The potential receipt of such benefits contributes to the value of physical appearance within society (Lennon, Lillethun, & Buckland, 1999). Since it appears that the media is an illustration of cultural norms and values, it is only normal for women to try to obtain beauty standards of magazine models (Jung & Lee, 2009).

According to Rudd and Lennon (2000), the contemporary American standard of attractiveness is very narrow, creating values based on thinness, attractiveness, and fitness. Many social factors influence beauty values today, including family, peers, schools, athletics, business, and health care professionals (Groez et al., 2001). However, as maintained by Tiggeman and McGill (2004), the mass media has the greatest impact on constructing idealized images of beauty. The standard of attractiveness emphasized is a slender body with trim hips, roundness of breasts, and unblemished and smooth skin. Women today go to great lengths to achieve weight and attractiveness standards (Tiggeman & McGill, 2004). In fact, the standard of attractiveness in American culture has been so internalized that body dissatisfaction is now considered normal among women (Stice & Shaw, 1994). Reinforcement to consumers regarding their inability to match up to media ideals contributes to the billion dollar sales of health and beauty products. Since advertisers continue to promote beauty standards represented through media images--which are unattainable for many women, there will continue to be a need for health and beauty products. A growth in sales even at the sake of women's body satisfaction and self-esteem has been realized (Bissell & Rask, 2010). Although the advertising industry is often criticized for

promoting unrealistic standards of beauty, they continue with the same approach to media placement. These companies argue that the use of thin models creates a more effective advertisement. However, Halliwell and Dittmar (2004) found in their study that attractiveness, not body size, influenced advertising's efficacy, demonstrating that an attractive average-sized model can be just as effective as an attractive thin model in advertisements (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004).

It is suggested that discrepancies are likely to occur between individuals' true selves and their ideal selves due to beauty norms projected by the media (Bissell & Rask, 2010). In addition, women suffer from body image discrepancies because the ideal thinness is not reflected within the increase in average size within American society (Kim & Damhorst, 2010). As women are exposed to media images, they compare themselves to idealized images and may perceive a discrepancy between their own image and the idealized image (Bissell & Rask, 2010). Body dissatisfaction is influenced by discrepancies between one's actual body size and thin ideal models represented in the media (Kim & Damhorst, 2010). In addition, some will go to extreme measures to do whatever it takes in order to diminish the discrepancy between their actual and ideal selves. Since it is almost impossible to reach beauty standards and minimize discrepancy between their ideal and actual self, these women are left with a psychological temperament often leading to unhealthy dieting behavior (Bissell & Rask, 2010).

People often compare themselves to the others within their environment and in the media to determine their self-worth (Morse & Gergen, 1970). In Morse and Gergen's (1970) study on social comparison, they found that casual exposure to others can influence an individual's momentary concept of self. Comparison to those with highly desirable characteristics can lead to a decrease in self-esteem. Women often engage in an upward comparison behavior to thin and

attractive models represented in the media. Upward comparison--comparison to superior others--are related to increases in depression and anger and decreases in self-esteem (Cattarin et al. 2000).

The increasing rate of eating disorders is positively related to articles featuring weight-loss and exercising techniques published in women's magazines (Stice & Shaw 1994). The media communicate to consumers that thinness can be achieved by diet, exercise, apparel, accessories, cosmetics, plastic surgery, and weight-loss drugs. Marketers in the apparel industry believe that exposure to media images will create a positive brand attitude (Yu, Damhorst, & Russell, 2011). According to Groez, Levine, and Murnen (2001), "Targeting markets to sell products such as diets, cosmetics, and exercise gear, the media construct a dream world of hopes and higher standards that incorporates the glorification of slenderness and weight loss" (p. 2). A study conducted by Andersen and DiDomenico (1990) found that weight-loss related articles and advertisements were 10.5 times as likely to be found in women's magazines rather than in men's. Lennon and Rudd (1994) state "Because media images tend to be highly attractive, the typical person's appearance would stand in direct contrast to the idealized media portrayal" (p. 97).

Tiggeman and McGill (2004) conducted a study to measure how magazine advertisements impact women's mood and body satisfaction. The study was divided into two sessions. The first session included a questionnaire that measured individual trait variables and magazine/television preferences and consumption. One week later, in the second session, participants were exposed to magazine images and post measures of mood, body satisfaction, and other variables were recorded. Within this study, the researchers found negative effects of media exposure after revealing only 11 idealized images in ten minutes, which is only a fraction of illustrations contained in a single issue of a fashion magazine. In addition, the study concluded

that social comparison is a mediator between exposure to media ideals and body dissatisfaction. Comparison to idealized images through advertisements may be automatic or forced (Rudd & Lennon, 2000). Because this ideal beauty of thinness is unattainable by most women, comparisons to idealized images may cause anger, depression, and body image disturbance (Kim & Lennon, 2007). In addition, Stice and Shaw (1994) used magazine ads containing ultra-thin models, average size models or no models to measure the effects of media images. They found that exposure to idealized images increases feelings of depression, shame, guilt, insecurity, stress and body dissatisfaction. It was supported within their study that these heightened feelings are associated with bulimic symptomatology and depression is strongly related to eating pathology.

Repetitive exposure to media images can contribute to body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and unhealthy behaviors (Bissell & Rask, 2010; Frisby, 2004; Kozar & Damhorst, 2009; Rudd & Lennon, 2000; Stephens et al., 1994; Tiggeman & McGill, 2004). Body dissatisfaction is normative among women in Western culture, a culture that promotes dieting in order to alter women's body figures. However, factors such as weight genetics can restrict women from obtaining the ideal thinness. Therefore, women go to extreme measures such as eating disorders to obtain the standard of attractiveness (Groez et al., 2001). Extreme changes to one's actual body in order to reflect one's imagination of how the body should look is referred to as body disturbance. The line that distinguishes normal appearance concerns from body disturbance can be obscure. However, body dissatisfaction can lead to various harmful appearance-management behaviors such as eating disorders, drug use, and cosmetic surgery (Rudd & Lennon, 2000; Stephens et al., 1994). Rudd and Lennon (2000) identified three components of risky appearance management behaviors in their study: eating, substance abuse and other appearance-related behaviors. Eating disorders included anorexia and bulimia; and substance use identified as

laxatives, diuretics and diet pills. Other risky appearance management behaviors included: obsessive exercising, tanning, smoking for weight loss and cosmetic surgery. In a survey given to 33,000 females ranging from ages 15 to 35, 75% of participants perceived themselves to be fat, when only 25% of the women were actually overweight. An additional 18% of the participants were actively using diuretics or laxatives, and 15% used vomiting as a method for weight control (Stephens et al., 1994).

Black vs. White Beauty

Currently, there is limited research exploring female definitions of beauty and attractiveness among African American women. The studies that do exist suggest that Black women have a more positive body satisfaction than Caucasian women (Allan et al., 1993; Altabe, 1996; Cachelin et al., 2002; Collins, 2000; Demarest & Allen, 2000; Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Hesse-Biber et al., 2004; Miller et al., 2000; Parker et al., 1995; Patel & Gray, 2001). Black women are not necessarily less concerned with appearance than Caucasian women; however, as noted previously in this thesis, ideal standards of thinness are often not as readily adopted and culturally valued by the Black community (Allan et al., 1993; Hesse-Biber et al., 2004; Flynn, & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Molloy & Herzberger, 1998; Parker et al., 1995).

In addition, studies measuring body satisfaction solely focus on weight satisfaction (Frisby, 2004). Weight satisfaction and body satisfaction are two distinct terms and should not be used interchangeably. Weight is an important attribute in both Black and White cultures, and is probably considered the most visible characteristic of body image (Allan et al., 1993; Cachelin et al., 2002; Miller et al., 2000). However, African American women are often less concerned with weight as compared to Caucasian women when determining their body satisfaction, actually preferring a heavier body weight than ideal standards of thinness (Flynn and Fitzgibbon, 1998;

Frisby, 2004; Smith et al., 1997). Consequently, other variables should be considered when defining the concept of body image among Black women. As part of this study, weight satisfaction, skin complexion and hair texture, was used to explore body satisfaction among Black women. Participants' racial identity and social comparison behavior is also examined.

Limited research exists on how Black women compare themselves to media images. Nevertheless, Frisby (2004) identified findings within her study that contribute to understanding the effectiveness of media images to body satisfaction among Black women. Within Frisby's study, findings support that similarity influences African American women responses to idealized images. Specifically, if media images are dissimilar or of another ethnicity than the viewer, it is likely that self-evaluation will not negatively influence body satisfaction. In addition, African American women are more likely to compare themselves to others with similar characteristics. Flynn and Fitzgibbon (1998) suggest that Black women who are exposed to media ideals do not internalize the ideal thinness because idealized images are related more to Caucasian women. Finally, Parker et al. (1995) concluded that Black women compare themselves to each other, instead of idealized images. Nevertheless, it has been researched that media images are very Eurocentric, promoting the ideal Whiteness. Pop culture contributes to the infusion of long, straight hair as the standard of attractiveness within Black and White culture through mass media (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Parker et al. (1995) mention that African American females compare their appearance to the dominant White ideal. However, the phenomenon of how the media impact social comparison and body satisfaction among African American women is still developing and was explored in this study.

Theoretical Foundation

Social Comparison Theory

Festinger's theory of Social Comparison highlights that people use each other as a reference in order to evaluate themselves—specifically their physical standards. People often compare themselves to others whom they perceive as similar to oneself (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989). Festinger hypothesized a “unidirectional upward drive” that has been imposed on Western Civilization, meaning that not only do people in U.S. culture evaluate themselves based on their similarity to others, but they also feel compelled to improve themselves (Wood, 1989).

According to Morse and Gergen (1970), “...people are often concerned with their personal attractiveness and general value as human beings. They may frequently compare themselves with others in their immediate environment (and in the mass media) to judge their own personal worth” (p. 148). This theory helps us understand how media images influence body dissatisfaction. Because of exposure to media ideals, women are consistently trying to improve themselves by attempting to obtain an ideal fashion of thinness (Allan et al., 1993; Bissell & Rask, 2010; Frisby, 2004; Kozar & Damhorst, 2009; Rudd & Lennon, 2000; Wood, 1989).

Upward comparison occurs when one compares herself to superior others for self-evaluation, while a downward comparison is made when one compares herself to inferior others (Cattarin, Thompson, Thomas & William, 2000; Wood, 1989). Upward comparisons are linked to increased depression, anger and low self-esteem; whereas downward comparisons are associated with increased self-esteem and positive effect (Cattarin et al., 2011). Cattarin et al. (2000) found that exposure to models in the media that depict the ideal thinness standards often resulted in an upward comparison for many women. In addition, the extent of internalization of thinness ideals can influence the level of body satisfaction. For example, women with a higher

tendency to accept the dominant cultural norms of beauty are more vulnerable to the effects of media ideals.

Social comparison theory also specifies that comparison of those who are dissimilar to one's self will have little or no impact on self-evaluation. Social comparison to those who are dissimilar can assist in identifying the spectrum of possibilities. However, those individuals may not be used as references in defining beauty (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989). As part of this study, social comparison theory was used to track the impact of media ideals on body satisfaction among African American women ages 18-30. Furthermore, social comparison theory assists in the investigation of why African American women may continue to have a positive body satisfaction even after being exposed to the same idealized images in the media as Caucasian women. When studying the cross-cultural examination of women's fashion and beauty magazine advertisements in the US and South Korea, Jung and Lee (2009) found that "if a Korean woman chooses to compare herself to Western images or perceives the physical characteristics of those models as the "ideal," then she is more likely to be dissatisfied with her body and engage in behaviors that would mold her into a persona of Western ideals" (p. 284). This may also be the case among the African American subculture. Frisby (2004) suggests that because there is a lack of representation of Black women in the media, African American women do not compare themselves to these models because they look quite different from themselves (Frisby, 2004). Instead, Black women may compare themselves more often to other Black women who are traditionally heavier than Caucasian women. It is conceivable that Black women do not as readily internalize the ideal thinness standard and as a result have a more positive weight satisfaction (Allan et al., 1993; Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Parker et al., 1995). This conception was examined further as part of this study.

Additionally, social comparison theory mentions that the social environment can affect the way a person forms self-evaluations, and the results thereof. The impact of engaging in social comparison behavior can change depending on one's social environment (Wood, 1989). Therefore, it was important to examine how social environment, including racial identity, affects body satisfaction of African American women within this study.

Racial Identity

In 1971, William Cross developed a model called the Negro-to-Black Conversion Experience, commonly known today as the Nigrescence Theory, in response to the Black Movement. The Black Movement was a time when African Americans were moving away from a state of oppression and anti-Blackness and transforming to a state of Black pride and liberation. The Negro-to-Black Conversion Experience was originally developed to highlight five stages that African Americans may encounter when transforming from a "Negro" to a Black American (Cross, 1971).

The Nigrescence Theory was revised in 1991 and expanded in 1995 (Vandiver et al., 2002). It is based on "...the various ways Black people make sense of themselves as social beings rather than a constellation of personality traits" (Vandiver & Cross, 2001 p. 380). In its current form, the Nigrescence Theory is composed of six levels: Nigrescence and the structure of the (Black) Self-Concept; Nigrescence and the Universe of Black Identity Types; Nigrescence Theory and Traditional Socialization; Nigrescence as Resocialization or Conversion experience; Nigrescence and Recycling; and Nigrescence and Identity Functions (Vandiver & Cross, 2001). According to Vandiver and Cross (2001),

In Nigrescence Theory, it is understood that Black identity refers to the way a person thinks about (cognitive component of identity), feels (evaluative

component of identity that also includes taste and preferences), and acts (behavioral component of identity) in reference to one cell or a subset of cells in a person's RGO Matrix. (p. 372) ¹

The premise of the Nigrescence Theory includes the following highlights (Vandiver & Cross, 2001):

- More than one Black identity exists among African American people.
- African Americans enact Black identity within their daily interactions with both Black and White people.
- Black people believe that they respond to situations concerning White and Black people as individuals.
- How Black people define and interpret their social sense of self varies among its subculture.

Racial Identity is deeply embedded into how African American women define beauty. As previously stated, "Beauty is defined less in relation to static images and more in terms of performance competence in a multicultural world marked by conflict as well as egalitarian ideals" (Parker et al., 1995, p. 111). This study included an examination of the concept of racial identity in order to fully explore how Black women define beauty. Racial Identity not only plays a significant role in understanding the issues of skin complexion and hair texture, but racial identity also impacts how African American evaluate women's style, attitude and overall concept of Black Beauty.

"Black Beauty" is focused on individuality while continuing to maintain a collective social strategy that differs from the dominant (White) culture. It is important for individuals

¹ RGO stands for reference group orientation or social identity.

within the Black community to make a personal statement through style and attitude. However, at the same time, one must not forget that self-presentation is not only a reflection of oneself, but also a representation of the Black community (Parker et al., 1995). Ethnic identity is engraved into the concept of Black Beauty. As Taylor mentioned in Parker's et al. study (1995), African American women have a lot ethnic pride that is illustrated through their style:

“Black style is our culture. It's our collective response to the world. Our style is rooted in our history and in knowledge of our inner power-our power as people. Black style is the opposite of conformity. It's what others conform to. In fact, quiet as it's kept, our style is envied and emulated throughout the world” (as cited by Taylor in Parker et al., 1995 p. 109).

A prominent expectation placed on the Black community is being able to understand one's culture and take pride in that. A woman who possesses a genuine and “real” personality and who fights to overcome all obstacles is perceived as beautiful and attractive among Black women. Having confidence in one's self and being perceived as being absorbed in physical attractiveness is a sign of beauty. Inner beauty is a part of creating an individual style (Parker et al., 1995).

The way in which African American women adopt different standards of beauty is largely dependent on their racial identity. As racial identity increases among Black women, the more likely they are to reject ideal standards of thinness and attractiveness communicated by the dominant culture. However, it is conceivable that an increased level of assimilation among Black women will cause them to be subject to the White norms of body image. In other words, the more Black women identify with the dominant culture, the more likely they will share similar values of body image with Caucasian women (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004). In addition, African

American women's responses to advertisements will differ as a result of racial identity. Black women with a high racial identity favor advertisements with Black models in a dominant position, whereas Black women with a low racial identity favor advertisements of White models in a dominant position (Green, 1999). Not only does racial identity influence body satisfaction among Black women, but it also impacts African Americans' level of self-esteem, well-being, and depression (Hesse-Biber, 2004). The challenge regarding racial identity is that it is a complex construct that can be difficult to define. The concept of being Black differs on an individual level. Moreover, there are many factors that influence the individual level of racial identity among Black women (Demo & Huges, 1990; Cross & Vandiver, 2001). As part of this study, the impact of racial identity on Black women's definitions of beauty was explored.

Purpose and Objectives

Previous studies conducted on the relationship between social comparison behavior to media images and body satisfaction were limited, and have predominately focused on Caucasian women. The purpose of this study was to explore body image and social comparison behavior among African American women ages 18-30. Body image research studies that have included Black women as participants found that Black women often maintain a more positive body satisfaction than Caucasian women. However, within these studies, weight satisfaction was used as the primary measurement of body satisfaction (Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998). This research more thoroughly explored the concept of Black Beauty, defining standards of attractiveness in the Black community and how African American women may differ in their definitions of beauty as compared to Caucasian women. In addition, the frequency with which African American women compared themselves to fashion media images was examined.

This study incorporated several variables which may influence body satisfaction among Black women, including weight, skin complexion, and hair texture. Previous studies supported that African American women may not internalize ideal thinness standards communicated in media images. However, Black women may internalize ideal Whiteness standards related to skin complexion and hair texture (Heinburg and Thompson, 1995; Kim & Lennon, 2007; Mazur, 1986; Stice & Shaw 1994; Tiggeman & McGill, 2004). This study analyzed how ideal Whiteness standards of beauty related to skin complexion and hair texture influenced body satisfaction among Black women. Additionally, previous research proposed that racial identity was inversely related to how Black women internalize ideal thinness standards and how frequently Black women compare themselves to media images (Hesse-Biber, 2004). Specifically, Hesse-Biber et al. (2004) concluded that African American women with a high racial identify were less likely to be negatively influenced by standards of thinness and were less likely to compare themselves with media images. However, few studies have examined racial identity in relationship to body satisfaction. Therefore, this research explored how racial identity affects social comparison behavior and overall body satisfaction of Black women.

Research Questions

The research questions of this study included an exploration of the following topics:

1. How do Black women define beauty and standards of attractiveness?
 - 1.1 How does body shape influence level of attractiveness?
 - 1.2 How do the variables of skin complexion and hair texture influence level of attractiveness?
2. Do the media impact Black women's body satisfaction?
 - 2.1 Do the media impact Black women's body satisfaction concerning body shape?

- 2.2 Do the media impact Black women's body satisfaction concerning skin complexion and hair texture?
3. Do African American women feel a sense of pressure to conform to White standards of beauty and attractiveness?
- 3.1 To what extent do Black women feel pressured to adopt White standards of attractiveness concerning body shape?
- 3.2 Do Black women feel pressured to adopt White standards of attractiveness concerning skin complexion and hair texture?
4. To what extent do Black women engage in social comparison behavior to media ideals?
5. To what extent do Black women perceive similarity with fashion media images?
- 5.1 What is the impact of engaging in social comparison behavior among African American women aged 18-30?
- 5.2 What is the relationship between social comparison behavior and overall body satisfaction among Black women aged 18-30?
- 5.3 Do model images of various racial backgrounds have a negative effect and/or positive effect on the body satisfaction of African American women?
6. How does racial identity influence standards of attractiveness, body satisfaction and social comparison behavior among African American women aged 18-30?
- 6.1 How does racial identity impact level of attractiveness?
- 6.2 How does racial identity impact body satisfaction?
- 6.3 What is the relationship between social comparison behavior and racial identity among Black women aged 18-30?

Chapter 3 - Methods

Qualitative data was collected in this study in order to explore body image and social comparison behavior among African American women. The topics discussed in this chapter include: demographics of sampled participants; the instrument used to collect data; data collection procedures; and data analysis. In addition, issues of confidentiality and participant consent are discussed.

Sample

As part of a convenience sample, this study included African American women between the ages of 18-30. Participants were recruited from a university located in the Midwestern region of the United States using a purposeful and snowball sampling technique. Twelve participants were interviewed for this study. The sample size was determined based on Strauss and Corbin's (1988) concept of data saturation. This concept suggests that after the researcher interviews a certain number of participants, data collection reaches a point of saturation where responses become redundant and new themes cease to emerge. Therefore, the researcher continued data collection until it was obvious that data saturation had occurred-- which occurred after interviewing twelve participants within this study.

Purposeful Sampling

According to Maxwell (1996), purposeful sampling is defined as “a strategy in which particular settings, persons or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that can't be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 70). Within this study, purposeful sampling was used in order to achieve two goals: to provide a complete range in the variables of interest, specifically body shape, skin complexion and hair texture; and to observe whether these

differences may lead to different experiences, standards of attractiveness and/or levels of comparison (Maxwell, 1996).

Prior to collecting data, the researcher noted appearance characteristics regarding body shape, skin complexion and hair texture, and provided a thorough discussion in the findings section. In order to provide greater specificity, this study was limited to African American women. African Caribbean and African native women may have different perspectives concerning issues of racial identity, social comparison, and body image than African American women. In addition, the geographic location in which African Caribbean and African native women were raised may have limited their exposure and adoption to sociocultural norms within American culture.

Distinguishing Appearance Characteristics

African American women's skin complexion consists of many different shades of brown. Skin complexions among Black women can range from a dark rich chocolate shade to a high yellow complexion. However, in order to synthesize information and identify themes, skin complexion was divided into three different categories: Light Skin, Medium Skin, and Dark Skin within this study.

Similar to skin complexion, there are many different hair textures presented among Black women in which distinguishing hair types can be quite complex. In fact, it is very common for an African American woman to have more than one texture and/or wave pattern in their hair. Straight hair that has been relaxed using a chemical permanent composes a hair texture that is different from straight hair that has been straightened using a hot pressing comb. In addition, natural hair can be defined as wavy, curly, curly kinky and kinky. Andre Walker, a known celebrity hair stylist, established a hair classification system to distinguish hair textures among

African American women. In his book, African American hair can be further classified in 11 categories: Type 1a hair, Type 1b hair, Type 1c hair, Type 2a hair, Type 2b hair, Type 2c hair, Type 3a hair, Type 3b hair, Type 3c hair, Type 4a hair and Type 4b hair (Walker, 1997). However, this study divided hair texture into two categories: straight hair and natural hair in order to conduct an analysis.

Body size, as captured by general dress size was used to distinguish between the body weights of individual participants. This intention of this was to study focus primarily Misses sizes. The range in Misses sizes can vary. However, in this study, Misses sizes ranging from a size 4-22 was explored. Body size is classified into four different categories: small (sizes 4-6) medium (sizes 8-10), large (sizes 12-14), extra-large (sizes 16-18) and double extra large (20-22). A size chart is provided in Appendix A illustrating the dimensions of each body shape category. Nevertheless, the sample was reflective of representing a variety of body shapes, skin complexions and hair textures within the study.

Instrument

In order to explore the self-perception and body image among African American women aged 18-30, participants were asked to respond to several open-ended questions within a semi-structured interview. The interviews were conducted individually to ensure confidentiality and minimize influence of responses. A pre-test was included in this study in order to ensure the validity of interview questions. Within the pre-test, the researcher interviewed one person within the represented group but not included in the sample. The participant often needed clarification of pretest questions. Therefore, the researcher revised interview questions and interviewed another person. The second pre-test was successful; therefore, the researcher began the data collection. Then, the researcher began data collection by interviewing twelve women as part of

this study. The interview questions were developed in order to measure the research questions specified below:

- How do Black women define beauty and standards of attractiveness?
- Do the media impact Black women's body satisfaction?
- Do African American women feel a sense of pressure to conform to White standards of beauty and attractiveness?
- To what extent do Black women engage in social comparison behavior to media ideals?
- What is the impact of engaging in social comparison behavior among African American women aged 18-30?
- How do racial identity influence standards of attractiveness, body satisfaction and social comparison behavior among African American women aged 18-30?

A list of interview questions is included in Appendix B. Although, the interview questions were used as a guiding framework to measure research questions, the interviews were adaptable in order to explore new themes and concepts that had not been previously identified by the researcher.

Procedure

Participants was solicited from among students in the university's Black Student Union (BSU) organization, sororities included in the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) that are historically known as African American sororities, and Black staff members employed at the university using the snowball and purposeful sampling technique. A series of pre-screening questions regarding ethnicity and age were asked to each participant in order to ensure they met appropriate sample requirements; each participant self-identified as being an African American female between the ages of 18-30. In addition, background questions were included in order to

explore initial relationships between participants' responses and certain demographics such as income, residency, and education level. The purpose of this study was explained thoroughly and an explanation of the consent forms was provided prior to collecting data. Individual interviews lasted an average of one hour in a private location where participants felt comfortable. All interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participants. Data was stored in a safe location where it was accessible only to the researcher. Data was collected and analyzed using character names for participants in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze data, a thorough description of each participant was completed. The data was interpreted in order to understand each participant's perspective regarding body image among African American women and their individual body satisfaction; gather meaning on how Black women define beauty; identify unanticipated phenomena and influences; and explore the relationship between racial identity and social comparison behavior. After data was collected, the researcher listened to the audio tapes prior to transcribing in order to develop tentative ideas and relationships. Express Scribe software was used to transcribe data. In addition, the researcher used a categorizing strategy (coding) in order to analyze data. Categorizing consisted of emic categorizing—categories composed from the framework of previous literature—as well as other categories that were established inductively during the analysis (Maxwell, 1996).

Coding

Auerbach and Silverstein's (2003) introduction to qualitative analysis was used as a framework to assist in the coding process. The authors have identified a six step approach within coding analysis. First, the research concerns and theoretical framework was identified. This step assisted in distinguishing between essential and non-essential data. Second, the researcher

identified relevant text. Relevant text is considered subjective. However, it can be generally defined as “...passages of your transcript that expresses a distinct idea related to your research” (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 78). The third step was to discover repeated ideas by gathering related passages together within each separate transcription. Then, the researcher consolidated the passages among all the transcriptions. Fourth, the researcher organized themes and repeat ideas to coherent categories. Fifth, theoretical constructs was be explored as it identifies with current research. Finally, the researcher created a theoretical narrative by re-writing the participants’ story in respect to a theoretical construct.

Trustworthiness of Study

Since the study utilized qualitative research methods, establishing standards of trustworthiness among research was imperative. Moreover, standards of validity, reliability and neutrality as important components of trustworthiness must be discussed within any scholastic study. Therefore, these factors were addressed within this study using Lincoln and Guba’s (2005) criterion which highlights that within non-positivist paradigms of inquiry, the extent of security among the researcher’s actions upon research findings should be assessed in order to measure validity along with the confidence level of the researcher in the application of public policy and engagement in social action on the basis of the findings. Specifically, using Lincoln and Guba’s (2005) criterion, this study addressed four concepts: truth value, fairness and representation of responses, reliability, and neutrality in order to establish trustworthiness of the research.

Establishing Validity

Lincoln and Guba (1999) suggest truth value as an essential element when measuring a study’s validity and/or credibility. In order to measured truth value, it is assumed that multiple realities exist. In addition, “reality” is composed of a multiple set of mental constructions made

by humans. Moreover, in order to establish truth value within research, multiple constructions of reality must be adequately represented and credible by those individuals who initially constructed the multiple realities. Within this study, because the researcher identified within similar demographics as the participants, it was helpful to accurately interpret participants' responses. In addition, in order to successfully interpret responses provided by the participants, the researcher consistently inquired for clarification and further explanation when needed. The researcher would often summarize interview responses in her own words, recite them back to the participant and confirm if interpretations were understood correctly.

In addition to truth value, Lincoln and Guba (2005) suggested that research finding should be fair and represent the voices of all research participants in order to measure validity within non-positivist research paradigms. Therefore, in order to ensure validity within this study, this research provided a thorough description of the findings as a representation of all the participants. In addition, findings were not excluded based on contestable content and/or any outliers found within the study.

Establishing Reliability

Similar to validity, it is important to establish standards of reliability in order to determine the study's trustworthiness. The reliability was demonstrated within this study by using a quality "audit trail" suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1999). Specifically, throughout data collection and analysis, the researcher was intentional about providing detailed field notes regarding research processes. Furthermore, as part of the audit trail for this study, information collected included interview transcriptions, field notes, color-coded guides, summary charts, and process notes. Therefore, inquiring minds can easily determine how the study was conducted and how conclusions were formed as part of this research.

Establishing Neutrality

According to Lincoln and Guba (1999), the degree to which the findings of the study reflect the responses of the participants and conditions of the study rather than the researcher's bias and perspective is known as neutrality. Furthermore, establishing trustworthiness within a study also depends upon the neutrality of the researcher throughout the research process and the objectivity of the conclusions. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested that it is important for a good researcher to be aware of the personal biases brought to the research study and develop controls for the effects the bias may have on research processes. Therefore, as previously mentioned, this study assumed that a personal bias existed as the researcher identifies with a similar demographic and background as the participants. Therefore, in order to be self-aware and honest about personal bias, the researcher kept a research journal often exploring the possibility of personal biases and their potential effects as part of study.

Chapter 4 - Data Analysis

As previously stated, the purpose of this study was to explore how African American women think and feel about their bodies. Specifically, this study examined how Black women define beauty, if African American women ages 18-30 compare themselves to fashion models represented in the media, and if comparison to fashion models impacts African American women's body satisfaction. The objective of Chapter 4 is to present the underlying themes that emerged from the interviews regarding African American women's body satisfaction. Specifically, this chapter provides background information about the research participants and addresses the five research questions, highlighting important variables such as body shape, skin complexion, and hair texture. Additional findings that were identified as a result of this study are also provided.

The Participants

Demographics

Table 4.1 illustrates the demographic background of the participants. All of the participants self-identified as middle class. While many of the participants currently reside in the Midwest as college students, their upbringings vary in terms of both geographic culture and community culture. Some of the participants grew up in predominately African American communities, while others lived in communities comprised of mostly Caucasian residents or a mixture of ethnicities. The sample included both undergraduate and graduate students currently enrolled in a mid-west institution as well as Black professionals who have obtained a master's degree in varied fields. The participants' ages ranged from 18-29.

Table 4.1 Participants' Demographics

Participant Name	Social Class	Education Level	Age	Community Members
Stephanie	Middle	Master's Completed	28	predominantly African American , low to middle class, high crime rate mixed income, African American
Courtney	Middle Lower	Master's Student	23	population Lower middle class, Black
LaPorsha	Middle	Master's Student	24	Community
Angela	Middle	Undergraduate	21	predominately Latino
Jasmine	Middle	Undergraduate	21	predominantly African American
Blake	Middle	Undergraduate	19	Mostly Caucasian, middle-middle class & upper middle class
Victoria	Middle	Undergraduate	23	Mixed, African and Caucasian, middle class, urban
Alex	Middle	Undergraduate	18	predominantly Caucasian, Surburban
Peyton	Middle	Master's Student	28	predominantly African American, poverty
Grey	Middle	PHD Student	29	Surburb, different ethnicities, primary Black social group
Renee	Middle	PHD Student	23	many races, very diverse, middle class
Brook	Middle	Master's Completed	25	Mixed, African and Caucasian, middle classand upper class, small town

Purposeful Sampling

As mentioned in Chapter 3, purposeful sampling was used in order to distinguish participants among variables such as gender, race, age, dress size, skin complexion and hair texture. More specifically, purposeful sampling was used in this research in order to achieve two goals: to provide a complete range in the variables of interest, specifically body shape, skin complexion and hair texture; and to observe whether these differences may lead to different experiences, standards of attractiveness and/or levels of comparison (Maxwell, 1996).

Table 4.1, 4.2 and Figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 disaggregate the participants' diversity. All demographics and variables were self-reported by the participants. As illustrated, age and dress

size varied the most among the participants. The medium shade dominates the skin complexion variable. Notably, the perception of color and skin complexion varied among participants. For example, a bronze skin complexion was identified as either a medium or dark skin complexion, depending on the participant. Hair texture was the least diverse variable in the sample; the majority of the participants described their hair texture as natural, though this was not necessarily an obvious classification. Participants struggled to define their hair as either straight or natural because they often wear a variety of styles, including straightened, whether by self-styling or wig. Straightening with the use of chemical relaxer, however, became the differentiator: those not using a chemical relaxer identified as having natural hair texture, and those using a chemical relaxer identified as having straight hair texture. Further comparisons of individual differences will be explained in Chapter 5. Ultimately, the constraint of accessible women willing to participate in the study is the most significant reason the sample is not exactly as the researcher anticipated.

Table 4.2 Participants' Body Image Variables

Participant Name	Dress Size	Hair Texture	Skin Complexion
Stephanie	Small	Straight	Medium
Courtney	Medium/Large Double Extra	Straight	Dark
LaPorsha	Large	Natural	Medium
Angela	Small/Medium	Straight	Dark
Jasmine	Small/Medium	Natural	Light
Blake	Small/Medium	Natural	Light
Victoria	Medium	Natural	Medium
Alex	Small	Natural	Medium
Peyton	Medium	Straight	Medium
Grey	Large	Natural	Dark
Renee	Small/Medium	Natural	Light
Brook	Extra Large	Natural	Medium

Figure 4.1 Participants' Dress Size

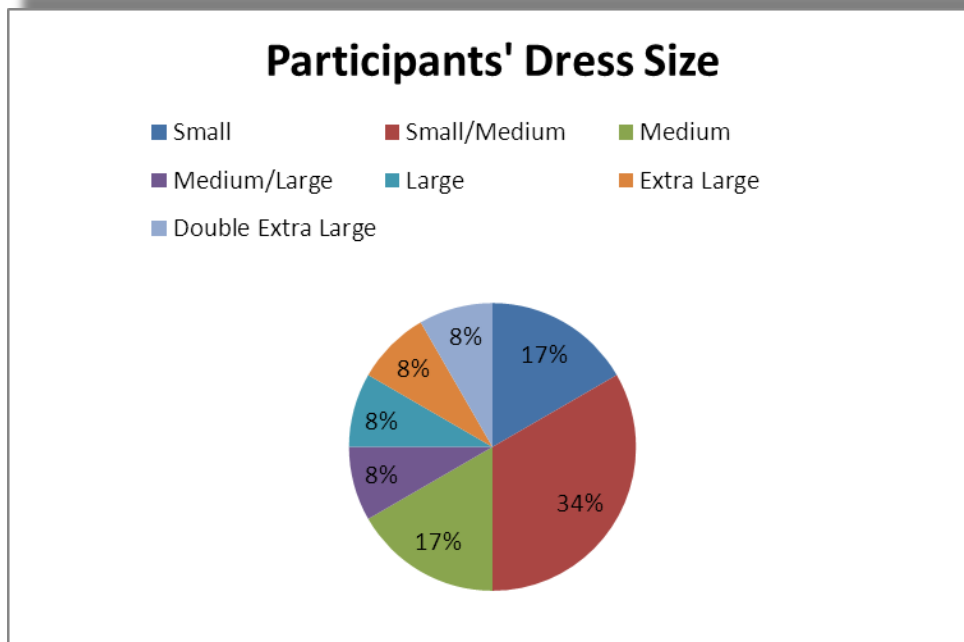


Figure 4.2 Participants' Skin Complexion

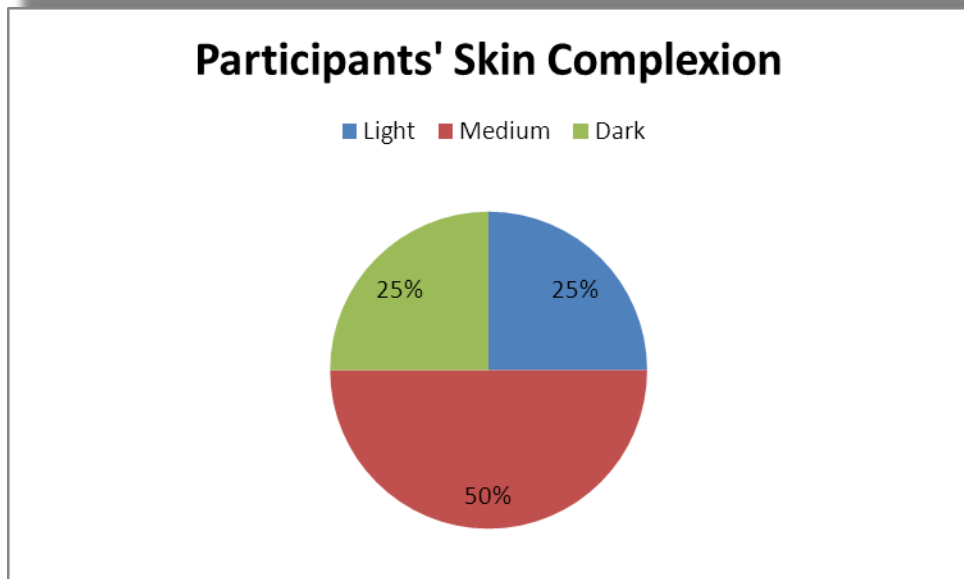
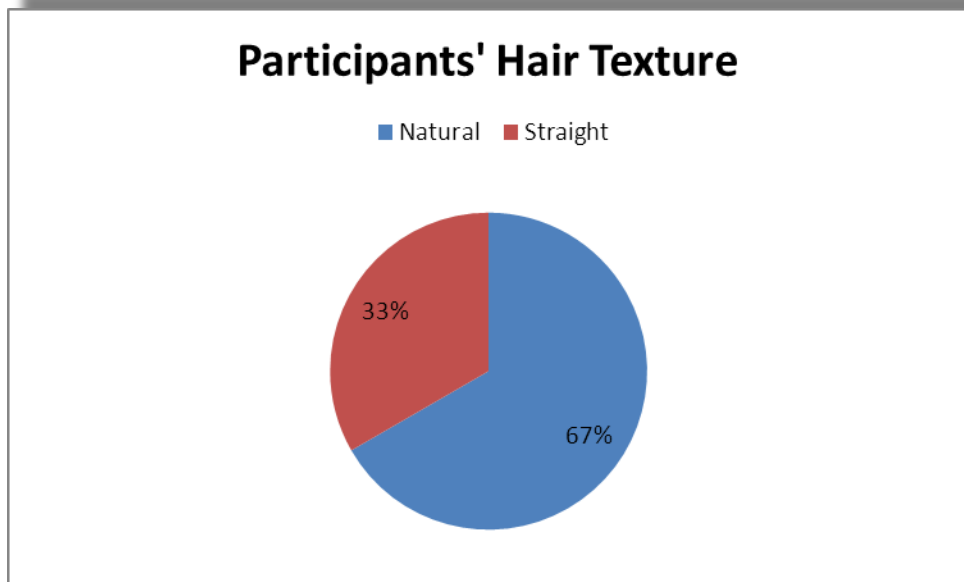


Figure 4.3 Participants' Hair Texture



Research Question 1: How do Black women define beauty standards of attractiveness?

This research questions explored how Black women define beauty standards of attractiveness. Furthermore, the way in which variables concerning body shape, skin complexion and hair texture influence standards of attractiveness was examined. Participants were not only asked to define how they personally define beauty but also to provide opinions on how they believe beauty is defined within the Black community as a subculture. Moreover, it was important to note that themes emerged regarding how Black women define beauty were based upon the response and opinions of the participants.

Defining Beauty among Participants

When asking the participants how they personally define beauty, an important theme emerged. For Black women, beauty is viewed as an overall full package. This is known as self-presentation, which includes upholding a combination of inner and outer beauty expectations that

are subjectively defined by the individual. Self-presentation often includes but is not limited to: confidence; character; commitment to individual values and ethics; being well-kempt with consistent grooming; poise; and individuality. The two strongest subsets of self-presentation are inner beauty and confidence.

JASMINE: ...when I look in the mirror, I kind of want to be flawless. Not necessarily everything in tact, but you know, just look presentable like my mother taught me how to be. That's one of the ways that I view attractiveness...

VICTORIA: ... basically umm it's about confidence. Also, how you carry yourself makes you attractive and beautiful. And how you present yourself—what your morals and values are, you know, and how you umm express those, you know, in front of other people....They named Beyonce the most beautiful woman in the world. That's just crazy because there are plenty more beautiful people in the world and I think they based it off of her looks and that does not just make you beautiful. It's your personality. It's how you carry yourself and what you do in the world and I think that's a problem.

ALEX: ... If they have their hair done, they look well put together and their clothes look decent. I'm not saying that you have to wear like Nike or Prada or anything. As long as you look well put together, you're intelligent, or you look like you have a good head on your shoulders and polite.

The participants suggested Black women acknowledge that physical features are taken into consideration when defining beauty, especially during first impressions. However, beauty is more complex than outer beauty. For Black women, personality and attitude impact one's perception of beauty. In this case, participants are not using the term *personality* as a specific trait that defines an individual, but to describe more of an overall energy and persona that an individual portrays. The participants often expressed that a woman who is physically attractive with a negative attitude and personality are not necessarily perceived as beautiful in the Black community.

RENEE: ... Beauty is both outer and inner. That's just my umm personal opinion...there are certain physical features that look good on, fit well together; but at the same time, if

the person don't personify inner beauty, then it's just not, it's like, they can be as ugly as whatever so.

COURTNEY: ... if you have the right attitude and the right personality, you can basically light up a room. It doesn't necessarily matter what you look like. You can get anybody you want. Everybody wants to be your friend. I mean it's just kind of like the law. I guess the law of attraction. Not necessarily that you are attracted to that, what you see, but the energy pulls you in like a magnetic force.

BROOK: I would say beauty to me is like a reflection of like your inner self. Like people think, you know the media and stuff, say beauty is more focused on people's outer appearance and to me, beauty is like a person's personality, you know, if they're fun, if they're loving, if they're generous, like that's attractive. Beauty is an attraction but it's just not physically. It's more mentally and emotionally to me...

LAPORSHA: ... I think it is very individualized. Umm, I think it has a lot to do with how you carry yourself. Also, umm, physical features definitely play a role in that. Umm, I think that you can be nice looking on the outside and have bad personality and people will not think you are beautiful...

According to the participants, confidence is defined as self-assurance and belief in one's self. Often external factors such as the media influence beauty standards of today. However, confidence entails defining beauty for one's self regardless of external perceptions and opinions. Many Black women acknowledge that their hair texture, skin complexion, and body shape is not often represented in the media's presentation of a beauty standard, making it thusly hard to conform to those expectations. Black women embrace not only their differences as a culture but also their uniqueness as individuals. Although confidence is intangible, it is easy to identify someone who has confidence and it is viewed as highly attractive in the Black community. Confidence is illustrated in the way one walks and talks and through a person's overall self-esteem and presentation.

JASMINE: ... Because we all have a story and I think that the more confident you are, the more you have that kind of glow about yourself. So when you tend to not know who you are, you have less confidence to compare. Because I compare myself to women all the time, like "Aww man, I wish I was confident. I wish I was sometimes bold enough

with my male counterparts. I wish I could be able to talk to them and I don't know if they think I'm cute or if they think I'm ugly" so you know and then he's talking to her and I wish I was on her level.. It goes to, you know, knowing who you are and you got to, got to figure out yourself before you compare to someone else and understand people have different personalities, people come from different places. So it's all about... I think it's all about the inner beauty.

BROOK: Umm, I think umm a Black woman is attractive when she is confident in herself. She loves people, loves her family, always ambitious, you know, just not held back because of our past struggles with Blacks and Black women in particular. You know, just always pushing forward, not belittled by any little small thing because it's always something geared towards a woman in general, especially a Black woman. Because our hair is different, our complexions are a variety, umm things that people don't—if you're not a Black woman, you don't understand you know. So I think umm confidence is the main thing. Once you become confident in yourself, like everything else falls into place.

PEYTON: I have not seen thus far any Black women, even the ones who are set aside who are not to be on the most beautiful side, saying, "I wish I was beautiful". I have not seen it. I think we are very confident and I think that even if we had some type of insecurity, I don't believe we'd let them show. I think we are too proud to be like "I just wish I look like her." You know, I think that there are very few.

ANGELA: ...I feel like beauty in the Black community is defined by confidence. At least for women I know. Because it's like, if you're not confident or like, "That girl is so shy" or "she's not confident in the way she looks--". Like you can tell when people are not standing out or like umm not talking and visiting with people or even if they are like looking down at the ground or not trying to be in contact with someone else. Like Black or White or any other race... I feel like the confidence factor is like beauty, even in men too. Sometimes they are over-confident but umm (laughter), I feel like beauty comes from within in the Black community. I feel like it's well known throughout the community...

Themes concerning self-presentation, inner beauty, and confidence often overlap and can be challenging to distinguish. Also, when discussing topics such as beauty and self-perception, it is often common to receive a variety of responses and opinions. However, in this case, every participant expressed the significance of these three concepts as dimensions of beauty.

Beauty defined in the Black Community

Body Shape

Curvature is highly desirable within the Black community, specifically, the hour glass figure, characterized by large breasts, a slim waist, distinguishable hips, and a round posterior. A round and full posterior was most commonly mentioned by the participants as a feature of beauty. Common terms used to describe the hour glass figure are thick, figure-eight, curves, and bodacious.

RENEE: Let's see. So curves as in shapely, so hourglass figure type of thing. You know, you have breasts. You have kind of a waist that curves in or umm we have hips...in the Black community, so it's just basically hips, centered around hips, that's it.

COURTNEY: A video vixen would be like the perfect in quotation marks "ten" as far as being like I said a fully figure eight. So full chest, small waist, round bottom, but still, she still fits in a size two which is like totally impossible to actually be...

GREY: Hmm, that's a hard one. Are we striving to be a certain body shape? I have to say yes but I think it is more so with the buns. I know Black women who don't have a butt. And so, that's their thing of like they want to figure out how to get one. But those that do have one, it's like "I'm trying to keep it. I'm trying to tone it." I don't you know. So it's like that focus.

BROOK: Umm, my opinion is that, you know, in the Black community people embrace your curves and your thickness as you would say and some African American women are small, very small. They want to gain weight and they can't gain weight but I think that regardless of what you are in the Black community, people embrace that and you should embrace that yourself as a woman. So I'm curvy. I'm a little thick and I embrace that ...

Also emphasized throughout the study was wanting not to be "too skinny". Black women desire shape and curvature. As a result, thinness is often viewed as unattractive among Black women. There was not a particular size or shape that defines or benchmarks the classification of "too skinny"; however, the participants provide descriptions below:

GREY: ...I like to be in shape but nothing like, "Oh, I am trying to be skinny". Like it's never been skinny. It's always like, "I want to have this shapely body"...Someone who is very skinny, you look like you're like sick, you know. Like you always hear that, "You need to eat something because I can see your bones". It's like "that's not cute" and so when we look at that or when you look at you know going to a Black college, you see the

dancers and the people. You can't really shake it if you don't have something to shake. Just in like those portrayals, it's like "Hmm, yeah. I'm trying to lose weight but I'm not trying to be like skinny"...

PEYTON: Not everyone wants to be a size four or six. When I say certain body shape, I think the average shape for a Black woman is probably a twelve. However, we have a lot of plump women in our culture. I don't think everyone is trying to be an average four/six because that is unlikely for our culture. Most of us are on the thicker side...everybody probably would be like happy to be a 10 maybe...

RENEE: Which is like a medium size umm so like you it's a lot of pressure to be voluptuous but you can't be voluptuous and fat so it's kind of like a having curves and being of a decent weight, not too skinny because no one wants to be skinny, not too big, kind of in the middle but with some type of shape... I think about this when I go down South, you get teased if you don't have a shape. It's like "why are you so skinny," so I think it emphasized in having curves is in the Black community, definitely. In fact, although having a larger shape may not be the most desirable and/or ideal in the Black community, African American women with a large body shape is still viewed as attractive within this subculture.

PEYTON: We have a way of umm, accenting ourselves. I think our Black women are beautiful. They are not ashamed of being bigger. I think some of them are very classy with it. I think some of those bigger women are not trying to lose weight. So, umm, they are happy. Not all of them are happy with their size but I don't see them showing they are unhappy. They are flaunting it.

COURTNEY: ...do I necessarily think it's most desirable within the Black community? I would say no but do I feel like they're necessarily just discriminated against because they may be a bigger size, not necessarily. I mean in that case, it really just has to do with preference like what other people find attractive or what certain men might find attractive.

STEPHANIE: Yes with some of us, we say that "Oh a size four is right or maybe I need to be a size zero", but you have some women that embrace that "I'm a larger woman. I have more hips and thighs, more breast", and I have to say it's almost-- I can't say its half and half, but I can say that some who want to be more thin and some prefer to embrace being larger, or thicker or medium size. So there's a difference there.

Overall, body shape is an important factor when defining beauty within the Black community. Of course, the level of importance is subjective. Many African American women, however, are naturally bodacious and born with curves. Therefore, it is not necessarily a concerning issue for Black women. In addition, many Black women are not actively striving to

become a certain shape. Many Black women are actually becoming slimmer because of health concerns, which will be discussed further in the chapter. Confidence and pride play a large role in how Black women react to body shape beauty standards. Pride in this context is a state or feeling of embracing their individuality as it relates to beauty. Specifically, many of the participants expressed that any type of body shape is considered attractive as long as one exudes confidence and embraces individuality.

LAPORSHA: Umm. I think body shape is very important but I think--(pause). I guess my thought is we all kind of have it already. We are not really striving to change it. I think that we are striving to embrace what we have.

PEYTON: I don't think it is important for us...I think we have more things that are important to us. Umm, more important things as far as our household... I don't think body shape is the number one important thing on our list...A lot of people in our community are dealing with things like being a single parent and we have to focus on our households' more than focusing on being a certain size.

BROOK: ... I have a large body shape and I've been told that I'm attractive and I mean it's all within yourself, the confidence within yourself. Don't get thrown into that "you're too big and nobody will ever love you" because this--. I think with women, you have to realize that you have to be confident in yourself and once you accomplish that goal, it don't matter what you like, if you're content with what you are, where you are.

Skin Complexion

When defining beauty standards of attractiveness, light skin is viewed as the most attractive skin complexion among African American women. Many participants expressed that "the lighter you are, the better," and this view has persisted throughout history, though perhaps more perniciously in the past than now. This concept will further be explained throughout the chapter.

VICTORIA: Beauty is defined by being light skin, umm, having a big butt, big breasts....

RENEE: Umm usually the typical stereotype in the Black community usually it's like light skin, straight hair...

COURTNEY: Yea, so I would say lighter. The lighter, the better...

LAPORSHA: Uh, uh, I think about just when I was younger and the people who, umm, people who were considered more popular or considered more attractive were always lighter skin people and not even like people we would consider like high yellow, but just brown, browner. So just based off of my childhood experiences...

Although light skin is considered to be the most attractive skin complexion, Black women who identify with being light skinned are sometimes segregated and stereotyped because of their skin complexion. For example, according to the participants, it is common for Black people to assume that light skinned African Americans are arrogant, or “stuck up.” It is assumed that they automatically receive certain privileges because of their skin complexion. In addition, some people go as far as denying light skinned African Americans their heritage because their skin complexion is similar to Caucasian Americans’.

JASMINE: I would say light skin. Most people I talk to want to be light skin. But growing up around dark skin people, I feel like I want to be dark skin so I don’t know. It’s a weird thing that I would like to discuss further with people. When I was younger, I just a White girl, you know, and I was not just me, you know. So it was kind of weird and to see that most people accept lighter skins on videos and movies and magazines rather not dark skin people because they’re beautiful dark skin people and there’s beautiful light skin people. I think we need to shy away from dividing ourselves.

BROOK: ... people always say, “Oh, you’re light skin, you’re high yellow,” in the Black community or whatever and I think I’m brown skin and people are like, “No, you are not brown skin.”...

BLAKE: ... a lot of Black women think that if you’re lighter, you’re kind of better than everybody else. Sometimes I would be stereotyped just because I was light skinned. People would think I’m stuck up when naturally I was just kind of shy...

RENEE: Umm actually, I would like to be a little darker just because when I don’t get sun, I look White so I just prefer ... a little bit of color in my skin so I prefer to be a little bit darker, umm but I like it overall...

Skin complexion has created a divide and obvious distinction within the Black community to the point that it’s a definable issue, known as the Light skin versus Dark skin issue. Many Black women are moving away from this concept and starting to embrace the idea

that Black is beautiful regardless of skin complexion. However, this issue still exists within the subculture, but is not heavily discussed. Courtney best describes the Light skin versus Dark skin issue as follows:

COURTNEY: I believe a lot of Black women have color issues (laughs) is the easiest way to say. So even though, I mean they might even be okay with whatever color they are, I think just the way that we've been raised, we're kind of in a sense programmed to think that even if you don't. So the ideal would be, most likely to be more on the lighter side but obviously everybody cannot be light so that's just the reality. Umm, but I feel that even though that person may not necessarily fit into that category, when they look out into other people, that's definitely something that they notice, if they are fair skin or darker or where they umm fall. The other part of that is nobody really wants to be--well I won't say nobody, but some people definitely don't want to be considered dark skin even if they could be dark skin by my standards but to them they wouldn't necessarily think of themselves as being dark skinned so I think it's just a--. Yea, so I would say lighter. The lighter, the better. But then too, I mean, I would have to say it depends on who you talk to because if you talk to somebody that's necessarily lighter, they might not think it's a good thing because of--It's like lose, lose. It doesn't matter what spectrum you're on (laughs). It doesn't matter because like either you're light skin and you think "well people are always asking me am I mixed" or umm "Oh, they think I'm stuck up," like there's all these conations with being light and if you're darker, "Oh, well I can't be pretty, blah, blah, blah". You know, so there's always this--None of it is good but I think most preferred would be to be lighter.

Moreover, the Light skin versus Dark skin issue has become very complex. In fact, many Black women are moving away from light skin as the ideal and now view a medium skin tone as the most preferred.

JASMINE: ... I wouldn't say dark skin but I just wanted to be medium so I could be accepted probably by everybody. Because I feel like, "Oh, she has more privileges because she's light skin" and I don't necessarily but people just throw me out there like, "Oh, you can probably get away with it because you're light skin and you probably look like them". If I was darker skin, I would probably be you know with everybody, you know, my family, my friends and all that stuff.

ALEX: I think just a nice milk chocolate is the color people prefer. You get the light brights² and you have those dark ones but I just think that milk chocolate is where it's at.

PEYTON: ...medium skin, that's probably what I am... I don't think like back in the day, light skin. People wanted to be light skin, not today. I think dark skin is umm very acceptable. I don't think people are like "I want to be light skin". I don't think that to be the case anymore. So I think, not saying that everyone wants to be brown skin, but somewhere in the middle is the more acceptable.

GREY: ... I think it is kind of like a caramel/almond is preferred in general. Because no one wants to be... heka³ light skin but no one wants to be like black/black either. You know, like what does that mean? I don't really know but so it's kind of this in between. If someone's dark skin, it's like "I want to date somebody who's light so my kids don't come out super you know. It's just like that whole kind of thing. So, I think in the community that, but I love being chocolate, dark skin.

In general, skin complexion is an important and passionate – maybe even political – topic among Black women because it is connected to history, heritage, identity, and relationships. However, Black women do not consider skin complexion an important factor in defining beauty within the Black community. For example, even though light skin and/or medium skin are viewed as most desirable, many dark skinned women are still considered attractive within the Black community. Today, African American women believe that all skin complexions are beautiful.

STEPHANIE: I don't think it's important at all. Just based on today and what I'm surrounded by, or who I am surrounded by, I don't think it's important at all. I don't feel like it comes up as much in the Black community so I wouldn't say that it's really that important.

² **Light Brights** -a slang term most often used by African Americans to describe light or fair-skinned Black people (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=light+bright>).

³ **Hecka**, a word used to make prominent a high level of something-- very similar to the word *super*. A more friendly version of the word *hella* (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=hecka>).

COURTNEY: It's. That's a hard question. I personally don't think that it's as important but I do feel that it's something that matters. I guess for me I'd say, I don't necessarily think about it everyday but it's still something that kind of effects me as I go.

BROOK: Umm, I think in the Black community, skin is not that important. I think the older you get, the more you realize that rather a person is lighter skin or darker skin, it doesn't make them that different of a person within themselves. Someone can be light and, you know, say that the lighter you are, the beautiful you are. That's not true. That person can be really nasty and you have this person that's a little darker, you know. She might not have the best hair or whatever but she's like the nicest person in the world and you know you wouldn't trade that for anything. You know, you just have to realize in yourself that you can't go and model yourself on what other people might perceive especially in an outer Black community. Especially what they might perceive you know, "Why are you so light? Why are they so dark? Is she mixed?" you know, things like that, you can't let that get into your head.

Hair Texture

The concept of hair texture has emerged as a new debate within Black community- straight hair versus natural hair. Similar to the light skin complexion, traditionally straight hair has been viewed as the preferred hair texture due to White supremacy within American culture. In addition, Black women find straighter hair easier to manage and upkeep. However, throughout recent years, many Black women have chosen to embrace their natural hair texture by not straightening or relaxing their hair.

STEPHANIE: When it comes to hair, I would see more natural these days. Back then, you saw more straight. Umm, very few people have straight hair today. It's more natural...

VICTORIA: ... Like, myself being natural, I hear like, "Oh I wish I could go natural, or umm I will only go natural if my hair looks like yours"

ANGELA: ... In the past, the preferred hair texture was straight or permed and putting weave in for straight or like wavy hair, which is like not as curly as natural African American hair. But umm, in recent times, and I don't know if this is because I have come to college because like I've noticed--. Like my mom she said when she was in college, there was a lot of people going natural even though straight hair was the thing. People went natural in college more because like they're influenced by other people which I can see happening because like I was influenced. Like I really wanna do it now but if it wasn't for me coming to college. I wouldn't have wanted to go natural...

BROOK: ... Today, Black women are going more natural. I'm a natural person but I do wear my weave too but umm I think it was a struggle because at some point you--, Black- and especially when you were younger, you're more naive to everything and don't become yourself until you become older and realize your importance in this world and other people's opinion of you don't matter... But I think God gave it to us for a reason and you see how it has evolved, and that, at one time it was like you get your hair pressed, you get your hair relaxed, you know, you want to get your hair as straight as you can. Now it's like, "I don't want a perm. I don't want to get my hair straight. I want to be natural just how God made me," so I think that's the perception of it now and I agree with that because I'm natural too.

On the other hand, some Black women are concerned that the Natural Movement is a temporary phase and that ultimately even if secretly, straight hair is still preferred.

COURTNEY: ... Umm, as I've gotten older, I've definitely started to see more, umm you know, like people going natural and umm some don't necessarily--. Even though they might wear their hair straight, they don't necessarily get a relaxer. Umm but I still think within the community--. Even though there's shifts that are happening, and truthfully they've happened before, you look at the 70s and Black Power movement, umm, it's still, I would say the preferred would have to be straight hair.

PEYTON: I think we are coming out of this because there are more and more women who are going natural within our community and umm, our race. Umm, I'm going to say deep down inside most of us wish we had the straighter hair... only because of the upkeep, not saying that our hair is not beautiful. I think we believe that our hair is beautiful. We think that we are unique.

GREY: Uhh, it is kind of difficult now that natural has become more mainstream. Umm, I think preferred. Well, let me go back because I have to take myself a little bit out of it. Preferred right now still seems like "long hair, don't care". Weave, you know, just kind of flowing body. Umm, that seems like that's preferred among Black women but umm, still not nappy but like loose curls, you know. Umm, yeah still not really fully accepting the natural hair that we have but still trying to make it, I don't even know what to call it, but I don't even know, loose curls. I'll say that. But "long hair, don't care" is definitely a major piece.

As Black women have struggled with their hair, a concept known as "good hair" has emerged. Good hair is often identified as more of a loose wavy curl pattern within one's natural state. In other words, women who naturally have wavy curls without chemicals or relaxer are considered to have "good hair."

COURTNEY: Well good hair would be preferably straight but that's-- We're not going to get there necessarily, but I'd say wavy fine hair. Not necessarily, not coarse⁴, not as umm...It's like that double edge sword. You want it thick but not too thick. You don't want it to be unruly and you can't do anything with it. Umm, so you know like, you want your hair to be flat but you still want some body. ..So it's not in between but umm I would say good hair is more like a looser wave pattern.

In addition, although everyone is not conforming to wear natural hair, the emergence of natural pride has moving Black women away from straight hair towards a soft, loose wave pattern as the preferred hair texture.

STEPHANIE: ... Umm, based on conversations, people want more of a softer, maybe curlier, and easier to manage type of texture. Umm (pause) more so soft hair, curly, you know. I guess less harder or harder to maintain. Umm, a lot people are going natural these days...

RENEE: I would say softer almost less closer to our roots which is sad. You know softer and less coarse, umm and less curly almost because of manageability. That's one reason because it's just hard when you have really coarse hair but I think again its trying to kind of fit in with society and everyone else has straight hair, you know, all the races has straight hair so it's like sometimes, you know, it's like "Why am I the different one with coarse hair?" and people will use chemicals to kind of get closer to that so.

BLAKE: ... the looser curl pattern ...besides not having a perm, if you're going natural, you want that long, curly, flowy hair, not so many kinks, or naps or anything, so.

Another theme that was identified in regards to hair texture is that Black women really enjoy the versatility of their hair. One of things that African American women embrace regarding their hair is that they can try a variety of different styles and hair textures.

STEPHANIE: Well, I would have to say I've seen straight, straight wigs, straight weaves, but also curly wigs, curly weaves. Umm and I think it's because we just like a variety, you know. We like a variety. We want to do more with our hair than just have it straightened or curly or umm kinky or you know. There's more we want to do with it. We just like a variety.

⁴**Coarse hair**- hair texture that is considered to be thick, rough, hard to manage and usually curly (<http://www.askabeauty.com/hair-coarse.htm>).

COURTNEY: ... I love Black women hair because I feel like, White people or people with that type of hair texture, they can't do very much with their hair. Just in general, like their hair just doesn't hold styles very well. Yea it's long, it grows. That's great but they just--. There's not as much versatility. I feel like with my hair, I can do whatever I want and so that's fine and if I don't have any hair on my head, then I can go buy some...

ALEX: I do everything. I just had normal braids yesterday and two days ago. I had a sew-in three days ago and now I'm back to natural. I had a fro earlier. You know, I've had something different this whole week. You know, I just keep it changed up. People are like "Oh my gosh, Alex, your hair can do so much," I'm like, "I know girl, shoot".

Overall, Black women believe that their hair texture as well as hair in general is extremely important within African American culture. The following passages illustrate how passionate Black women are when it comes to hair. Not only do the participants feel that hair texture is infused with their identity, but they also believe that hair texture and styles contribute to how others will perceive them.

JASMINE: Umm, I think it's important because it's all we have. I think what holds us together is our hair. Umm that's what kind of defines, you know, us. When we see people with short, short hair, we tend to think "Ooh, something's wrong", or you see people with long hair, "Aww, it's beautiful", but I think that we should not focus on our hair so much...

.GREY: It's important. It is real important umm. It's a big deal...Texture umm, because even as a natural person, you know, a person will look at it and be like "I could never go, I could never do it because my hair is like, you know, like I was a slave." What's really the difference? You know it's like it is always about the texture. It's never about that health or the "I don't really know how to do hair". But it's just really about the texture or like, "Are you a 4b or 4c or a 3b?" You know, always trying to figure out how to do your two strand twist and "mine doesn't come out looking like that," or "I don't wear my hair out because I don't like the shrinkage". You know, like those kinds of things are such a big deal. Even within the natural realm. But then, when you're talking about people who are relaxed or whatever it's just the longer, the better. In that sense, like you know, my hair is now down past my shoulders or you get the weave and it's always like just past mid-shoulder but when you look at texture you are going to get the wet and wavy or the straight, you know. Umm, yeah so texture is a big deal.

BROOK: Umm, I think hair is very important to Black women. Women focus on hair, the majority, I mean especially Black women. Umm you know, you're going to get your hair done once a week and ... I think we focus on that and it's a generational thing. I can go back far through my great, great, grand like she kept her hair done like if anything else

was go-, she was going to have her hair done. I think as far as that, I think it is very important to Black women to get yourself up and the main thing is hair.

Style

Within African American culture, style is about self-expression and being able to incorporate different garments in a unique way. It is recognition that the clothes one wears is a cohesive representation of him or her as an individual. Everyone's definition of personal style is different. Style is important in the Black community because it promotes individualization, creativity, and identity among its people. Furthermore, style is included as a factor when defining beauty because confidence is illustrated through one's attire and, as previously discussed, confidence is viewed as highly attractive within the Black community.

STEPHANIE: ... It makes the person stand out instead of blending in and I think that is what makes our culture unique because a lot of us don't mind umm taking chances or doing things differently than the typical person or what you see. Umm so what I like is people stepping outside the box. I admire that, you know. I umm wish I could do that more or not be afraid to do that. So that's what makes our community unique.

VICTORIA: I mean yes that goes along with your confidence. You know, that makes you who you are. That makes you unique and yep personal style definitely goes along with that because that's make you who you are. You feel more confident in that portraying your personal style. I think yea that goes along with attractiveness.

LAPORSHA: ...I think once you own that and you have a style, I think that helps so much in being who you are and being confident in what you look like.

BROOK: Umm a strong sense of personal style, yes, I think umm you have to be a little bit more cautious sometimes of when you have a certain style or something...If that's a reflection of you. If you a heel person and you wear heels all the time, that's you. If you're a flat or flip flop person, you know, that's you. I think umm going back to confidence or what you are within yourself, not trying to be someone else and just make it your own. Own it, you know. Whatever you do, if you like t-shirts and flip flops. Own it. Don't sulk because you feel like, "Oh I can never a dress up or put on heels or something like that". You know, try it out and if it's not you then go back to what you're comfortable doing and own it. Whatever you do, own it.

Nevertheless, the findings from research question one illustrate that how participants personally define beauty is quite different from their perceptions of how beauty is defined within the Black community. Specifically, participants personally believe that self-presentation and its subsets, confidence and inner beauty, are important elements when measuring beauty. On the other hand, participants suggest that value is placed on obtaining a curvaceous body shape, light skin complexion, straight hair and personal style when defining beauty standards of attractiveness within the Black community.

Research Question 2: Do the media impact Black women's body satisfaction?

The second research question explored how the media impact body satisfaction among African American women. Specifically, participants were asked to describe how do mainstream media impact body satisfaction and whether or not they believe Black women's body satisfaction is influenced by beauty standards depicted in mainstream media concerning body shape, skin complexion and hair texture. The findings illustrate the participants' perceptions of how the media impact Black women's body satisfaction. Moreover, the findings suggest that the media contributes to the development and facilitation of beauty standards of attractiveness concerning body shape, skin complexion and hair texture. As a result, some participants feel pressure to conform to beauty standards of attractiveness that may lead to body dissatisfaction.

The Role of the Media

According to the participants, African American women are very aware of how the media influence their lives in particular but also the lives of people in general. The participants expressed that one cannot escape the media because it is everywhere. The media establishes trends and the beauty standard for everyone. It dictates and changes the way people think about

themselves. Moreover, the media provides strong implications on how one should be, look and dress. People in general compare themselves to who and what they see in the media. However, with technological advancements such as digital editing, many of the people portrayed in the media are not representative of “real” people.

STEPHANIE: I think a lot of women look at what’s on TV, what’s in the magazines and we look at--. We or women... look at that so much and think that is how I should look or “maybe I should look like that in order to, I don’t know, be this... beautiful woman umm because this is what is shown to society as though it is the standard women or what America looks like”, which it doesn’t. Umm, and so I think it changes the way we think about ourselves and the way we *should* think about ourselves because what you see in media, I mean it’s superficial...I feel like some women, not all women, think they should look like that—what’s in the media...

LAPORSHA: Hmm, well I think the media is a constant comparison. I think people constantly compare themselves to people that they see on TV, people on magazine covers and people in music videos. I know I did that in my teenage years. I think it has a big influence on how you see yourself until you can either realize...that is not average or you can find people in the media who look like you for that to be your standard. I think that makes it easier.

VICTORIA: It impacts it a lot, that’s the main thing, that’s where it starts. Either you gotta, like I said before, you have to be--, have a big butt, big breast, light skin, long hair...It’s like the media, the media is so jacked up. They--I don’t know. It’s all about perception. I guess, umm, like I said, body image is definitely something that the media makes people believe that this is how it should be, this is how you should look, this is how you should dress. Umm, this is how your hair should look and everything. So I think the media is like the parent of people’s mind.

GREY: They impact it a lot, a whole lot. Umm, they do it on a subliminal level and a very “in your face” way. Umm, it’s everywhere every, every, everywhere and it’s on repeat and so you find yourself not realizing how they’re dictating what you think about yourself and the body image form. So, media has the biggest impact in my opinion.

JASMINE: Umm, it affects it a lot. I mean when you pick up a magazine, you’re not going to see someone in their true form. Half of time, we don’t even see the celebrities, what they really look like. They’re either photo-shopped or to look perfect for, for us and we want to base our image off of them. So it’s kind of like a make believe type of thing because we’re never going to look photo-shopped in person. They put them on a pedestal which is unfair and to show them in their true form would be great to us, great to our confidence as Black women and women in general.

PEYTON: Within the media, I think umm, these people umm, kind of set a type of standard of what they think it should be. I think that's where you know everyone is influenced and umm, some people have insecurities because they believe that is how it supposed to be, when it is not. I think everyone tries to be on board instead of ... not following others. Just like with different entertainers and also daytime television, everyone gets caught up in what they're putting out there. They kind of want to jump ship.

Body Shape

Pressure to become slimmer

According to the participants, although many Black women do not desire to be extremely thin or skinny, they still feel some pressure from the media to slim down. A lot of this pressure stems from the lack of "normal" sized women in the media—specifically TV, movies, magazines, and music videos. In addition, many well-known apparel brands provide garments only up to a certain size. As a result, being slim is considered attractive and desirable. Black women acknowledge that the media has set a beauty standard concerning body shape that can have a negative impact on the body satisfaction among those who do not conform to that standard.

RENEE: Hmm, I think there's a lot of pressure for women to look like models definitely just because of-- I mean you just look at who they choose for everything, ads, even things that are not directly related to fashion. So there's definitely a lot of pressure for women to look a certain way and so I would say probably the average woman is not satisfied with her body in some way, you know, whether it's a small thing or the whole thing so there's definitely pressure.

JASMINE: Yes, when you see a music video, you're not going to see somebody past two hundred pounds. So it does have an effect.

BROOK: Umm, I think mainstream media definitely defines body satisfaction. Umm and it's just that world, you know, that Hollywood world that you say you know you want to live in or whatever. Everybody wants to be the--, you know, there are certain designer lines that only go up to a size six so if you can't-- If that's what you love, you're gonna try to get to that size six so you can wear those clothes. It's just that type of world and on every magazine cover, other than Oprah because she's owns the magazine, it's always somebody smaller. Sometimes, it's a plus size person but it depends on if they're doing

something that's out. Like when Precious came out, she was on the cover; but if she didn't have that movie, she probably wouldn't have been on any covers. You know what I'm saying? Like it's just--, that's how focused it is on. They're always looking for the smallest thing or the best looking thing but I think, you know, it's wrong and it gives the bad impression for younger girls as they grow up. I don't think when we we're growing up it was that much focused, but now, we have internet and so many other things that young people are attracted to now. That's all they see and now it's causing more problems in the home. So, you know, to me I think it's crazy how it just, it just impacts the world but, you know, you can't get wrapped up in that...

COURTNEY: Largely. I think that a lot about the images that people see. I mean even now, we are becoming more of a--. I think it's funny because like we still want to eat the same and do the same and be the same basically, but then you know we want to drop weight like that and we need to be on diet pills and all this other stuff so we can obtain this beauty that see on the, umm you know, be it on the TV screen, movie screen, magazines, whatever you may be reading...

Interestingly, the participants expressed that even though Black women recognize the beauty standards concerning body shape, they are not willing to go to extreme measures to become a certain body shape. Even with pressure from the media to be slimmer, curves and the hourglass is still the preferred body shape.

LAPORSHA: No, I don't think so. I don't think that-- I think about mainstream images of body shape really, they're shapeless. My boyfriend says this all the time—but they're just kind of shapeless. I think that we appreciate curves and shapes and hips and bigger breasts and things like that. I think we appreciate that more.

PEYTON: Not with Black women, I don't think so. Maybe in other cultures, yes. Umm, you know, I just haven't encountered that...I really think our Black women are like "you take it or leave it" basically. "I am not going to change because you want me to. This is how I am. This is who I am going to be." I do think we will with our size. I don't think we are willing to do a size four or five. Some people's body shapes are not meant to be--. We are not built to be--, or even so if it were to be, it may not fit them accordingly. I think everyone is built a certain way. I do not think we are willing to switch just because mainstream is over there. What is the stats of us surgically doing it? Not really, they are very low. So, that's why I am saying no for African American women because other races are getting liposuctions and we're not doing it and if we were doing it, we are going to do it on our own. ..

COURTNEY: ... the people on the movie screen don't even look the way they look and then on top of that, the few that do, I mean they're the minority. Not everybody can look that way so I definitely think that people are influenced by what they see in the media and

are trying to obtain this certain beauty standard that I would say a lot people aren't ready or willing to follow or actually take the steps to be. And then, other people are on the extreme trying to like kill themselves trying to be thin or fuller lips or whatever the thing is that they want to change.

Skin Complexion

Light Skinned Women in the Media

Light skin has been the preferred skin complexion for decades throughout African American history. Although this beauty standard has historical ties to white supremacy, the media still facilitates and influences this ideal. According to the participants, most Black women who are featured in the media including television, advertising, music videos, and movies are light skinned. Only recently has the media begun to portray a variety of skin complexions including darker women. Even so, lighter skin is the predominant image even to the extent that digital editing is used to make darker skinned women appear lighter in complexion.

COURTNEY: ... I mean you're starting to obviously to see more women of different skin tones. Umm, but majority, even Black actresses, are on the lighter side of the spectrum so you don't see as many darker skin women. When you do, umm, I wouldn't say that they're necessarily unattractive but they're not what people would traditionally think of if they were trying to compare to what attractiveness is. Umm, so it's kind of like a fine line because you want everybody to make it, then at the same time, you're like "that's not me," (laughs) so umm, I don't know it's kind of, it's hard, it just, it's hard.

LAPORSHA: Yeah there are some models like Naomi Campbell and Iman that are darker and considered beautiful but for the most part it's lighter. The lighter skin, the better or the more attractive you are considered. ... there's more White people on TV in general so that might lean you more towards "lighter skin complexion is better", I guess. And there are very few darker skin. Even like in the hair commercials, they are starting to do more darker skin women. But even then, there are still very few. Umm, so maybe I could see that being an impact.

ANGELA: ... I mean for me personally, I have come to terms with the fact that you're barely starting to get foundation that actually matches my complexion for once. It's like "oh wow" but it's also like "If I can't wear foundation, that is fine. But obviously they need to be thinking about other complexions then like trying to tan the Caucasian complexion". Like everyone is trying to be tan. It's like people with darker complexions; they like to use the same products as everyone else. But like now a lot of companies are

starting to get different complexions of African American or the Black skin tone where as they have had the Caucasian, White tone or lighter tones for the longest time...

RENEE: Umm, I think it would be a lot less. I think it is. As I said, lighter skin is emphasized, but I don't think it's as especially now that they're trying to reach kind of all corners. So I'd so yes but to a much lesser degree.

JASMINE: ... most of time we're watching these videos on BET, you always see light skin mixed women. Not necessarily the dark skin women. They will probably be all the way in the back.

ALEX: I feel like the media does try to incorporate the lighter skin tone. I was just in my sociology class, we were looking at it how there was a normal picture of Barack Obama and he's darker colored and then there's him in a magazine and then they lightened up his face. And then, they did the same thing again with like someone else...they always lighten up the African American skin tone to make it seem like lighter is better, when I think who you are is just fine.

BROOK: Umm, to an extent. I think umm it might in some of the Black community. You don't always see an African American working woman of a darker complexion to be visualized by others umm. They always go for a lighter skin girl where she can kind of blend in with the other models that are fair skinned...Umm, but again I think over time--, times are changing and you see more of a darker skin sister that is on the with media or things like that. It's all about how you take care of yourself and I think now, of course, you still have people that are more focused on "Oh, you're too dark or you're too hippy, you know, you're too curvy because you're a Black woman," and I mean that's just how we we're made, you know, you just can't help that but I think more people are attracted to the way you carry yourself now and that's how people are nailing these roles and movies and umm, whatever else that's going on you know in the media and world.

Similarly to Black women's feelings about body shape, Black women, both light and dark skinned, do not necessarily believe they are affected by the light skin beauty standard set by the media. They seem to be more accepting of their skin complexion as it is.

GREY: ... I think skin complexion has been an issue from when you were real, real small. So, by the time you get to a place to where like the media exists, it's like "really"...It probably affects you more when like you're younger but like after like a certain point you kind of like "this is it, this is me". And you're just kind of like--. You'll see a variety of like different shades, you're just like, "our culture doesn't have a big thing with like skin lightener", you know, but I know in like the Virgin Islands that's a really big thing but like culturally here in the States, you know, it's like okay that being light skin is never going to happen. You'll figure out some reason why you don't want to be light like "light skin people are crazy" or you know this kind of thing or like you know

“you use like being dark. You see like these models and they have this really rich kinda skin”. So you look at that, but I don’t think that the media makes you like “I wish I was this or I wish I was that,” at least as a dark skinned girl I don’t feel that way.

PEYTON: ... one thing I can say about our community, we all believe we are beautiful. We do not let television with a different skin race and long hair tell us that is what beautiful is supposed to be. I don’t think any of us wants to be a different race. I think we’re all satisfied with who we are.

RENEE: I’d say yeah. I think that people in general have embraced who they are. Umm, I can only think of a couple friends who wished they were a different skin complexion, but I’d say overall, pretty satisfied and learned to embrace it within. Black is beautiful no matter what skin color you are.

ANGELA: I think so. I mean people complain like I heard friends be like, “I wish I was a lighter skin toned” but it’s not like an everyday thing and they said it like once... because they think the grass is greener on the other side. But it’s like, “come to terms with the way you look” because it’s like obviously nothing is going to change and you’re obviously going to be treated the same way you have been treated...It’s just the way it is and it’s just going to stay that way. I feel like there’s no changed there.

BROOK: Umm overall, I think Black women are satisfied with their skin complexion. I mean no woman in this world says “Oh, I’m perfect.” Just being a woman, we always have something to talk about ourselves, like “Oh, I don’t like my nose,” or “I don’t like my lips,” things like that but I think now people are more umm confident in who they are and their skin complexion. Umm, you know because it’s more--. It’s seem like it’s more acceptance...People you rarely saw maybe 10-15 years ago, rarely you saw a dark skinned woman playing a leading role...

Hair Texture

Two Types of Black Women

Figure 4.4 Black Women's Hair Textures: Natural (left) and Straight (right)



Photographed by Kedric Elmore

African American hair can be challenging to define. Black women have many different hair textures; there are probably as many different textures as there are Black women. However, overall, Black hair has been divided into two categories: natural and straight. Figure 4.4 illustrates the two different types of hair textures. According to the participants, the media depicts these two categories as follows: a Black “diva” has long, straight extensions or a Black “neo-soul” has kinky natural hair. Musical artist Beyonce’s hair would be considered diva while singer-song writer India Arie’s would be classified as “neo-soul.” Personality stereotypes accompany these different hair types. A Black woman with natural hair is stereotyped as a

feminist, Black revolutionist, and spiritual being. If her hair is long and straight, she is stereotyped as fashionable, a trend-follower, and “bourgeoisie.” Though Black women haven’t felt as pressured to conform to body shape and skin complexion beauty standards set by the media, the hair type beauty standard has been more difficult for Black women to ignore.

PEYTON: ...It is just so hard. Umm, I think our hair is, umm, it kind of says a lot of about who we are. As far as it gets a little of our personality. Just to go into detail, if someone is natural or wear a lot of different natural styles, I would say they are more on a neo-soul side or something like that. I’m just saying perception. I’m just saying your hair determines like a lot. If someone has like curly hair, 18 inch weave, they might be like, “Okay, she may be high maintenance”.

GREY: ... for Black women in media when you look at magazines--. When you think about what’s on TV, it’s the same two types of Black women. Umm, you know, you have your Beyoncé-ish which she’s everywhere. She will be on L’Oreal and all these different things. That’s more so like the long weave, the curvature, and toned body and things like that. But then when I like look at commercials or whatever, then you have the dark skin girl who’s got the natural hair but she’s still you know put together in the sense of when you look at that as a Black woman, you’re like “Okay, well finally we’re portrayed”. But then when they are portrayed, it’s like they just pick like the two most realistic forms for media world that would be appealing to everyone. And so, when you look at that, then it’s like I can only be these kinda two, two kinda people or whatever...

ALEX: ... But I just think it depends on who you like and who you follow. If you think of Beyonce, you think “oh I need a sew-in⁵” ... and if you think of Erica Badu, you think, “I’m going to be natural and beautiful”. So I just think. I just think it all depends on who you want to be. Like, what’s her name, she’s married to Will Smith, Jada Pinkett-Smith. She’s always had braids in her hair. I always noticed in the pictures of her. So like, it just depends on who you look up to and if you look to a certain person... some people tend to do their hair like that.

PEYTON: ... I think you have to wear your hair a certain way. Now, umm, Angie Stone, India Arie and the most popular one--. I cannot think of her name. Jill Scott is very beautiful. Umm, but I think they’re set in their own category unfortunately as beautiful. Now, Jill Scott everyone thinks she’s beautiful. However, umm, I think she is a leader...I think she, you know, she gives a lot of the other side to us ...She wears certain styles, you know, and she’s a full figured woman and she’s okay. This is beautiful because she sets the trends for those people in that category. Not saying their different from us, when

⁵ **Sew-in** -weave or hair extensions that are sewn into one’s scalp (<http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-sew-in-weave.htm>).

I say category. However, I mean that's still not, you know, what's umm, that's showing, streaming, that's like sexy, like beautiful. That's not like right on front. It's like it is kind of sectioned off.

Dissatisfaction of Black Hair

The participants suggest that some Black women feel satisfied that a variety of hair textures are represented in the media. Moreover, they believe that the Natural Movement is a direct reflection of Black women being empowered and satisfied with their hair. While this may be true, the majority of the participants believe that Black women are dissatisfied with their hair. There still is a preference to have long, straight hair in order to be considered attractive. Because hair is such an important factor for Black women, they are consumed by it. Black hair is important to the extent that it is an extension of their identity. It is challenging to identify the exact source of African American women's dissatisfaction with their hair. However, most Black women struggle with their hair regardless of the texture.

COURTNEY: Umm, that's a tough one. Like I said, I just think especially with Black women, we're just wrapped up in our hair. I don't think anyone is satisfied. Even if they supposedly have the good hair, they're not satisfied and even if they supposedly have the bad hair, they're not satisfied. I just think it's a constant battle to a certain extent with our hair.

BLAKE: ... not fully, even though this whole natural thing is going on, they, some still want permed hair. We always want what we don't have. So I feel like we're not fully satisfied.

GREY: natural is becoming a little bit more--. I don't even want to say mainstream but Black mainstream. Umm... so you see that and you can tell with all the YouTube videos and all the websites. Now, all the hair care products, you know, no frizz. You know tightly loose curls. I don't even know how it works without it being any kind of chemical. I mean now with like weaves, it's like it's no longer a secret. It's just like just the thing to do. It's a part of you but where do get that from? Why do you feel like you need weave? Or "I don't want nobody to see my hair", or you take work off to go get your hair done. I mean, I'm guilty (*Laughter*). Umm, you know, so it's a big deal and media plays on it. It's a multi-billion dollar market and we spend a lot of money on hair. So, we're definitely influenced by it.

JASMINE: ... I think it goes back to our grandparents and great grandparents. They were in the perm era and so they brought it down and said, "You can't wear your hair nappy, you know. You got to have it straight. You got to have it pressed." So we continued on with that. And when we realized that maybe chemicals are bad, we try to focus on "Okay, let me go back to my roots and what my hair really looks like." And what people have seen is that our hair looks curly. It looks beautiful the way it is. So I think that mainstream kind of has a toll on people still trying to get use to the natural hair phase, umm, trying to see that it actually does fit into our society...

Finally, the second research question explored if the media impact body satisfaction among African American women. The findings show that the media reinforces beauty standards of attractiveness through its depiction of Black women in mainstream media. In particular, Black women feel a sense of pressure from the media to slim down; however, they are not willing to engage in risky appearance management behaviors in order to obtain a certain body shape. In addition, the lack of dark skinned women in media and the use of digital editing to create lighter skin complexions among Black people reinforce the idea that a light skin complexion is more attractive than a dark skin complexion. However, all of the participants who self-identified as dark skinned reported they are satisfied with their skin complexion. In addition, according to the participants, Black women are accepting of their skin complexion as it is. The media is also responsible for its two depictions of Black women based on their hair. The participants believe that many Black women are dissatisfied with their hair. However, the findings do not illustrate that the media is a direct impact on Black women's dissatisfaction of hair.

Research Question 3: Do African American women feel a sense of pressure to conform to White standards of attractiveness?

The third research question inquired if African American women feel a sense of pressure to conform to White standards of attractiveness concerning body shape, skin complexion and hair

texture. Moreover, the participants were asked the following questions in order to explore this research objective:

- Do you think that Black and White women have different body shape standards? If so, are you more likely to identify with Black or White women's weight standards of attractiveness?
- Do you think that American culture has set an expectation for Black women to wear certain hair styles in order to be considered attractive as depicted in the mainstream media? If so, do you conform to hair expectations that are depicted in the mainstream media?
- Do you think that American culture has set an expectation for Black women to be a certain skin complexion in order to be considered attractive? If so, do you conform to skin complexion expectations that are set by American culture?
- Within the Black community, do you think Black women feel obligated to look similar to White women in order to be considered attractive?

The findings show that Black and White women have different body shape standards. Therefore, Black women follow their own body shape standards instead of conforming to White women's standards of attractiveness. In addition, according to the participants, American culture has set an expectation to be a certain skin complexion and hair texture to be considered attractive.

Furthermore, participants do not feel pressure to become a certain skin complexion; however, they do feel pressure wear certain hairstyles in order to be considered attractive.

Body Shape

Black and White Women Body Shape Standards

Curves and the hour glass figure is generally the body shape standard among women within Black culture. However, Black women perceive that Caucasian women's beauty standards are much different from their own. They believe Caucasian women desire to be very thin and at times will go to extreme measures to achieve this ideal standard. In addition, White women do not desire curves, specifically hips and buttocks. Black and White body shape standards are assumed to be so different because the body types are physically different among them. In other words, because the body shapes for Black and White women are assumed to be so different, it is easier to have two different body shape standards than to try to conform to the expectation a different race. Therefore, many Black women do not feel a pressure to conform to White standards of attractiveness concerning body shape.

GREY: ... I think that Black women, I mean White women focus more on breasts and Black women--. I mean they do, but not like White women. Umm, I think White women are more so umm, alter their look, you know, Botox and stuff like that. I mean as time progresses, there are more people of color doing it but for them, I mean, it would be very, very difficult to be a White woman and not like what I look like to try to fit a mode. So, yeah those are the differences. I mean skinny and curvaceous in my mind that's kind of what it is, body image wise.

ANGELA: Hmm, yes I do. Umm, this is coming from experience too. Some of my friends that are Caucasian, they are a bit more curvy which is literally how African American women are portrayed today, which is considered a good thing. The curvy, the curvature thing like butt curves, hip curves, like just curvy. And then, people have commented on like certain female friends of mine that are Caucasian like, "Oh wow, like you look fine", type of thing. Like any kind of race guy will say that. This girl like doesn't feel comfortable. She's like "Oh, I need to be really thin", feeling like she's the odd one out of her race being curvy because not a lot of Cau--. There's not a lot of Caucasian women that are curvy. It's like what she's been surrounded by, she's the odd one out. So, she wants to be like thin...She is thin but she doesn't want the curves. She gets embarrassed by them...I'm not as curvaceous for what I consider or what people have told me. Like I am not curvaceous but I have curves but it's not like--. I'm just not like the hourglass shape kind of thing. Umm, I don't know. Sometimes, I do feel like am I supposed to look like that. Because they're like, "Well, you don't have a butt," I'm like "Am I supposed to go get one?" Well, I can't change my body and it's just really weird. I've had some people ask me "So how come you don't have butt?" Like they'll look at my family and say "You guys are flat blah, blah, blah". I'm just like, "What are we supposed to do?" Like you can't change the way you are but it's just like you are

influenced by your race and what you should look like. You are but it's like it is up to you to be like I have to look like this or no I don't have to look like this. It's just the way I am. Like you don't have to accept it for what it is.

JASMINE: Umm, White women tend to be on the very skinny side and just wall down. Umm and Black women tend to wanna have like curves and stuff. So when we look at each other, it kind of like, we view them differently. I don't know if we view them on a pedestal necessarily but it's kind of like, we can't buy White girl jeans because our butts are too big ... We know what we view ourselves as and we can't jump over to a land where we can't get in.

COURTNEY: ...I think Caucasian women, our-- you know, they just don't have our bodies. They just don't. The reason why some of them especially aren't trying to obtain our body types is because they just wouldn't look right. I mean they got low butts...not all of them, but I would say majority, just the way extra weight sits on them is so different from how it may necessarily sit or distribute on African American women. For most African American women, I feel like their beauty standards are to fit their culture. I mean that's just the reality of it. Their beauty standards are to fit their culture. So since African American women tend to be umm more full figured voluptuous, umm you know, like a larger butt, may have a fuller chest, and may have both at the same time; umm I think we are more accepting of what we are because we have to be. I mean that's just the reality. I can't, I can't get rid of my butt just like some Caucasian women can't have a butt so that becomes okay because this is just what I am and the majority is like this so you can't knock the majority, it's the majority.

On the other hand, some Black women believe that one body shape standard is starting to emerge. Specifically, White women are beginning to adopt beauty standards that are commonly known in Black culture. For example, Caucasian women are becoming more receptive to curvature.

RENEE: Hmm, I'd say no. I think we all converge on the same focal point which is like a medium size. Umm, it's a lot of pressure to be voluptuous but you can't be voluptuous and fat. So it's kind of like a having curves and being of a decent weight, not too skinny because no one wants to be skinny, not too big, kind of in the middle but with some type of shape.

COURTNEY: ... the perceptions are becoming similar. Umm, as we know, more Caucasians or non African American or Latina umm women are getting you know lip injections, butt implants and so I think the dominant cultural beauty standard is starting to shift and be more of a--... No one necessarily want to be fat, but they definitely do want more of a umm voluptuous body type than more so necessarily having a body of a boy.

VICTORIA: No, excuse what I am about to say but White women nowadays want the big butt, big breast. Back then, they didn't want wide hips...they didn't want butts. But now, butt implants are a big hit over there...

PEYTON: ... our statistics are pretty much the same with Black and White women because umm, I think 70% of us are--. Well okay let me say this; African Americans are slightly higher than White women. However, Americans as a whole are overweight, White and Black. I think umm, it's different percentiles. I think within like maybe 18 to 25, White women are slimmer than us. I think our 18 to 25 are bigger. However, as a whole, I think Americans are obese and so I don't think there is like too much difference between White and Black...

Although the majority of participants identify with Black beauty standards, it is also important to acknowledge that not all Black women adopt traditional African American beauty shape standards. In fact, 25% of participants stated that they more so identify with White body shape standards. For each individual the reasoning is different. However, whether one identifies as White or Black, it is possible for women not to follow beauty standards established within their race.

STEPHANIE: Umm, I would have to say, I would have to be more on the White. Why? Because modeling which I use to do goes more towards the dominant side which is White so that the, umm, that's, I guess that's my goal of making sure I maintain a smaller size because that's what they want. So it's based on the profession. Now if I didn't do it...because of modeling, I don't think I would be so focused on maintaining or staying slim but yeah.

LAPORSHA: Hmm, I think that subconsciously, I probably identify-, I'm probably using White standards but I want to be more, umm, or start using Black standards more. I think as I am getting older, I am starting to understand that more.

ANGELA: I feel like I identify with White beauty standards because my body shape and size is the "standard" size of Caucasian beauty standards. So, it's like, I can't really push myself to wear certain types of clothes. I'm not sure how to say it per se, I'm not curvaceous. It's just different for me. I know friends--. Like just for instance, they can't fit into Hollister jeans and it's like African American women, they can't fit into Hollister jeans. They're too curvaceous but I have no curves and like I can fit into Hollister clothes... You get the difference in like branding of clothes and like the appearance. I feel like both are equally as beautiful but I feel like personally I identify with the Caucasian beauty standards because that's kind of where I'm at with my body. So, that's what works for me.

Skin Complexion

Light skin has been identified as the preferred skin complexion in African American culture, and this ideal beauty standard has been established as a way to look “White.” In the past, many African American women have internalized the “lighter is better” concept and as a result light skinned women still are considered to be more attractive than dark skinned women today.

RENEE: Umm, we’ve actually had this discussion just with people in general and I think it’s--. I think it’s just that one’s closer to European so I mean you don’t see--. Usually if you see a Black model, usually she’s lighter. You do see the occasional dark skin, which I think is wonderful... I think its carried over from slavery. Umm people with fair skin complexion were kind of like the high ranking slaves so they worked inside the house. Black, Black skin, they were put outside the house and there was always that standard. I think some of that just carried over in our people, which is really sad.

COURTNEY: ... I still think it’s not as prominent as it would have been in the past. Umm, I do think that the preferred is to be lighter. That’s not everybody’s preferred but I would say that would probably be the majority’s. Umm, but from my experiences and the people I know, it doesn’t play as large of a role as I would say it has in the past.

ALEX: ... because it’s closest to the dominant race... Like closer to being White is the lighter you are. .. In our culture, the main race is Caucasian and so the culture that goes back to that dominant--, that White superiority thing. Even though people say, “Oh race is not...” That’s crap. Race is a big thing and every person knows it. Even when, you know, someone tries to hide it. No, you know it’s still there and you know that White people are still trying to have their dominant White society. (Mumbled). So anything closer to what they want to get to is better.

JASMINE: Umm yes, yes it has because White is the purist form and light skin is kind of on that same level. It’s kind of sad to see that most people think that way. It’s unfortunate.

STEPHANIE: ... I think some of us try to umm fit in with the dominant group and what we see there becomes a way to measure ourselves for whatever reason umm and what we should like or how we should look in order to umm I guess maybe fit in or umm blend in with the other culture umm so I think yea we use it sometimes. I don’t think all women but yeah...

COURTNEY: I say yes and no. Umm, I think body type wise, we don’t necessarily look to White women but I would say in the hair and complexion arena, we—I had using we because I don’t, I not a part of this (laughs)—but umm some Black women may more so

look to the White culture and how they wear their hair and how they perceive what attractive as far as their skin complexion wanting to be lighter or whatever that may be.

Many Black women believe issues regarding skin complexion still exists but that they have become less prevalent than in the past. However, others think beauty standards regarding skin complexion have dissolved. Moreover, some Black women believe that the media represents a variety of skin complexions and also that today Black women embrace their skin complexion simply because they cannot change it. Therefore, many Black women do not feel a sense a pressure to conform to White standards of attractiveness concerning skin complexion even though they are aware that an expectation exists.

ANGELA: Hmm. I don't think society has set that. They haven't said you have to look a certain complexion or be whatever complexion. Like whatever complexion you are, it needs to be blemish-less or like no imperfections. So, it's like whatever you look like, make it look good kind of thing. But umm, I don't know personally umm. I don't know. As a child, I'd be like--. I remember asking my mom at one point like "Mommy how come my skin is not lighter?" I got in trouble for that and I knew to never ask that question again because it's just like be accepting of what you look like. It's like, "Why do you want to be lighter or darker?" Like it's not going to happen. I mean it's in only in like certain cases like Michael Jackson. He happened to pull off becoming lighter. I don't know how that happened but he's one of the few that has made a transition but everyone else still knew he was Black. So, it doesn't matter...

BLAKE: (pause) No, no it's a good mix now. I feel like everyone is represented within their skin pigment.

PEYTON: Umm. No, not in today's 2012, because umm, I mean I think darker women are beautiful and they are being more acknowledged as beautiful these days. I'm just like really light skinned is not in anymore... I just don't think that to be an expectation, you know, anymore. I mean in the 90s and the 80s, yes, but not now, no. I think that umm darker women are considered more beautiful.

Hair Texture

In addition to body shape and skin complexion, participants were asked if they feel a sense of pressure to wear certain hair styles in order to conform to White beauty standards. Indeed, straight hair is considered to be the beauty standard in the Black community, and African

American women do feel pressure to conform to this standard. Even those with natural hair still desire a loose curl pattern. In addition, as part of their self-presentation, Black women feel an extra pressure to have their hair styled at all times.

PEYTON: Umm, most definitely. Umm, I think your hair should--. You know they expect your hair to be umm, straight, umm flawlessly. Umm, to be honest, I think the only person with acceptable, I mean that has been identified as beautiful with short hair is Halle Berry. Anything out of that I think, I mean your hair probably needs to be, you know, long. Also umm, she is the only one now that has actually really been acknowledged as beautiful as a whole because of her skin complexion and her hair. Because her hair is naturally not, you know--what should I say, umm, it's not tough, not woven. You know she's mixed so. You know but she has been acknowledged by society that she is a beautiful Black woman. No one else has been, you know, acknowledged as a whole by the world. She is the only Black person I know.

COURTNEY: Most definitely. So you either have to be as I said with the wavy, long, or straight hair. If you do have a more natural look, it has to very, umm, it may be looser curls and very voluminous. ..So I feel like it's just an extremist and I think too, I mean obviously, it's, it is the media. So everything you see can't be taken as necessarily real, but it definitely--. I feel like it magnifies what, umm, what is acceptable.

LAPORSHA: Hmm, yes, umm, straight hair. Either relaxed or with a sew-in or however you can achieve it, but straighter, longer hair yeah.

ALEX: In the media, they basically show a sew-in as what's beautiful because you see every time you watch anything on BET⁶, everybody has their sew-in. You know it's a sew-in because you know it's not their hair. It's just kind of sad because it goes all the way down to their butt holes. So you know it's not their hair. It's just yeah--. Society makes it so that sew-ins are what's attractive.

ANGELA: ...But like it makes me wonder sometimes. Like there's been times where I've been so tempted to just--. I wanted to walk outside the house without doing my hair like how a lot of my Caucasian friends have done and like it looks fine out in public and no one says anything. It's like it's not noticeable that it's not "done." But if an African American woman, whether she has natural or relaxed hair, walks out and didn't brush her hair or something umm... it will look unkempt according to society... So, it's just like society's standards have put a strain on African American women as to how they're hair needs to look. ..Like clean is a good thing for me, like for appearance, but it just kind of

⁶ **Black Entertainment Television (BET)**-a television network reaching more than 90 million households composed of mainstream movies, music videos and television series targeting African American audiences (<http://betcareers.viacom.com/about.html>).

puts a damper on African American women to have to always have to do their hair. Like umm, I feel like other races a lot of times don't have to do their hair in order for it like to look nice. Like it looks normal for them to go outside. But like for us, it does not look normal to go outside. Our hair doesn't look normal if we just walk outside not brushing it at all. So, I think it would be nice if that standard was lowered at some point in time but I really doubt it.

LAPORSHA: from personal experience, I did it for a while. I thought that was what was acceptable. I thought that was pretty. I thought that was what people wanted... I guess I think about all of my friends. Everybody I was around was striving for that. People were getting relaxers in their toddler years. Umm ... I have a cousin who, umm, has very long silky hair and it is a completely different texture from mine. She was always thought to have good hair or better hair than any other child in our family. And I remember this experience. Or like when your parents are trying to do your hair and they are talking about how nappy your hair is because it is curly...

Moreover, similar to skin complexion, Black women recognize that long and straight hair has become the ideal beauty standard because it is similar to people of the Caucasian race.

STEPHANIE: More so in the past because I feel like more Black women felt, based on observation, felt like hair had to be straight, just umm, straight just like White people. Umm, then and I'm talking about 80s and 90s. ... more Black people, because I think the dominant culture is starting to embrace like who African American women are and we're different, so and I feel like Black women see that or at least that's what I see and that's why I don't feel like it's a way for us to, you know, measure ourselves or see ourselves.

LAPORSHA: Closer to what White people hair is like. Straight umm, yeah I think we strive for that long straight look a lot.

RENEE: Umm usually the typical stereotype in the Black community usually it's like light skin, straight hair so more Europeanized. Basically almost the closest you are to White, you are considered more attractive unless you're somewhere that actually promotes women's beauty than you actually kind of get the more diverse definition of like, you know, actually including an afro, darker skin--usually thin, thin shapely, long hair, straight, light skin.

However, not all Black women feel as much pressure to have long, straight hair. Because the media presents a greater variety of hairstyles among Black women, some women believe that natural hair is slowly becoming more accepted.

BROOK: ... you always see, you know women, Black women, that are in the media that have long hair or you know more preference to a Whiter or a White woman. You know, you might have long curly hair, whatever. Umm, I think it is a look so to speak ... but I think sometimes it's not--. I mean you got Nicki Minaj. I mean her hair is long but it might be orange or yellow- I mean things like that so I think it comes and goes but now I think we live in a world now where everybody is becoming more comfortable with themselves and how they feel and try to put their stamp on the world. That American culture, whatever that idea, ideal of what Black women is suppose to look like, probably is not going to be in effect for long depending on that person. I mean just because I might wear long hair, long weave is not because of American culture, I just think I look better with long hair and long weave. I mean ,you know, so umm I think it was a trend but I think now it's more accepting of people becoming themselves, you know, whether it's being gay and lesbian or whatever ,you know. It's so many things that people are just being them that American culture--. I mean they can just zip it up because you're just not going to get that if that's what you're looking for anymore.

RENEE: Hmm, I'd say no. I don't think there's pressure for a certain hairstyle umm like I said I think that our hair is pretty represented in the media (mumbled) so No.

STEPHANIE: Umm, at one point...if you look in the magazines now and if you looked at magazines what ten maybe fifteen years ago, magazines now have more African Americans that have umm more of natural hair because that's what they want. A few years ago, they had more African Americans with more straight hair because that's what they wanted the African American person to be portrayed as...and it changes on, I guess, what media wants us to look like (laughs).

Finally, the purpose of research question three was to explore if African American women feel a sense of pressure to conform to White standards of attractiveness concerning body shape, skin complexion and hair texture. The findings show that difference in body shape among Black and White women creates different standards of attractiveness. Therefore, participants are not conforming to White standards of attractiveness concerning body shape. Moreover, participants do not feel a pressure to conform to light skin beauty standards concerning skin complexion although they are aware that an expectation exist. Specifically, "the lighter, the better" concept still exists but not as prevalent as in the past. However, there is a pressure to wear and upkeep certain hairstyles in order to be considered attractive. It is also important to note that

some participants believe a good representation of skin complexions and hairstyles are represented in the media and do not feel pressure to conform.

Research Question 4: To what extent do Black women engage in social comparison behavior to media ideals?

The fourth research question examined the extent in which African American women engage in social comparison behavior to media ideals. In particular, the participants were asked if they compare themselves to White, Black and/or non-Caucasian models in fashion magazines, television and other advertising mediums when evaluating their own attractiveness? In addition, the comparison behavior to everyday women was also explored. Furthermore, the findings illustrate that most of participants are not engaging in social comparison behavior to media ideals regardless of race. Moreover, participants do engage in social comparison behavior to everyday Black women but not everyday White women.

Social Comparison Behavior to White and Black Models

Many of the study participants reported that they do not socially compare themselves to White models as adults, but they did at some point in their life, most often as an adolescent. Many of the participants discontinued social comparison behavior after realizing that Caucasian and African American women's body shapes are often too physically different; many Black women feel their bodies will never be able to slim down to an acceptable—as defined by White culture—size. Therefore, instead of comparing, they learn to embrace their own Black beauty standards.

RENEE: I used to do that when I was younger, umm, then I realized I was holding myself to a false standard. We just can't be compared. We're just different. I was in ballet when I was little and everybody else stayed skinny and I got curves and so I just couldn't, you know--. There was a lot of pressure for me to be skinny like them and have straight hair

like them and I just realized that you just can't be on the same scale because our bodies are just built different. So not anymore.

JASMINE: Umm no, I don't. Umm, I know that I won't have that model body so obviously no.

BLAKE: Not as much as I used to. When I was little, I would. But now, umm I really don't pay any mind to it.

BROOK: White models. Umm, no maybe within high school, you know, you're kind of like, "Oh well you know she's, you know, I want to wear a bikini." You know whatever but and I just think that's being a young girl because you know that's what you see and everybody wants to be, you know. You don't really have a true definition of beauty then as you grow up hopefully now. Umm, you know, you see that's what you thought was beauty. Like so you tried to identify yourself with that, you know, you tried to, you know. If she was wearing a certain lip gloss, you know, you tried to get that or if she had an outfit on, you tried to find the outfit or something similar to that. But now if you understand yourself, you know that you're not going to be that size zero or two whatever she is. I mean it's just not going to happen so you have to be, you just have to be you. You have to be confident in you.

LAPORSHA: Umm... not anymore. I did probably just even a few years ago I did. Again just like said getting older and just trying to understand more about who I am and culture. I know that like I said that I never will look like that. I am not made to look like that and shouldn't like that. So, today I don't but I have in the past.

Many participants expressed that they do not compare themselves to White models or Black models. A variety reasons exist for this, including the limited number of African American models featured in the media, Black models' body shapes being too similar to those of White models, and Black women embracing who they are as individuals instead of trying to be like someone else.

LAPORSHA: No, I don't think so...and maybe I'm not looking in the right magazines. I don't see a whole lot of people really to compare to.

PEYTON:...I don't compare myself. I believe I am very much attractive as they are believed to be. But I don't compare myself, no.

BROOK: ... I mean I have in the past, you know, I'm just like, "Oh, she got abs, you know, she, you know, she got hazel eyes, I fenna⁷ get me some hazel contacts." (laughs). Things like that. I mean you did because that's just what you thought you had to be. And it's fine but I think to an extent now you might say, "Oh, I want abs like Kelly Rowland." Kelly Rowland got nice abs, you know, and you can work to get that but you're not trying to be her as a whole. You know what I'm saying? You might depict in that just being women. I have friends you know and stuff. I like that fact that, you know, if someone has a certain way of how they did their eyebrows or something like that, it's like "Oh okay, I like that," you know, things like that and I think that's just women because we share a lot of those things with each other. But I don't think it's trying, you know, necessarily trying to be like a certain person but some people do but I think the older you get and the more you realize that, you know, your own self and that to an extent that you probably won't ever get that way, you know, to be that person. And I'm not saying you can't. You can have nice legs. You can have abs. You can have nice arms, you know, embrace whatever you want to say. But, you know, you just have to be confident within yourself. You have to look at yourself internally and say this is what I want to do and if this is the goal you want to reach, then go for that. But, you know, you just have to work with yourself. You can't be someone else.

In addition, most of the participants who reported they do engage in social comparison behavior to Black models where most often a comparing themselves to a specific aspect or body part of models rather than their entire being. For example, Jasmine only refers to models in respect to fashion trends and styles rather than comparison than the model herself.

RENEE: Umm yes in the sense of a lot of features instead of maybe like my body type, for instance. That's because I'm not built like a model. That's another thing I realized. I'm just not built like a model but features like facial features, sometimes I think about it. Umm, complexion, skin quality, things like that. But as far as body shape umm body size, no. Shape a little, but size not at all.

JASMINE: No. As far the new styles of fashion, yes, but not necessarily evaluating your body or face or anything like that.

ALEX: I look at their abs again. Like when Cierra did her--, well I don't know what it is that she did. She had a video. I was like "Man, her abs just look so perfect". I need to get some sit ups going on.

⁷ **Fenna** -going to, about to (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=fenna>)

Nevertheless, although a minimal number, three participants stated they do engage in social comparison behavior with either Black or White models.

COURTNEY: Of course, I think that's a natural occurrence with women in general and in any race or culture. So yes, I do.

GREY: Yeah. I do. It's because it's a color thing. I'm like at least I can see what is realistic. Yeah. There are so many things you can and cannot photoshop out. So you're like, "Is that possible for me to look like that?"...

ANGELA: Uhh, honestly I can say that I do because my body type is similar. My hair is straight at times until it's time to get that new growth⁸ (maybe doesn't need to be defined?) straightened out. I'm like, "Oh like I can look like this". Then I'm like wait I don't look like her. Like that's not going to happen and like, "Why am I comparing myself to her?". Like I just need to be myself. Umm, I don't like--. If it's like "Man, I want abs like her. Like she's really thin or whatever". It's like, "Okay, I can try to get those abs but--" or like "Man, I want to be able to fit into those pants these are pretty cool". Like okay. That's an easy goal because I'm already that body shape... I'm not trying to be the White woman. I just want certain aspects of stuff that she's wearing or like body shape or like stuff that's achievable for me. Because if it's like--. I don't know... I'm like what a five/seven in pants...and like maybe medium size shirt. Umm, if she's like an extra small, it's like okay. I am going to have to starve myself to get there. Like that's not me. I'm not that small. But it's like I'd like to be toned. That's nice but just like that comparison. But I never have really wanted to be like, "Hey, I want to be that White person in the magazine, like I want to have her life." It's like no not that kind of comparison.

Social Comparison Behavior to Non-Caucasian Models

This study also explored if African American women engaged in social comparison behavior to non-Caucasian models. The term non-Caucasian was used to refer to models who do not identify as either African American or Caucasian American. The findings suggest that overall, participants do not compare themselves to non-Caucasian models to evaluate their own beauty.

⁸ **New growth**-the natural hair that grows from your scalp weeks after it has been relaxed or permed (http://www.ehow.com/how_5578176_manage-hairs-new-growth.html) .

BROOK: Non Caucasian? Umm, no, umm no. I think I could probably identify more with that person because they're not Caucasian, you know, they're a minority so to speak umm but I think umm I think no, no. To me like some things I might, "Oh she really has nice skin, what kind of moisturizer does she use?", you know something like that but not like "Oh I need to go get longer weave, I need to go get some lipo, I need to go get a tattoo right here you know"...

GREY: Oh... hmm I have to think about that. Nope, can't say I do.

PEYTON: No, only because I don't get caught up. I am not the type of individual who say "I wish this was--. I wish I was this person. I wish I could be with this person." I am a realist and I just don't sit up here and imagine. I mean I have accepted who I am and that's what it is going to be. I have never imagined myself wishing, daydreaming, I was another person. I don't dream about it in my sleep and I don't fantasize who I can be with. That's just not me. So, no. the answer is no.

JASMINE: Umm, no. I don't. I don't because I really don't tend to look at them for their attractiveness...

Some of the participants do compare themselves to non-Caucasian models in media images but not necessarily concerning body shape and/or skin complexion. The participants expressed that the areas of comparison to non-Caucasian models are personality, demeanor, hairstyles, and fashion.

BLAKE: Un huh, I do like when, especially when they are mixed, like with black and Mexican like my cousins are. I really do compare, I'm like oh, they are not white, but they really are like gorgeous and everything.

ANGELA: ...I mean I do compare myself at times... I don't know, maybe like the elegance. Like this is a female, not a male, but female actor or actress, actresses, African American female actresses or African Latina actresses. Umm and I guess in comparison, it's like the elegance of umm I guess the way they act or umm their personality. I mean I really enjoy their personality and like I really wish that I could be like that. Like umm, like their spark personality and don't want to say fireball but the spark to their personality. I mean I love that because it's like just seeing it the on TV, the attention that they get but it's like I'm not trying to force it. It's just like, that's really nice and something to tailor to myself where it would be out of place for me to implement it in my life kind of thing. But like appearance wise, they have cute outfits or whatever but like umm I'm not really changing my body type to fit theirs per say unless I'm a similar body structure to theirs but most are like just materialistic things. Like that's what I like so.

LAPORSHA: ... I think about mostly their style, their fashion sense because I don't have that right now, That is what I am looking for. So really at how they dress and the confidence they have.

ALEX: Yea because I might look at something that they have and be like "Oh, I wish my hair looked liked that, that's cute." ... or if I had that outfit ...

Social Comparison Behavior to Everyday Women

Overall, the participants responded most affirmatively to comparing themselves to everyday Black women including friends and family when evaluating their attractiveness. Comparing themselves to other Black women is a more achievable and realistic expectation than media images.

RENEE: Umm definitely. To be honest especially people like my family because that's where I got my stuff from, you know, so umm definitely. Yeah.

GREY: Yeah the most. I mean they could be--. I wouldn't say daily, but yeah. A lot.

STEPHANIE: Yep, umm but it's based off of the-- (pause). I guess it's based on the standards or the goals that I've set for myself so I will compare because, maybe I shouldn't envy, but you know it's something that I want so I will continue to compare.

JASMINE: Umm, yes I do. Sometimes, I really don't do well with my make up so I'm like "hey, can you do my make up" ... So I do evaluate myself among our people umm because that's what I look at the most so I know that that is real. So I tend to, you know. I kind of want to be on that level but then I just remember I am who I am ...

ANGELA: Hmm, yes, I feel like a lot of people do that. I mean it's not like severe like "Man, like I wish I had shoulders like hers" or "I wish I had calves like that." But it's just like--. I don't know. It's like whenever I see it, I'm like, "Wow, I have my mom's like broad shoulders" or like "Man, I can see where I got my breast from" or "My grandma has a heavier chest" or just a kind of comparison for like a identification thing ,not like a comparison as negative thing like "Why didn't look like my cousin? I wish I had her complexion" or like "I wish that I was taller like him or her?" or something. It's just more of an identification saying. Like seeing where I come from and like what parts and pieces I got from what grandparents or like where I came from kinda thing. Because like I said, it's hard for me to identify, uhh, racially identity. So, like seeing my family, it's like "Wow okay, now I'm seeing where I'm getting --", it more strongly helps identify who I am as a person.

On the other hand, participants were least likely to compare themselves to everyday White women when evaluating their individual attractiveness. Unfortunately, seldom explanations were given to explain this rationale.

STEPHANIE: Other White women in the sense of the media but not White women when it's like friends, family...

ALEX: No because they wear some stuff that, I'm like--.They get all flowery and floral stuff. I can go into certain stores just for shoes or something, but clothing wise, like Charlotte Russe, they have like flowery looking stuff and Wet Seal, only a certain, few things I can get out of there. ...

BROOK: I really don't. I just, I mean me and myself. I know that I am Black so I know that I never be White so I don't go no further than that.

Finally, the fourth research question examined the extent in which African American women engaged in social comparison behavior to media ideals and everyday women. This study supports that most of participants are not engaging in social comparison behavior to media ideals regardless of race because media ideals are not a reflection of women in general. In addition, participant who do engage in social comparison behavior in Black models were often comparing themselves to a specific aspect or body part of models rather than their entire being. There were three participants who did acknowledge that they engage in social comparison behavior to media ideals. Moreover, participants do engage in social comparison behavior to everyday Black women but not everyday White women.

Research Question 5: What is the impact of social comparison behavior among African American females aged 18-30?

The fifth research question explored the impact of social comparison behavior among African American females aged 18-30. Moreover, participants were asked to describe if they were satisfied with their body shape, skin complexion, hair texture and overall body. In addition,

participants were asked to share their opinions to whether they believe if few, many, or most Black women are satisfied with their bodies as well as if media images of Black and non-Caucasian models impact body satisfaction among African American women. The results show that overall participants are satisfied with their body shape, skin complexion and hair texture. In addition, media images do not impact body satisfaction among many participants because they are not engaging in social comparison behavior to media ideals.

Body Satisfaction among participants

Body Shape

Figure 4.5 illustrates the participant's body satisfaction regarding body shape. Most of the participants reported they are satisfied with their body shape. However, 50 percent of the participants expressed some concerns even though they are generally satisfied.

BROOK: I'm satisfied but it's things like with my weight. Stuff like that I would focus more on to feel better for myself and to fit clothes better. Things like that. But I wouldn't go and have these major surgeries to be a size zero, you know. I would just work on myself. I guess some--. You know you get to a point where you know you can be better at certain things. My hair and my skin are not going to change. My weight I have control over so.

COURTNEY: Yes. I could stand to be a little smaller but umm for the most part I am.

STEPHANIE: It depends, it's sometimes umm if I'm focused on modeling then no, if I'm everyday without modeling being included, yea

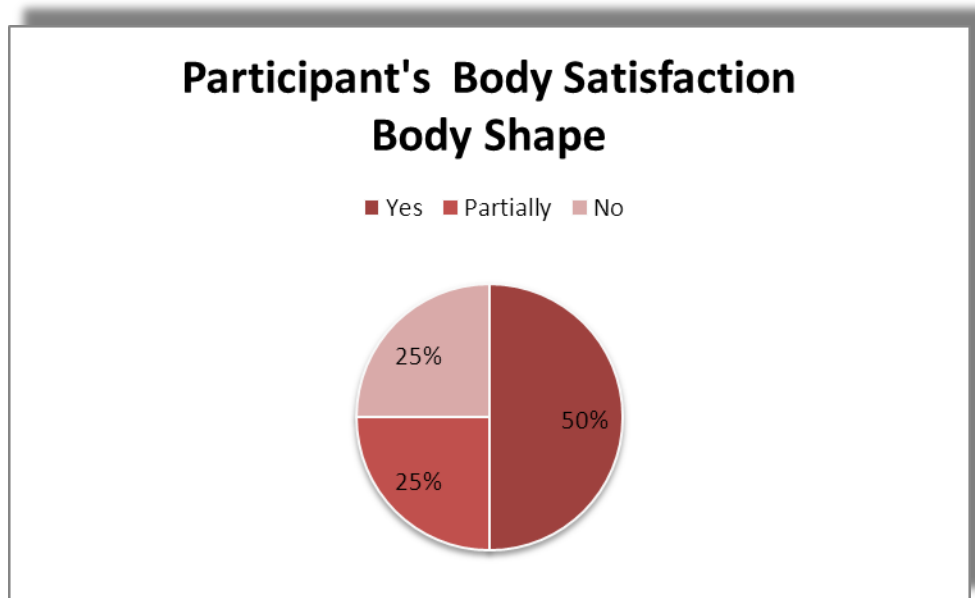
In addition, a 25 percent of participants stated they are not satisfied with their body shape-- particularly weight. Participants responded with either dissatisfaction and/or concerns regarding dimensions of body shape more than any other variable studied throughout this research.

GREY: I just wanna be. I mean numbers do matter to me but I mean like if I wanna like-- . What I want to do is I wanna lose 30 pounds so that when I get pregnant, I won't have an additional 30lbs I need to lose. In addition to baby weight...I want to be able to wear a

two piece bathing suit without like being bothered. I know people wear them regardless but I am on like Facebook and everything. I don't wanna be on Facebook and be like, "Go ahead and crop that up real quick". You know I just want to be like this is it. That's just my ideal.

LAPORSHA: No, I am not happy or satisfied...

Figure 4.5 Participants' Body Satisfaction-Body Shape



Skin Complexion

Figure 4.6 illustrates the participants' body satisfaction regarding skin complexion. The participants responded most favorably to skin complexion satisfaction. One participant reported dissatisfaction with her body because she wanted to be darker. One participant expressed her preference to be darker but still an overall satisfaction with her skin complexion. The remainder of participants who responded to the question stated they were satisfied with their skin complexion.

Figure 4.6 Participants' Body Satisfaction-Skin Complexion



Hair Texture

Figure 4.7 highlights the participants' body satisfaction regarding hair texture. The majority of participants are satisfied with their hair texture. One participant addressed some concerns with her hair.

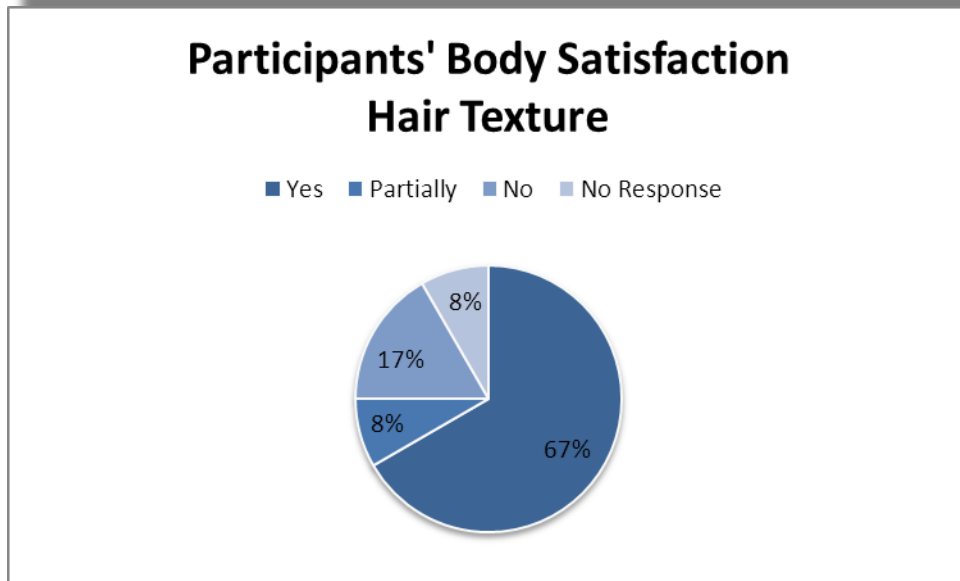
ANGELA: Yes, I'm happy with my hair texture but satisfied? Like I said, the whole since my hair is permed, I always have to get it done. Whether that means pay sixty dollars to get it done at the hair dresser, or paying like four dollars to get the perm solution and do it myself. But it always a constant reminder, "Do you want to cut me now? Do you want to cut me so that I can just go natural?", but I don't know. I feel like the hair thing. I always struggle to be satisfied because there are so many hair styles that I can do either way, natural or permed, and it's just like I always play with my hair all the time. I'm like, "Well, what if I did this?" and it's just either way, I'm still going to be like unsatisfied with hairstyles and/or textures that I do.

Two participants reported they were dissatisfied with their hair mostly due to maintenance issues. Otherwise, the remainder of participants who responded to the question stated they were satisfied with their hair texture.

VICTORIA: I just have a lot of hair and just frustration with doing it. That's it. I wish it was a little bit more manageable. I like my hair. I just wish it was more manageable.

PEYTON: ...umm, I'm not going to lie. I wish my hair texture was different. I mean like to softer hair. It could be soft curly. It don't even have to be like straight. It don't have to just be like woven, you know, like hair to comb through.

Figure 4.7 Participants Body Satisfaction-Hair Texture



Overall Body Satisfaction

Figure 4.8 highlights the participants' overall body satisfaction. As illustrated, most of the participants are satisfied with their body. Only two participants expressed body dissatisfaction and felt strong pressure to lose weight. Although the majority of participants are satisfied overall with their body, some individuals still identified dissatisfaction with specific body parts. Figure 4.9 illustrates specific dissatisfactions. Some participants specified more than one.

Figure 4.8 Participants' Overall Body Satisfaction

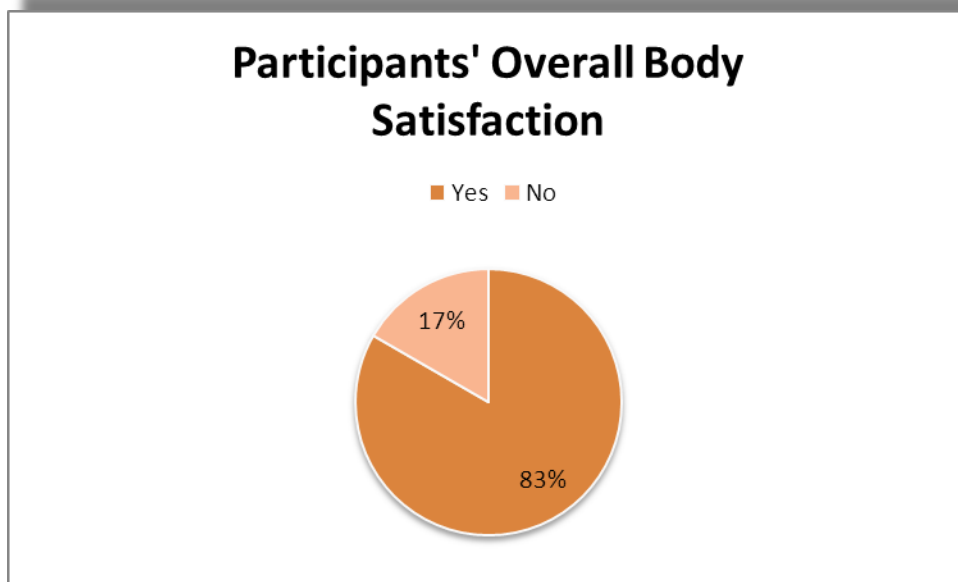
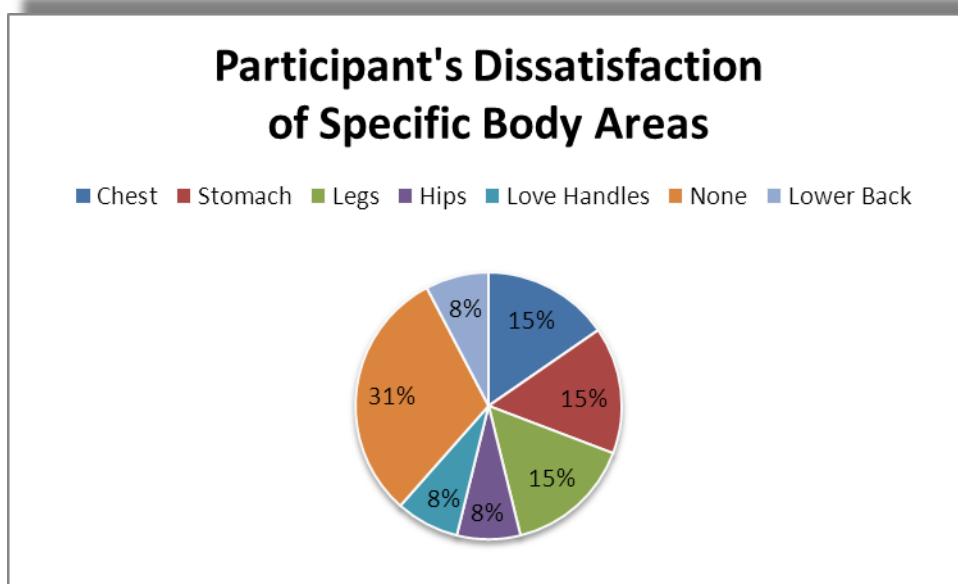


Figure 4.9 Participants' Dissatisfaction of Specific Body Areas



Body Satisfaction among African American Women

Are African American women satisfied with their bodies? As with many of the research questions addressed in this study, the responses were divided among participants. Some of the participants believe only few Black women are satisfied with their bodies, specifically noting

that Black women are concerned with issues regarding their weight and body shape. In addition, some participants feel that some aspect of one's body shape will always cause dissatisfaction.

Alex: ... not everybody was raised the same way. So I think even with my group of friends, most of them are not satisfied with it. Some people, some of them are like "Oh my gosh, I'm too small," or "Oh, I'm too skinny. I don't have a butt," or something like that. I'm like, "Really, it's not that big of a deal". As long as you look good and feel confident in what you're wearing, then you should be satisfied, but I can't tell other people how to think.

GREY: Few... I guess because I just always feel like someone is always trying to alter something or produce something. I kinda feel like not many would say that "I'm just satisfied."

VICTORIA: Umm, I just say from my own personal surroundings, a lot of them want to lose weight. They always talk about what they want to lose and everything, so I mean yeah. That's what I see. I really can't speak for everybody else, but I know a lot of people who aren't satisfied with their weight and their body image.

RENEE: I would say few... a lot of us just struggle with weight, I'd say. And then like I said, a lot of clothes aren't tailored the way that we're shaped and so a lot of times you find women be trying to lose something here or there just to fit into something else...

JASMINE: Few... cause I think, because we live in America, society has given us fast foods and we've ate the wrong foods. We tend to be bigger as African American women and we are trying, trying to focus on being healthy now. So I don't think nobody wants to be 200 plus pounds if they don't have to ...

On the other hand, some participants believe that many African American women are satisfied with their bodies, claiming that Black women are confident within themselves and do not illustrate dissatisfaction with their bodies. Moreover, Black women are not concerned with issues they believe cannot be changed.

BROOK: ... Many are satisfied but not most... I think, you know, you're starting to see things that are similar to your body type so I think that gives you more confidence within yourself. Umm, that you're a certain way. But I think our Black women are working on themselves health wise, exercising and losing weight and that's good. So I think most people are at that point of making that transition and some that are just not happy within themselves, you know. They want to change everything about themselves and to me I think, you know, it's a small percentage but some people out there...they want to change everything. They don't like their hair. They don't like their skin. They don't like their

hips and just really struggling with identity as a person. So umm, I think many are satisfied but umm a lot of are still working to get to that goal that you know we want to achieve within ourselves.

ANGELA: Umm I never really asked anyone this just looking from the outside in. I say that they are because most women that I run into are like, like I said are confident and even if they personally are not confident, they're confidence shows like excludes out from them...It's not spoken of unless you get into a heart to heart conversation with them and they're like "I really can't stand this part about me or whatever", but it's like from first glance, they're like happy with the way they look, most people so.

LAPORSHA: I would say many.... But I think, I think that a lot of people want to work on themselves and I think there are a lot of people who are comfortable in their skin. So, it's just kind of in the middle.

PEYTON: Many because I think we all find a way to deal with it. I mean I just feel like we have to--. I mean it just is, what it is. You know, you can change it if you want and we just choose not to. If they don't, they are just comfortable with it.

Do media images of non-Caucasian models impact body satisfaction among African American women?

According to the participants, Black women's body satisfaction may be impacted by media images of non-Caucasian models. Specifically, African American women may be able to relate or perceive similarity because they are women of color. In addition, it was mentioned that Hispanic women featured in the media often have curvy bodies, which is an ideal for Black women.

RENEE: Un hun, definitely. How? I'd just say it's very mixed. It's very diverse and we have a lot of people that are mulattoes, you know. So I think every woman compare themselves to models in general. I don't particularly look at the Caucasian ones and "Oh, I want to be like that." No, I just look at models as a whole and how? Same way as I would I look at--, evaluate any women.

GREY: So, not Black but not White. Ok, umm I think that they probably do. I mean they are another woman of color. It just kinda like depends. Like I would have to say--. Like I don't compare myself to her but I see how someone will see a certain feature that is real big in African American community like Jennifer Lopez. Like everybody was on her butt. It's just like "Wait a second, this is a Hispanic lady or whatever." This should be little Black features, you know, if were like to claim something. And so, I could see, you know, someone looking at that. Umm, I consider non-Caucasian also as multi-racial. You

know, I mean which one they go by. I still see it as just like just out there. So probably looking at that. Umm, so yeah.

JASMINE: Umm, yes it does. Umm, cause that's the closest thing that we can compare to. So when we see a non-Caucasian woman, we kind of know... what they look like and kind of know where they come from. So when we see them, we can kind of say "Oh, maybe I can look like them".

VICTORIA: I mean to some extent, yeah and that's all you really see like I said is, skinny, big butt or big breast and I think a lot women try to "Oh, I want to look like that" or you know stuff like that.

COURTNEY: Because these media images may look more like them.

LAPORSHA: ... I think that they're just a part of our idols--people that we put on pedestals that we strive to be like. I think that it's just the way the media has infiltrated people's lives regardless of whether your Black or White. Those people that are famous look a certain way and you think that in order to be famous or popular, you have to look like that.

Although many of the participants acknowledge non-Caucasian models, particularly Hispanic models, as more relatable than Caucasian models, some participants believe that Black women's body satisfaction is not impacted by media images. It is believed the models in general are an unrealistic representation of women in general regardless of race, non-Caucasian models are not similar enough to impact body satisfaction, and there are minimal images featuring non-Caucasian models in the media.

ALEX: Not Asian models. They're always skinny. If you ever see them, they're either...their whole race and culture in society is relatively small because they can walk everywhere because they're so many people there. So they, I've never seen a big Asian model ever. Hispanic, I don't think I've ever seen a Hispanic--. They've always been like a normal--. The way I've seen Hispanic models is the same way I see like normal Black people just like umm curvy but tall and beautiful and they're umm what the word for the Hispanic people. ..They look very exotic... I think they could but it's not that many of them. They're more African American models than they're Hispanic models that I see when I look through the media.

BROOK: Umm, no. Umm not to an extent. I think, umm you know everybody, every race is different. I mean we can probably relate more of the Black women to a non-Caucasian model because you know a lot of Brazilian women you know they're curvy or umm Hispanic women are curvy. You know, we can relate to, more overall, to non-

Caucasian models than--. But I don't think self, body self image or body satisfaction. Umm no, because it's not, it's not a part of your race, you know. It just-- .They're a minority like you are but it's not umm something I would focus on. It's good to see, you know, I can identify but it's good to see that they're being exposed, you know, like that. That's good but not far as body satisfaction. No.

PEYTON: ... I think that they throw out what you should be and it's unclear of what you're supposed to be... I don't know. Is it a size two, four, six, umm or a zero. I think those models are a zero or possibly two. However, that's unrealistic in our community. We don't have--. I know we do not have too many zero's floating around here...unless they are some real live models. However, they may throw out, even if you are not model, the media person is maybe a size six. I don't know. Umm, I think that that does not make us want to be a size six. You know, we're not influenced like "Okay, we need to be a size 6", of course not. I mean how many people are walking around here a size six like, you know, in our race... Umm, I think yes. I think we believe what they put out here--. We believe to have accepted what they have said we should be. However, we are not saying we are going to do it. We're not so whatever. You know, I think that's what it is. Like okay, I think what I'm trying to say is I think we believe that we should be a size 6 but however we're not. I think that's our attitude about it.

ANGELA: Hmm, actually. I mean I don't think so. I mean for one, there's not that many non--. Like there's a lot but it's not majority of non- Caucasian women in society... So I feel like there's not much to compare yourself too but then when you do see them in the media it's like you're not trying to be completely just like them because society is saying that they're the minority. This is the majority you want to look like this. So it's like okay I guess. I'm going to try to look like that. They're the minority. We like the majority. That's what I think. That's what a lot of people think so.

Do media images of Black models impact body satisfaction among African American women?

The majority of the participants expressed that Black models do not impact body satisfaction among African American women because models are not realistic representations of Black women, especially runway fashion models. For example, they are too skinny and look similar to Caucasian models.

ALEX: No because I feel--. Yes and No. If it's the more celebrity type that we see, than we can get some satisfaction out of it because we see them in all shapes and sizes like in the music industry. But when you go to like runway models, I don't think we like identify with them necessarily because we know that they are just a White person with Brown skin basically. Well the way they are perceived to us when we look at them because they look just like them. ..

PEYTON: No, because umm, because we're not jumping on the bandwagon. We're just not.

RENEE: Again, for me I. Again for me models are kind of-, models are here and we are here so umm. No. Not really. Do I have a preference when I look at a model and I say "Oh she's Black, do I look more like her?" Yea sometimes, but that's more so for facial features than overall body and size.

LAPORSHA: I don't think so. Honestly I do not think people could name more than three Black models. Tyra, Naomi, Iman and there's one from Victoria secret. I don't even know her name.

VICTORIA: No, either they're like too skinny--. If you're talking about fashion models like no. I think people are like, "Oh, they are too skinny, I don't want to be that skinny", so no.

COURTNEY: I don't know because models are hard. Because models are like on a whole other level like of a playing field. ...I mean I'm not saying that they don't affect people at all, but I do think that there's a line of umm like non--, you know it's unrealistic. I do think people get that to a certain extent. So I don't know it's hard for me to look at just model images.

STEPHANIE: ...All Black women don't want to look like the models...That's why I don't feel like it impacts the entire, or I can't generalize and say it impacts umm majority, but I think it impacts some...

However, some of the participants believe that media images of Black models do impact body satisfaction, particularly in a positive way, suggesting that media images of African American models empower women to take control of their own bodies and motivate them to become better people because they have witnessed a beautiful Black women who has "made it" in American society.

BROOK: Umm, I think so. I mean in a way, yes but I think it's more of a positive light because look at Jennifer Hudson. You know she was a bigger woman and, you know, she went to Weight Watchers. Supposedly, you know, she went to Weight Watchers and started to eat right, started to exercise to become more comfortable with herself and feel better within herself. And I think people are more focused--. People see her image now and like "Oh, she, she really looks really good", but she did before to me, you know. It is what it is but I think it's more, you could look at it as a positive way of saying "Okay, she knew that she could be better within herself, feel better within herself because of, you know, family you know having help, stuff like that. So she resulted into something that would take her body, more exercise and that was the result. So I think it's more of a

positive image than anything to say to Black women, “If she can do it, you can do it”. You know, start taking back your bodies, you know, taking care of your body and if you lose weight and start looking and feeling better than that’s good. But if you lose inches and start feeling better, it’s that same thing. So you know, I just think if you take away the concept of it, then I think that is what the difference is.

ANGELA: ... What comes to mind is like Tyra Banks and to be honest Tyra Banks with her whole Top Model show thing, like that’s one of the few people I think of when you say model. And African American like umm I guess Naomi Campbell but she wasn’t completely of my time. But umm, I feel like they have influenced me kind of like umm African American models. Like if you are African American, you see an African American model that is pretty affluent and that has made it, it’s just like “Okay, that would be so cool. I really want to be like them umm because they made it and they really made something of themselves.” So like if you fall in under Caucasian, someone who fall in under Caucasian appearance, you see the African Americans made it. It’s kind of like, “Oh, I’m not going to follow a Caucasian person. This African American made it. Let me try to be more like them.” So that’s what I feel like. When I say Tyra Banks, like she has been a role model. I don’t like compare myself to her but like she’s been a role model and like she made it. Whatever she says, I think I take it with great strategy. I’m like “hmm”. I think about it. And I’m just like, because she made it and she knows how to get to where she was, I just kind of like listen to it. I don’t dwell on every word but it’s just something that is inspirational that I think of so.

JASMINE: Umm, yes, it does. Umm, like I said umm those are the models that we can actually compare closest to.

GREY: ...I would have to say that as a Black model, you have this sense of like mainstream acceptance depending on where it is. So some form of mainstream acceptance and so when you look to that, you want to be accepted within the majority population so you look to that model to see what is it about them that’s attractive or whatever. Umm, so you just--. I mean you kinda work with what you got or you know so yeah.

The fifth research question explored the impact of social comparison behavior among African American females aged 18-30. In respect to body shape, 50 percent of participants expressed concerns even though they are generally satisfied. In addition, participants responded with either dissatisfaction and/or concerns regarding dimensions of body shape more than any other variable studied throughout this research. Although some participants preferred to be darker, the participants responded most favorably to skin complexion satisfaction. Most participants are satisfied with their hair texture; however, dissatisfaction was mainly to maintenance issues. In

addition, media images do not impact body satisfaction among many participants because they are not engaging in social comparison behavior to media ideals.

Research Question 6: How does racial identity influence standards of attractiveness, body satisfaction and social comparison behavior among African American women aged 18-30?

The sixth research question explored how racial identity influenced standards of attractiveness, body satisfaction and social comparison behavior among African American women aged 18-30. Moreover, the participants were asked the following questions regarding racial identity:

- Do you think it is important for Black women to have a strong racial identity to be considered attractive? Explain.
- In your opinion, do you think having a strong racial identity impacts body satisfaction among Black women? If so, how?
- Do you feel that racial identity influence Black women to compare themselves to media images? Black women? White women? If so, how?
- Do you believe that your racial identity influences you to compare yourself to Black women instead of White women or vice versa? Explain.

The finding shows that some but not all African American women view having a strong racial identity an important factor in measuring someone's attractiveness. In addition, the majority of the participants do believe that racial identity impacts body satisfaction among African American women. Racial identity often precludes African American women from comparing themselves to images. However, responses varied to whether or not racial identity influence Black women to compare themselves with other Black and White women. Moreover,

majority of participants believe that their individual racial identity influences them to compare to Black women either more than or instead of to White women.

The Importance of Racial Identity

Some African American women view having a strong racial identity an important factor in measuring someone's attractiveness. Having a strong racial identity reflects an understanding and pride not only of one's culture, but also of one's self. As mentioned previously, pride in this context is a state or feeling of embracing one's individuality as it relates to beauty. A strong racial and personal identity illustrates confidence and individual pride, which is viewed as highly attractive in the Black community. Racial identity helps African American women address and ignore stereotypes related to their race and gender as well as motivates them to identify with beauty standards of attractiveness within the Black community.

RENEE: I'd say yes. I mean identity is where it's at, right. You have to be whole in yourself in order to be able to find your inner beauty, whatever that is so definitely.

BLAKE: it helps because there are always stereotypes of how Black women act as being ghetto or something like that, just talking really loud. So I do feel like, it is important to, like you know, uphold your race in a mature manner so we can eliminate those stereotypes. But then again, I feel like those stereotypes will always be around, umm. Because there are movies, there are TV shows, like reality shows like Basketball Wives, I feel like it makes it even more harder to live up to your race and being dominant and strong, when those reality TV shows are just out there for all the world to see. People in different countries can see them, little kids will see them, and other kids will go up to their schools to other little black girls and automatically assume that's what they will grow up to be like.

JASMINE: ...I say yes and no because if you know who you are than you kind of become more confident. I think it's all about the confidence level. So to see, you know, confidence is very attractive. If you don't yourself and if you don't know like who you are and how to define yourself, you kind of get into that shell. You kind of steer away from, you know, being confident and that's unattractive.

STEPHANIE: Yeah umm because they have to embrace who they are umm and love who they are just like anybody else because this is who they are and umm regardless of what they've face today, you know, if there is something within their race, umm they're a part

of it. They're a part of it and they have to either fight against whatever is going against their race or them, umm. Yea it's a matter of embracing, embracing and loving who they are and umm what culture they come from.

COURTNEY: Yes, I could see why, umm because if you're not stro-- If you're not, I guess rooted, or you don't perceive yourself within your race, then it makes it difficult for you to even identify with the person in the mirror. So if you didn't have a strong racial identity, then in a sense, I would say you would loathe the way you look or who you are or you would try to be something else. But if you have a strong racial identity, you are embracing who you are and what comes with that so...

LAPORSHA: ... If your standards of beauty lie in an African American standard of beauty, then you should have a strong racial identity, so that you can own that. But if your standard of beauty lies outside of that Black community, then maybe you do not have the same kind of racial identity as someone else.

On the other hand, not all Black women believe that racial identity factors into attractiveness. They do not acknowledge a relationship between personal and racial identity. Instead of racial identity, confidence and personal identity is important as a standard of attractiveness.

BROOK: Umm, no. I think umm to be attractive-- I mean you don't have look at if you're Black or whatever. I just think it's within yourself. Umm, if you're okay with yourself, if you're confident within yourself, I think that's attractive regardless of what color you are or what shade of Black you are. Umm so umm, I don't think it's a particular something that you can focus on: what is racial identity with attractiveness with Black women. I think it just boils down to confidence like whoever you are within yourself. That way it's viewed out whether you're Black or whatever. It's just what it is.

ANGELA: Hmm... I'm trying to think if someone who didn't have a strong racial identity. I feel like I don't think so. I mean like I said earlier confidence but I feel like that is separate from having a strong racial identity because for me, for the longest time like I was like, "Yes, my skin's black". I identify with the afro- or the Latina community but I still don't know where I fit in. But I like wasn't letting that show on the outside. I wasn't like "Oh my gosh, like I feel uncomfortable here." Like I make, I make the most of where I am, when I am, wherever. So it's like again that overall confidence coming back in and even if you don't know where you fit in it's just like being confident in who you are personally is more important then like the racial identity thing...

In fact, a few women actually view a strong racial identity as unattractive; believing it only reinforces stereotypes and may create challenges for inter-relational challenges.

PEYTON: No, I think that makes us unattractive, umm, because we are already perceived to be strong anyway. So umm, I think that is one thing that umm... is our down fall because we do not fall under the radar anyway as a whole and that is anywhere within our jobs, our households ... and I think we are very open minded and I think a lot of people are sometimes intimidated by that. Not to saying that we don't succeed or go far in life, but think sometimes that do hinder us because umm, sometimes we just, we need to know when to stand down.

VICTORIA: I don't think a lot of men these days are looking for you to be "Soul-sista" anymore. I think—I'm not going to say all men, but a lot of men don't care as long as you got—as long as you look good. That's all that matters.

Does racial identity impact body satisfaction?

The majority of the participants do believe that racial identity impacts body satisfaction among African American women. Although Black women vary in shape and size, many Black women have a curvy body shape. Having a strong racial identity motivates many African American women to adopt beauty standards of attractiveness within the Black community, and these beauty standards embrace a curvaceous body shape. This is important in the Black community because having a strong racial identity allows African American women to embrace themselves without having to change who they are. In addition, a strong racial identity provides a support system and social connectedness. Furthermore, racial identity provides Black women less pressure to conform to standards of attractiveness of the dominant culture.

BROOK: Umm, my opinion yes. I think having a strong racial identity does impact the woman's body satisfaction because umm I think umm you know--. Like I said like most Black women are curvy and you know hippy and thick, you know, things like that. I think if you identify that with your race and know that that's how we are and you understand that you're not trying to be someone else, than you have the right to embrace whatever you have because you understand that your racial identity, that's what comes with it. So you know, the fact that I'm Black and I identify with my race and know that my body image from looking at my grand parents on down to me, you know they we're curvy, you know they we're hippy, you know they had thick thighs you that's just, that's just how--. I know that's just what I am so I accepted that and you know you just have to do that so when you identify with your race and know this is what you are and this is where you come from, then you're body satisfaction is a piece of cake. It just comes together, for me so.

Grey: I think that when you identify with whatever group, you're able to embrace the uniqueness and you realize that the people in the different cultures or groups look different. And so you begin you appreciate it...you can see how you fit in and then you feel more comfortable because you don't feel like this outsider umm. But you can't do that when you like trying to surface be just this general person. Like I feel like in America they want you to be this like generalized person in order to be safe. It's okay if you want to identify with being Black. It's okay if you want to identify with being Indian. It's okay. It like doesn't mean you don't like these, you don't like these other groups. It just means when you have certain characteristics you bring to the table. You know to be able to do that, you are able to accept yourself more. You are more confident and when people say stuff to you that could hurt your feelings, you have a whole bunch of history and images you can fall on...you have a whole entire community like "girl, you're good". Like it really makes a difference where you live. Just living in different places, I see people who are really struggling because they don't have a community so they like try to conform to groups that is just not them and they're just so unhappy. Cause like you can't do that, like you can't. I'll say it. You know these young Black girls in all these White towns. I'm like boo you can't wear your hair in this bun and have this headband around it. It's like that's not--. You can't wash your hair every day. Like it bothers me because I'm just like no one is teaching them that it is okay to have their natural or whatever it is and to know how psychological hair is to, you know, to a Black girl and to be raised in place where you only get your hair done to get highlights or to get a cut. She doesn't have anything to fall on. So then she thinks she is ugly or she's whatever. She doesn't see other people, you know, who are doing different things with their hair. You know, they are shaped differently. Or you know it's just so if you don't have that you can't really build that confidence without feeling like you have to conform with something completely that is not you.

COURTNEY: ... I think if you're not satis-, if you're not rooted in your racial identity, then who you see in the mirror, there will be a disconnect because you wouldn't be able to accept who that person is if you were going based off of whatever the dominant culture is because the reality is that we can't be the dominant culture so you definitely be abl-, I mean at the end of the day even if you might be closest to the fairest Black person alive, you still might not necessarily be White so it would be kind of hard (laughs).

LAPORSHA: ... if your racial identity is within the African American, then your standard of beauty should be different than European Americans or whatever else. So, umm, you would have different expectations about yourself. And being curvier or not having long luxurious hair or being brown skin or darker skin would be okay because that is the standard you are comparing yourself to.

However, according to Angela, racial identity does not influence body satisfaction because there is strong pressure from the dominant culture to adopt White standards of attractiveness and it

affects everyone regardless of race. In addition, there are more opportunities available for people to change their physical appearance if they do not like it.

ANGELA: Hmm... I feel like the racial identity thing doesn't have as much as an affect as society's impact has on appearance. Because society is like I need to be thin. It's like well most people are like "Well, I am going to try to be thin" and it's not like because I'm Black, I can't be thin. It's like no. If it says do this, a lot of people will be like "Okay, I will do this". Like there is no race factor limiting like you can't do this because you're a certain race. Umm... but being a certain--, identifying with a certain race, I feel like that really doesn't have much effect on saying what you should look like. Because you are always put into different situations around different people and different people look different ways. So, even if you like for instance, if I was like in a group of Black women and they're all like curvy and like say I'm not curvy, it's just like okay well like that's really nice they're all curvy but it's like "Okay, how am I going to get here". So it's like, I'm just not--. I mean you can like stuff your bra or like stuff your pants with those new booty pop things they got going on. But anyways you can change yourself umm... but still like you're pretty much going to be you. Like you can't really completely change yourself unless you get surgery and stuff like that.

The Influence of Racial Identity on Social Comparison Behavior

Social Comparison to Media Ideals

Racial identity often precludes African American women from comparing themselves to images. It has been expressed that racial identity influences Black women to recognize (and accept) that their curvaceous body shape is not represented in the media. Although Black women realize that media images exist, they do not feel a sense of pressure to become a certain body shape. Moreover, they may be trying to rebel against stereotypes and misconceptions portrayed by the Black women that are represented in the media.

BROOK: Umm, no umm like if you identify with your race, umm like I said especially you know me, being Black umm, every women in my family, not every women but most women in my family, are curvy or big boned, you know, so just something you just don't see too much in the media ...

PEYTON: No, because I don't think we let people influence us. I think children are influenced and I think when you're in grade school that plays a major part but not when you're an adult because we all have choices and you set forth, you know, what you want

to be and I just don't think that these pictures dictate. I mean because if you want to, you can just do it and then we don't. I am just saying that because the results are we don't. You know, we're not going to be transforming our bodies. Ultimately, I don't think it is because of any money issues. I think that we have accepted who we are. I mean it is, what it is.

VICTORIA: Umm, I think they are trying not to. Umm, cause like the Basketball wives⁹. A lot of women don't like that because of that, how people portray Black women based on what they see on Basketball wives and other umm, all those other shows. I think I'm seeing a lot of Black women go against what the media portrays in those shows because... that's how everybody thinks Black women are? So I more so think that they trying, you know, to get rid of that image that they see in the media.

In addition, Black women acknowledge a relationship between racial identity and social comparison to media images. Specifically, Black women with a stronger racial identity are less likely to compare themselves to media images.

LAPORSHA: Racial identity does influence one to compare themselves to media images.... But if it is higher, I guess, or yeah if it is higher, you would be less likely I think to compare yourself to mass media images because they are so different than what your racial identity standard is.

COURTNEY: So I say if you have low racial identity, then you may more so look at media images, specifically looking at the dominant culture. But if you have a higher racial identity, I would say that, if you were looking into the media culture, you would like identify media images that look like yourself or that you would be similar to.

ALEX: No because I feel like if you're one of those people who are very--, have a really strong racial identity, you're not going to conform to the norms, you are going to be an individual ... you're going to be yourself and I feel like someone who is not necessarily that strong, they're going to be like "Oh well, if Beyonce can wear something skin tight then I should wear something skin tight to be beautiful". No, no. Like it just depends on how strong you are, mentally, emotionally, physically a strong person--well not necessarily physically--but mentally, emotionally strong person, then you won't conform to the ways of society or the media.

Because the media is so influential, some Black women believe that everyone is subject to comparing themselves to media images regardless of ethnicity or racial identity. The media leads

⁹ **Basketball Wives**- a reality television series following the lives of a group of women who have been either married to, the fiancé of, or in love with, a professional basketball player. (http://www.vh1.com/shows/basketball_wives/season_4/series.jhtml).

all women to doubt and question their own beauty. However, racial identity may influence the kind of media images that Black women will use for comparison. For example, racial identity may influence Black women to compare themselves to Black models or Black celebrities in the music video instead of White models.

ANGELA: Umm, I feel like I feel like it does because like with the instance of me. People were calling me saying that I look Black but I act White kind of thing. I feel like that's causing me to want to try and be Black sometimes because there are times when I feel like why can't I just act Black or like quote on quote Black like they say. But it's just like, that's not me. I can't do that because that's not what I grew up with or like I can't act like something I'm not or try to pretend like I'm something else ... It's like I just have to be myself. The racial identity thing isn't a influencer for like people of the African American community. Like just the way it's portrayed it's like the media and society and like that draws me back to music videos where it's like if you're male you got to have like a lot of umm like women kind of falling after you or like you have a women, you get a lot of money. That's what the rap songs are saying so it's like if you're a man, that's what you go for. Umm, if you're a female, it's like you gotta be supportive of your man. Either way, like you should anyways, but like to a different extent from the music videos...

JASMINE: Yes, I think so. Umm, as far as umm looking in the mirror and looking at what society accepts, it kind of goes into, "Why do I look like this?" and "Why does she look like this?" and "Why don't I look like her?" So it's kind of, it's kind of that level.

BLAKE: Yeah...those girls in the music videos, self-comparisons, umm even in different movies you compare yourself to Megan Goode, Zoe Saldana, just, yea...

GREY: Umm... it kinda just narrows down the scope of what you look at to compare yourself with, umm, so then you either adapt or reject the cultural norms. So, I have a strong Black identity. When you ask me do I identify with White models, no, because that is not the racial group I identify with so I reject that. You know, so I just kind of feel that's just kind of how people kind of narrow down what's acceptable for them.

Social Comparison to Black Women

Racial identity does not influence Black women to compare themselves with other Black women. According to the participants, the confidence Black women have within themselves prevents them from using social comparison behavior.

BROOK: Umm, no...If you identify with your race, you know that Black women come in all different shapes, sizes, and colors and everything... if you identify with your race you just know that so I would say no. I would just say no because the fact that you--. If you identify with your race, you're Black and you know that it could be light skinned women, dark skinned women umm women with big butt, women with no butt, I mean you know you just have all types of shapes and sizes within our race that you know you may compare but you don't focus yourself on them. I don't, I don't. So I, I mean you might compare and say "Oh, she has a nice butt, I want a bigger butt," but wouldn't focus your whole self on trying to be that certain person because you know that everybody's make up is different so.

PEYTON: I have not seen thus far any Black women, even the ones who are set aside who are not to be on the most beautiful side, saying, "I wish I was beautiful". I have not seen it. I think we are very confident and I think that even if we had some type of insecurity, I don't believe we'd let them show. I think we are too proud to be like "I just wish I look like her." You know, I think that there are very few.

ANGELA: I really don't think so like as a Black woman--. Coming from a Black woman like myself, I don't really compare myself to other Black women. I'm just not "Oh you have to be like this", or whatever. It's just like "Okay that's cool, there's my friends" or whatever. Like I haven't seen that I have to like compare myself but I'm not sure why that is.

However, some Black women feel that body shape, hair texture, skin complexion, and other differences among Black women cause pressure to engage in social comparison behavior.

In addition, a competition exists between women in general.

GREY: Well it's kind of different from within cause now you're like really looking and your saying "she has and I don't have". And it's like "but we're both Black". Yeah and so then you start questioning "Well, is she mixed? Well, is she this?", or you know "Why have this?", or whatever. So it just becomes that you look at this person and like if you think they are attractive, you either will try to make it get it for yourself or completely hate on it...So it becomes a little bit more within inter-culture/inter-race, especially if you identify. I mean yeah you can say there are a lot of different Black women but you have to look at them too, are there different tiers? ... There are different tiers of Black women's attractiveness...

VICTORIA: Yea, I think, I think a lot of Black women try to compare themselves. That's why there's not a lot of umm sisterhood going on because you're not-- women are in competition with women and if that didn't exist, then it would probably be a better world. But, that's how it is---always comparing yourself to someone else that you see...I think women dress up or look good to look better than other women. Men they dress up to look good for women. Women dress up to look good for other women.

STEPHANIE: Yeah because we are so different in how we represent ourselves. Umm, it's different and that can be attractive, or what a person does or how they represent themselves as an African American woman can be attractive to other African American women...

Social Comparison to White Women

In some aspects, racial identity may influence Black women to feel pressured to compare themselves to White women. Some Black women may compare themselves to White women as a standard to guard against African American stereotypes. In addition, being raised in a White community may give added pressure for social comparison behavior. However, the most common reason for social comparison behavior was interracial dating, which will be explored further within this chapter.

RENEE: Hmm, I'd say yeah definitely. Why is it kind of a tougher question? I would just say that we do that as people. You know in general. We look at our stereotypes, we look at how we grew up, we compare to how other people have done, how other people were brought up. What have they done? Have they fit into their stereotype? Have they not? Umm, I'd say yeah.

ANGELA: I feel like it does because hmm I know like it is a stereotype that--. Like, I don't know. It's like a mixture of stereotype and fact because facts have been done that umm African American women are like the least desirable per say in like surveys that I have looked over on the internet or that I've heard about or read over in magazines or like just different things. It's like the least desirable mate per say. Maybe not like a person, just least desirable and so that's why I feel like African American women sometimes do try to live up to be like Caucasian women because they're desirable and it's like not in all cases either. It's just like as in overall like everyone wants to be accepted so I feel like that's where that come from. I feel like people, African American women, do try in some where form to live to up to Caucasian women's standards thing so.

BLAKE: ... I know with my experience it did, but I'm not sure with others. I feel like if you do grow up around of White people, you will compare yourself. Umm, but if you don't, then it's kind of like a non-factor.

However, some Black women do not engage in social comparison behavior.

STEPHANIE: ...No

ALEX: No. I don't know very many Black women who compare themselves to White women. I don't any.

VICTORIA: No, I don't think so...

BROOK: Umm, overall no.

The Extent of Social Comparison Behavior

Although social comparison behavior to Black and White women varied among the participants, an overall majority of them believe that their individual racial identity influences them to compare to Black women either more or instead of White women. Some Black women want to compare to other individuals who are similar. In addition, it is believed that having a stronger racial identity leads to more social comparison to Black women than to White women. Below are the responses from the participants to the question, "Do you believe that your racial identity influences you to compare yourself to Black women instead of White women or vice versa?"

ALEX: I compare myself to Black women more because White women don't look like me. They have their own standards and ways of looking. I feel like why would I want to want to look like someone who doesn't look like me? I rather be like people who are like me. If I had to choose to be with someone, than I rather be with people who are like me or who look like me.

STEPHANIE: I mean I think it causes me to compare myself to umm my own race, umm, more so than the White race or other races.

JASMINE: ... I think it does because my racial identity is different from their racial identity. I feel like maybe like if we were all on the same playing field and we respected each other, you know, as equal parts, maybe it wouldn't be so hard. Maybe it wouldn't be so, it wouldn't be so—*Why do I have to ask these questions?*, "Is she better than me?"...

GREY: Yes. Hmm...Cause your Black.

LAPORSHA: ... I think I am kind of in that middle stage where because I did not have a strong racial identity, I was more apt to compare myself to White women. Now, I'm starting to have more racial identity or it's starting to get stronger, I am more apt to compare myself to Black women... In undergrad, I had an opportunity to be around Black people and so my racial identity was little bit higher but then when I came here, it

was like me and me and my boyfriend. It was like the only Black people I'd seen for a while. I feel like I was, like my frame of reference, was changing. Because my reference group was nine other White women who I did things with, sitting around talking about yoga, yogurt and granola bars; I was like maybe I need to try this out and see what this is about. And you know and it wasn't working for me. This is not my normal. And so I really had to take a step back. It helped having my boyfriend be my voice of reason, "That is weird", "that's not normal", "If we were at home, you would be fine. You wouldn't be self-conscious about how you look... You wouldn't be worried about if you're working out enough. That would not be your standard. But because these people are doing it, you feel like you need to fit in, that this is what you need to do". I think because I am graduating, I know some more Black people... and I am starting to realize--, especially going natural has helped me, finding a whole new group of people and just understanding more about what it means to be a Black woman and that it is very different than what it means to be a White woman.

However, racial identity does not influence all Black women to the same degree.

RENEE: ... Hmm, I'd say I compare myself to Black women a little bit more but it's almost even.

COURTNEY: ... I compare myself to women. I'm not caught up on Black and White. I would say because obviously I am within the African American culture and a lot of my friends are and you know that's my family so I would say I compare myself more but in general just women.

PEYTON: ... I'm just a different individual all together. I set myself apart from any one doesn't matter, White, Black whoever.

ANGELA: Hmm, I feel like my racial identity... I see myself as being Black on outside, Black skin color. Like I mean my family's Black, my extended family's Black but I grew up in near the border of El Paso, Texas umm around the Latino community. So that's completely removed from Caucasian or African American. So it's like kind of have been a blessing to not have been influenced by either one because so many times like "You gotta act Black". It's not, "Well I'm not Black, I'm Latino" kind of thing. Like in my mind, I'm like "Well, oh, okay," or it's like "You need to look this way," and I'm like "Well, I don't want to look that way like I'm Latino like why do I need to look that way so...", but then also at the same time it's like "But I am Black and it's like I want to be like I am Black, or be like Black people are suppose to be quote on quote," and it's like man what am I missing out on or what did I miss out on growing up because it's like I can't really completely identify with that other than what other people tell me or people telling me what I suppose to be like. My parents, they grew up in Black communities, so they just like will remind me, or my sister will sometimes be like "Oh, thus happened when I was younger", we're like, "What, that happens?". We don't know and just hearing it from like this second hand stuff to us and I feel like I'm completely removed from

both. Kind of growing into the Black community now for myself trying to learn to see what goin--. What's umm it like in that community.

The sixth research question explored how racial identity influence standards of attractiveness, body satisfaction and social comparison behavior among African American women aged 18-30. The findings show that racial identity is an important variable regarding body image among Black women. Furthermore, according to the participants, racial identity illustrates confidence and individual pride, helps address and ignore stereotypes related to race and gender, motivates Black women to identify with beauty standards of attractiveness within the Black community, allows African American women to embrace themselves without having to change who they are and provides a support system and social connectedness. Some but not all Black women believe that racial identity factors into attractiveness. In addition, one-third some of participants do not acknowledge a relationship exist between personal and racial identity. Instead of racial identity, confidence and personal identity is important as a standard of attractiveness. Racial identity often precludes African American women from comparing themselves to images. In addition, responses varied regarding whether or not racial identity influenced Black women to engage in social comparison behavior among other Black and White women. However, majority of participants believe that their individual racial identity influences them to compare to Black women either more than or instead of to White women.

Additional Findings

While examining the self-perception and body image among African American women, four additional themes emerged throughout this study. Specifically, the participants expressed the following throughout the exploration of stated research objectives: Black women are focused on becoming healthier instead of becoming a particular body shape; Black women feel pressured

to wear certain hairstyles in the workplace; tension and discomfort exist when Black men date outside their race, particularly with White women; and Black women feeling attractive, confident, and positive about their bodies is due to affirmation and compliments from their parents. Further details are provided below.

Health and Body Image

A theme that emerged from the study is that more Black women are focused on becoming healthier instead of becoming a particular body shape. They recognize that certain illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease are connected to their food choices and exercise practices. As a result, some African American women feel a sense of pressure to workout and practice healthy eating habits.

BROOK: Umm, I think now umm it's more of--. I think now it's more of a focus of not becoming a particular body shape but just trying to be more healthy and...feel better for yourself...

BLAKE: ... sometimes, with our race, it's always like we are more big boned more than other races or that we're more prone to become overweight. Even like in different research studies even say that, "Oh African American women are more prone umm to become overweight and have diabetes". And so, I do feel like it plays a role...

ALEX: I personally think that if God made us a certain weight, shape or size, than it's fine ... Yeah you might hit the gym a little bit to keep it toned up so that you don't have any health issues but that's about it.

LAPORSHA: No, I am not happy or satisfied because I am not healthy. I think I just want to be healthy. If I was the way I am and I could walk up a flight of stairs without feeling tired, I would not care. I want to be fit. I want to be healthy.

JASMINE: Yes I do believe that we are trying to focus more on our health issues now and trying to get slimmer ...

JASMINE: We tend to be bigger as African American women and we are trying, trying to focus on being healthy now. So I don't think nobody wants to be 200 plus pounds if they don't have to ...

VICTORIA: I don't think body shape is that important. I more so think health is important within the Black community. We have a lot of high diabetes rate and heart

disease and that's more important than body shape... It's a lot of-- like my sister just got diabetes and that really affects me and I really need to, you know, get more healthy and you know, work out more...

Hair and Job Security

Another theme that emerged from the study is that Black women feel pressured to wear certain hairstyles in the workplace as well as job interviews and other career related events. Specifically, Black women feel an added pressure to straighten their hair in order to secure a job because straight hair is perceived as more professional and/or formal among African American. According to Grey, for the most part, Black women are not being openly discriminated against because of the way they wear their hair, but it is an unspoken rule perceived by many African American women.

GREY: Yes. I think that umm, for hair it is very, very--. It has a very long history of control for Black women because you're talking about Black women rights. So when you go all the way back to you know slavery and all that... that went rampant, you know, to a point where you can't get job..... And so then, you know, even as I found myself getting older and like playing with the idea of going natural. It's like I can't do that. Like, "how am I going to interview". You know like okay after I get the job, then you're like okay, you know. But umm, because you can never like--, you know. People say you don't want them to discriminate against you. It's like unspoken though. Like I can't hide my hair but you don't have to tell me I didn't get hired because of my hair. So then you're like-- .You tried to eliminate that as an issue. To eliminate that as a possibility of not getting a job and in the Black community, it's kind of became this perpetuating issue because now it's never been a White person or anyone else outside of the Black community be like you need to make sure your hair is straight in order to get this job. It has always been a Black person, you know but it's like where does that come from? It's like just time after time after time, people have said and so you know it's a big issue. I still hear it today "I don't know what I am going to do because I have this job interview." So now we got natural which his cool but then it's like, "Oh well you know don't go in there with like a Mohawk." You know or whatever but it is like you will do these nice pin-ups. Umm, you know, where it still clean and out of your face and simple but it's naturally you know it's like--. So it is a still an issue. It's still an issue.

JASMINE: One of the main issues I've heard people talk about is, "Would you wear your hair in a professional setting?" And so far, as far as people accepting it, I think that mainstream has really made it really hard for people to accept it.

STEPHANIE: Yes, especially umm when it comes to dress and comes to hair. Umm more in the workplace umm I see that a lot umm .You want--. I think people want you to conform to what everyone else is doing, what all the other White people are doing. I don't think a lot of professionals embrace the different hairstyles that a lot African Americans have, so a lot of us tend to go with perms or relaxers to blend in or you know meet that standard that we feel that they have set. Umm that's just with the workplace so...

Interracial Dating and Body Image

According to the research participants, Black women do not feel pressured to look similar to White women. However, tension and discomfort exist when Black men date outside their race, particularly White women. Black women question Black men's decisions not to stay within their race when it comes to dating. They ask, "What do White have that I do not have"? Moreover, they seek to understand whether interracial dating is due to the perception of how White women look or act in general or if it's simply a genuine connection between two people. As a result, Black women challenge their own looks, bodies, and personalities in order to find the motivation behind interracial dating.

BROOK: ... The world we live in today, it's always with the media, you know. Like the hottest topic now is Kayne and Kim Kardashian, you know. Kim she likes African American men that's you know, that's her thing and umm you know that's fine but sometimes I think women, Black women try --. You know you may ask Black men what's the reasoning, like "What's behind you know--? Why are you resorting to another race and you haven't looked within your own race first?" and you know it's always a hoopla of whatever it is but I just think you know now it's, it's about who you connect with, you know. People may disagree with that, umm, but I think more so it is about looks sometimes, you know, especially people in the media go for a certain look and I think Kim has the body of a Black women. I mean, you know, she does. She's a curvy girl but you know they don't want a, you know, a Black woman to tie--. You know, it's so much other stuff as far as women, you know, Black women have attitudes or, you know, just don't do whatever ... It took some time to kind of get adjusted to seeing Black men with White women. I mean, you know, it's just like "I'm over here, hello," ...

PEYTON: ... I don't believe that White women are competition for us at all. I think they only become an issue when we have umm Black successful women and Black successful men and the Black successful men choose White unsuccessful woman. I think that's when it becomes an issue...

GREY: ... Like you see a lot more interracial dating but more so with Black men and White women. And so when you're looking at that or you're trying to appease this Black man, you know, you tend to do the all of sudden, everyone has long Farrah Fawcett hair...or even in your style or how you just carry yourself. Umm, not to say that is a White--, but you see that more so amongst White women and so you can see some people or at least you feel the pressure to conform...

VICTORIA: Because they want to be accepted by Black men and Black men are going towards White women and leaving the Black women behind. So it's like, they feel like they got to step up and you know figure out what they're doing, you know in order to get their spot back...

JASMINE: ... I know that a lot of times we get that little madness in our heart when we see an athlete with a White girlfriend. You're kind of like "Oh, what does she got, that I don't have?" you, know "What is she doing, that I'm not doing?" So it kind of like, "Is it because I'm Black?", "Is it because of my attitude?", "Is it because of my confidence", "Is she better in size?", "Is she...?", you know, what is it about her or what is it about me.

Black women are unsure why Black men date outside their race. However, Grey and Jasmine shared their opinions regarding the motivation behind interracial dating, specifically among Black men and White women.

GREY: ... I would say that White women are a status symbol...I can't say all of them that nobody loves each other, can't say that at all, but it just becomes really interesting how it became this big epidemic ... I think that I read in a book and they used the terminology like a rubber band. It's like you stretched it a part for so long and then it snaps and comes back together. You know, it's like when you think about history. It's like you have pulled White women and Black men apart for so long, you can't look at her in the eye. So there is this mystery, this whatever about you know who he is and for him, it's like they have always put her on this pedestal... I see a lot of my single friends who have terrific qualities. It's like all the stuff they want to say that we're ghetto, we're loud, we're extra, we're all this...and here she is, she's not so what's wrong with her. You know, but it's like all of sudden, this is just what it kind of is... and then another piece I'd have to say is umm, in the White community, I have to say that in the area, I can't say all over the states, but areas umm, White women are taught how to become a wife... and umm I can't say anything for their race, I don't know that, but I do know that it has worked for them and you know being here at the school hearing lots of girls getting engaged when they are junior in college... Sororities having date parties and all these other--. There is something strategic that's going on that clearly is not happening within our community. Here it is be independent, gotta do what you gotta do, you know. Be on your grind. You're so focused on yourself that you're not really whatever those qualities are to be attractive to a man who still need to feel wanted. We may not know how to do

that. So if it's pushed out there and you're put into an atmosphere where it's gotta be me or her and he is not adverse to race anymore, she gets chosen...

VICTORIA: Attitude. I think that's a big thing right now. That's why a lot of Black men date White women because you always hear that "Oh I don't date Black women because they have an attitude problem". That's all you hear and I kind of agree with some points of that...as far as the media portrays Black women—that's all you see. Black women having attitudes and I think now this generation more so being raised by single parents, it caused for them to have attitudes because they don't have that balance, they don't understand the dynamics of relationships even with friendships or spouses and everything. I think the attitude is definitely something that Black women need to work on.

Parental Influence on Body Image

As with many elements of people's lives, parents have a lot of influence on how Black women view and feel about their bodies. Black women feeling attractive, confident, and positive about their bodies is due to affirmation and compliments from their parents. African American parents are teaching their daughters to be confident within themselves and to embrace their beauty. As a result, many Black women feel less pressure to conform to White beauty standards of attractiveness.

ALEX: I would say few because, like well the way I was raised, not everyone was raised the same way I was. My dad was like, my parents named me beautiful because my name means beautiful in Swahili and Arabic and a bunch of other middle eastern languages. And so, with my parents, they built that into my lifestyle. My parents never put me down and thought I was ugly on anything. They would always say, "Alex, you are so beautiful". And then my dad, like the other day, he was like "You can't hurt yourself and run because you are beautiful Alex. I put you on a pedestal for people to see you. You look so beaut-." Like my parents always indulge me with compliments, saying I was beautiful. And even if I wasn't beautiful, they won't say I'm ugly but it just like they made me have more confidence in myself by saying "you are a strong, beautiful Black woman. You going to do great things in life," and most people don't necessarily have that. Because like what, my mom sent me a text message this morning saying, "You look so elegant Alex ...," And just like, not necessarily everybody get's that. I don't know what everybody else get but I don't think they get as much beautiful praise that my parents give me and my parents have never put me down in any kind of way. If something doesn't look right, my dad will say, "You look really pretty Alex but that dress is a little too short," or "I don't know about that, it's an ugly color but you still pull it off but, it's still pretty". ... I think other people either they grew up in a society where like a

heavy, heavy populated Caucasian society like I did and so, the Caucasian people did not make you feel beautiful but as soon as I went home, my parents made me feel beautiful which overpowered them...

COURTNEY: I don't know. I just like the way I look. I was talking to my momma yesterday and she told me I was pretty and I believed her...I find myself attractive.

JASMINE: ...Umm, let's go with the eyes because my mom says it. I guess she wouldn't lie to me...Umm, well-kept. Basically for me, when I look in the mirror, I kind of want to be flawless. Not necessarily everything in tact, but you know, just look presentable like my mother taught me how to be. That's one of the ways that I view attractiveness...

ALEX: Um, hum. Because I know with some big girls like I know some big girls who grew up in an environment where their mom is like "ooe, girl you're working it," or some people got put down for their weight. It just really depends. I know two separate people who are bigger. One got that uplifting through out their childhood to say *don't let anyone talk about you*, they're perfectly fine, while the other one is a little bit more shy about what they wear because they feel like "Oh, I'm a little overweight daadaada." And it's like, I can't go in and change years of put down that they might have faced.

These additional findings contribute to the knowledge of how Black women think and feel about their bodies. In addition, these finds findings also illustrate the complexity and fluidness of the self-perception and body image among African American women aged 18-30.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of Chapter 5 is to conceptualize the meanings of the findings in Chapter 4 and to summarize this exploratory study by revisiting the purpose and objective of the study, outlining the measurement used to examine the research questions, and discussing the findings as they relate to existing research. In addition, the limitations of the study are acknowledged along with recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore body image among African American women ages 18-30. In particular, this study examined the degree to which African American women ages 18-30 compare themselves to media images and how it affects body satisfaction. This study explored if African American women feel pressure to adopt beauty standards of the dominant culture. In addition, the attributes that Black women use in constructing their body satisfaction were defined along with the role racial identity plays in Black women's body satisfaction. The study also examined the relationship between racial identity and social comparison behavior.

Snowball sampling and purposeful selection were used to select the sample, and twelve participants were interviewed as part of this qualitative study. Overall, the findings illustrate that different beauty standards exist within the Black community and some African American women do engage in social comparison behavior and feel pressure to adopt White standards of beauty, while others do not. Within the next section, the findings are analyzed for how they relate to the literature review and implications along with limitations and future research possibilities are discussed.

Discussion

Beauty Standards of Attractiveness

As discussed in the literature review, Byrd & Sharps (2001), Hill (2002), and Jones & Shorter-Gooden (2003) illustrate that although African American women may not internalize the ideal thinness portrayed in Western culture, Black women may internalize other appearance standards communicated in the media, including skin complexion and hair texture. The findings in Chapter 4 confirm that separate beauty standards of attractiveness exist within the Black community, especially concerning body shape. In general, skin complexion appears to be an important factor within the Black community; however, many Black women do not identify skin complexion as a determining variable in measuring beauty as they once did. On the other hand, hair texture and hair in general are shown to be very important among Black women. Many participants expressed hair to be part of their individual identity. In addition, hair texture and styles contribute to how they will be perceived by others.

Self-presentation is also important when defining beauty. The participants expressed that the way in which a person carries herself as well as her inner beauty and confidence is very significant. Flynn and Fitzgibbon (1998) elaborate on the fluidity of Black Beauty: "...attractiveness is based not only on the shape and size of the body, but also on how a woman or girl presents herself. Presentation includes grooming, dress, posture, and whether she walks and moves as though she is proud of herself and her culture" (p. 21). The fluidity of beauty among Black women is reflected within this study as themes regarding self-presentation emerged as well as overlapping of themes regarding confidence and inner beauty as its subset.

Similarly to Parker's findings (1995), the attitude of a Black woman plays a significant role in defining appearance and attractiveness. In fact, although physical features are taken into

consideration—especially during first impressions—attitude can overshadow outer beauty when determining attractiveness among individuals. For example, a person with a negative attitude may not be seen as attractive even if she has beautiful physical features.

Within this study, confidence emerged as a subset of self-presentation. Although Parker et al. (2005) and Flynn and Fitzgibbon (1998) reference confidence as a variable of beauty, confidence was illustrated as an essential element of beauty in this study. Moreover, confidence was found to be an ingredient within other variables reflecting attractiveness. For example, personal style is important when defining beauty among Black women because it illustrates confidence along with other factors. Also, some Black women believe that racial identity is important because understanding one's race increases individual confidence, which is considered to be attractive. Confidence was also found to be a barrier in the effects of social comparison behavior. In other words, some Black women may recognize pressures from the media to conform to beauty standards of the dominant culture. However, Black women use individual confidence as a shield against social comparison behavior and/or body dissatisfaction due to social comparison behavior.

Although it was not one of the first components Black women think of when defining beauty, style is considered to be an important dimension of attractiveness among Black women. According to Parker et al., (1995), style is the communication and presentation to others through appearance and attitude. It involves figuring out what kind of dress complements one's personality as well as having confidence in one's style (Parker et al., 1995). Within this study, the findings show style to be important in the Black community because it promotes individualization, creativity, and identity among its people. Furthermore, as previously

discussed, style is included as a factor when defining beauty because confidence is illustrated through one's attire which is viewed as highly attractive within the Black community.

Body Shape

Studies show that Black women are not necessarily less concerned with appearance than Caucasian women; however, ideal standards of thinness are often not as readily adopted and culturally valued by the Black community (Allan et al., 1993; Hesse-Biber et al., 2004; Flynn, & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Molloy & Herzberger, 1998; Parker et al., 1995). In addition, African American women are often less concerned with weight as compared to Caucasian women when determining their body satisfaction, actually preferring a heavier body weight than ideal standards of thinness (Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Frisby, 2004; Smith et al., 1997). This study does show that the participants desire a heavier body shape overall than White women. In addition, Black women desire to be slim, but not the ideal thinness discussed within the literature review. However, there were not any findings that suggest that Black women are necessarily less concerned with their weight or body shape than Caucasian women.

Previous research also suggests that Black women do not feel pressured to adopt this ideal thinness because the physical appearances of models in media images are more related to Caucasian Americans'. In addition, lack of perceived similarity influences them not to compare to or adopt White standards of attractiveness (Allan et al., 1993; Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Parker et al., 1995; Wood 1989). This concept was supported by some of the participants. While race may play a role for many participants in the facilitation of the lack of perceived similarity, the participants found media images of models not to be a reflection of women in general regardless of race. Another important reason Black women do not adopt White beauty standards of attractiveness is the body shapes between most Black and White women are physically

different. Black women prefer beauty standards concerning body shape that are more attainable and similar to their actual body type.

Skin Complexion

According to Hill (2002), skin complexion may actually be a stronger predictor of perceived attractiveness among Black women than weight. In addition, a light-skinned complexion may be considered more attractive and ideal than a dark-skinned complexion. In this study, a light or fair skin complexion has been identified as the preferred skin complexion within the Black community. In addition to historic ideas of White supremacy, the media also influenced skin complexion beauty ideals by seldomly featuring dark skinned models as well as digitally editing dark skin to appear lighter. However, the findings within this study do not support skin complexion as a stronger predictor of perceived attractiveness among Black women than weight. In fact, many of the participants believe that beauty ideals concerning skin complexion are dissolving. Black women do feel a sense of pressure to have a light skinned complexion. However, Black women accept their skin complexion because they believe it cannot be changed. In addition, Black women of all skin complexions are starting to become more represented in the media.

A concept exists within the Black community known as the Light skin versus Dark skin issue. Altabe (1996) suggests dark skinned women sometimes feel devalued and/or not as beautiful as light-skinned women. On the other hand, some light-skinned Black women do not feel as connected and/or excluded from the Black community for being too light or close to the White race. The participants recognize that this idea exists within the Black community. Although there are some people who view light skin as most ideal, the dark-skin complexion is not viewed as unattractive. In fact, all of the participants who identify as dark skinned reported

satisfaction with their body. On the other hand, some participants who identify as light skinned acknowledged that at times they are perceived as arrogant or “stuck up.” Two participants preferred to a darker skin complexion.

Hair Texture

Similar to Byrd & Tharps (2001), participants suggest that many Black women also view straight or wavy long hair as the ideal standard of attractiveness. This is due to ideas of White Supremacy as well as to the lack of Black women featured in the media with their natural hair texture. However, another important reason Black women prefer a straight or wavy hair texture is Black hair is very challenging to maintain and upkeep in its natural state. Nevertheless, more Black women are starting to embrace their natural hair, while others believe that going natural is just a trend and a straight hair texture is still preferred.

Byrd & Tharps (2001) support the idea that hair is often used as a symbol reflecting the struggle between racial identity and assimilation among Black women. There was no evidence in this study supporting that concept. However, findings revealed that the media portrays two different depictions of Black women based on how they wear their hair. Instead, many participants expressed hair to be an important part of their individual identity, with hair texture and styles contributing to how they will be perceived by others.

Finally, some of participants did acknowledge a sense of pressure to adopt White beauty standards of attractiveness concerning hair. Specifically, some participants feel pressure to wear certain hairstyles, classified as “professional,” in order to secure a job. Overall, participants believe that many Black women in general are dissatisfied with their hair regardless of the hair texture.

Social Comparison Behavior

Social comparison theory suggests that the social environment can affect the way a person forms self-evaluations, and the results thereof. The impact of engaging in social comparison behavior can change depending on one's social environment (Wood, 1989). Morse and Gergen's (1970) study on social comparison found that casual exposure to others can influence an individual's momentary concept of self. People often compare themselves to others within their environment and in the media to determine their self-worth (Morse & Gergen, 1970). This research did show the social environment can impact who Black women compare to and whether or not they adopt White standards of beauty. Some participants did acknowledge when growing up in a predominately Caucasian and/or heavily diverse community with other races in addition to African Americans, strong pressures exist to engage in social comparison behavior to media images and adopt White standards of beauty—especially during adolescence.

Studies show comparison to idealized images through advertisements may be automatic or forced. Moreover, because this ideal beauty of thinness is unattainable by most women, comparisons to idealized images may cause anger, depression, and body image disturbance (Rudd & Lennon, 2000; Kim & Lennon, 2007). Those participants who acknowledged they adopted White beauty standards at one point in their life expressed that they were unhappy and dissatisfied with their body at the time because the beauty ideals were unattainable. However, participants were not willing to go through extreme measures to obtain beauty standards and most participants eventually rejected White beauty standards of attractiveness.

Social comparison theory also specifies that comparison of those who are dissimilar to one's self will have little or no impact on self-evaluation. Social comparison to those who are dissimilar can assist in identifying the spectrum of possibilities. However, those individuals will not be used as references in defining beauty (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989). This was true for

some participants, but not all. In addition, some participants found dissimilarity in the body shape of media images as a whole, more so than race. In other words, media images looked dissimilar to women in general regardless of race.

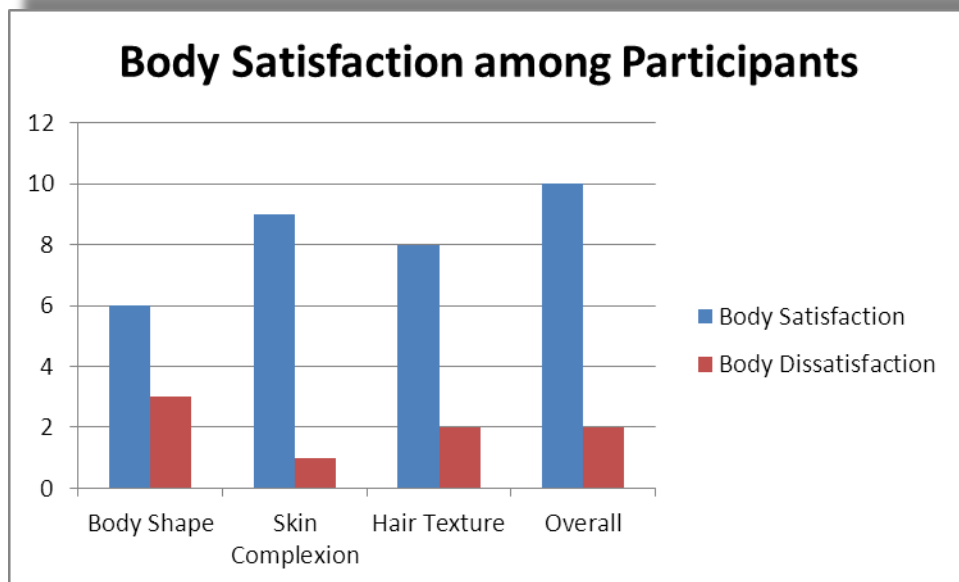
Racial Identity

According to Parker et al. (1995), racial identity is deeply embedded into how African American women define beauty: “Beauty is defined less in relation to static images and more in terms of performance competence in a multicultural world marked by conflict as well as egalitarian ideals” (p. 111). Some of the participants believe having a strong racial identity provides a better understanding of the individual. Moreover, a strong racial and personal identity illustrates confidence and individual and cultural pride which is viewed as attractive in the Black community. However, other participants did not feel racial identity was an important factor when defining beauty.

Hesse-Biber et al. (2004) suggest the way in which African American women adopt different standards of beauty is largely dependent on their racial identity. As racial identity increases among Black women, the more likely they are to reject ideal standards of thinness and attractiveness communicated by the dominant culture. There were some participants who recognized this pattern among Black women, while others do not believe a relationship exists between racial identity and social comparison behavior or standards of beauty.

Body Satisfaction among African American Women

Figure 5.1 Body Satisfaction among Participants



Are African Women overall satisfied with their bodies? Figure 5.1 illustrates that most of the participants are satisfied with their bodies. Body shape is the most concerning variable in respect to body satisfaction. Although participants believe that many Black women are dissatisfied with their bodies, it is not reflected within this sample. In addition, participants were most satisfied with their skin complexion.

Significant themes were highlighted within this study. However, it is important to recognize that responses to research questions varied among participants. Specifically, some participants believed that many Black women are satisfied, while others believe that only few are satisfied. Moreover, it is important to understand that all Black women do not adopt the same beauty standards of attractiveness, feel a sense of pressure to conform to White standards of attractiveness, and/or engage in social comparison behavior. Finally, some but not all women are satisfied with their bodies.

Implications

The Role of Music Videos

Many participants within this study do not read fashion magazines and/or frequently engage in exposure to fashion models within the media. Instead, most of their media influence is from exposure to music videos, reality television, and Black celebrities in the music industry. When asking participants questions about the media, they often referenced to African American celebrities such as Beyonce, Jennifer Hudson, Jill Scott, and Ericka Badu. In addition, Kim Kardashian and the reality television series *Basketball Wives* were mentioned. According to the participants, celebrities within the media often illustrate the ideal hour-glass figure body shape most desired in the Black community. This finding may suggest that although many Black women are not adopting White standards of attractiveness, it does not necessarily mean African American women are less influenced by the media or media images. Instead, their source of reference for beauty standards measurements is different from that of the dominant race. Furthermore, this implication is important because the media may play a larger role in the lives of Black women's body image and satisfaction than what has been suggested from previous research.

Middle Range Ideal Beauty Standard

Standards of beauty variables most relevant to Black women appear to represent extremes: light versus dark, curly versus straight, skinny versus "thick" and curvaceous. Findings support that these extremes are softening, that preferences/standards are becoming more flexible and open along the continuum, perhaps even shifting to a middle point on the continuum as medium skin tones, soft curls, and healthy but curvy shapes become ideal. As Black women begin to embrace who they are along with an increase of mainstream acceptance regarding the

diversity of Black women's hair texture and skin complexion, a middle range beauty standard may be emerging among Black women. For example, when participants described their ideal body shape, they were very particular about how they preferred to be healthy but not "too skinny." Due to the rise of the Natural Hair Movement, Black women are moving away from straight hair as the ideal hair texture. Instead, participants prefer a hair texture between straight and natural hair identified as a soft and wavy hair texture. Finally, some participants acknowledge that although light skin is the preferred skin complexion within the Black community, a medium skin complexion has been accepted as ideal among Black women. All of these examples may indicate that beauty standards are becoming more flexible and a middle range beauty ideal standard is starting to emerge. One participant stated that she preferred to be a medium skin complexion in order to be accepted by everyone. However, no evidence has been found illustrating the cause of the emerging middle range ideal beauty standard. This is important because a shift in beauty standards of attractiveness may impact Black women's body satisfaction. Specifically, the rise of flexible beauty standards of attractiveness may cause Black women to feel less pressured to conform to specific extreme beauty standards within the Black community.

Rejection of Media Ideals among Women

Many participants expressed their ability to reject White standards of attractiveness is due to the lack of perceived similarity. The participants found media images of models not to be a reflection of women in general regardless of race. Previous literature illustrates that media images are considered to be idealized because the models presented in advertisements are an unrealistic representation of people and their lives (Kim & Lennon, 2007). Female models portrayed within advertisements are significantly underweight and thinner than the average

American woman, and this gap has increased over the decades (Bissell & Rask, 2010). Today, the average American woman is 5'4 and weighs 140 pounds; the average model portrayed in fashion magazines is 5'11 and weighs 117 pounds (Bissell & Rask, 2010). In addition, the average model today is more than 20% underweight and the use of digital editing creates flawless media images that make them even less realistic (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004; Kim & Lennon, 2007). This finding is important because it questions the idea that: if media images are dissimilar to women in general then why do Caucasian women not also reject these unrealistic standards of attractiveness within American culture? These findings may suggest there is a possibility to dissolve and/or shift beauty standards of attractiveness within American culture.

Limitations

Defining Social Comparison and Racial Identity

Within this study, the concept of social comparison behavior was defined differently among participants. Some participants interpreted the term *social comparison* as a behavior “to look as to others as frame of reference to measure beauty,” while other participants viewed social comparison as a behavior “to look to others in order to model their entire being.” Therefore, this may have influenced their responses within the interview. In addition, some of the participants were unsure how to define racial identity while others were challenged to conceptualize racial identity as it related to beauty standards of attractiveness and social comparison behavior. Moreover, this too may have influenced how they responded to interview questions.

Participants' Self-identification

All of the demographics along with dress size, hair texture, and skin complexion was self-reported by the participants. Analyses were conducted based on variables and demographics. For example, findings show that some participants who identified with light skin expressed they

preferred to be a darker skin complexion. In addition, some of the participants who were raised in a predominately Caucasian and/or heavily diverse community with other races in addition to African American experienced strong pressures to engage in social comparison behavior with media images and to adopt White standards of beauty. Misrepresentation of participants' demographics and beauty variables can influence the data analysis, but no evidence suggests misrepresentation of participants' background information.

African American Women vs. Caucasian Women

The study explored many concepts regarding body image among African American women as it relates to the dominant culture and race. Themes emerged recognizing the difference between Black and White women's beauty standards of attractiveness. The purpose of this study was to explore Black women's perceptions of differences—if any—between Black and White beauty standards of attractiveness for women. Caucasian women were not included in the sample of this study; such inclusion would be necessary to fully understand whether beauty standards truly differ among cultures.

Future Research

Overall, participants' responses were divided into two different categories. One group of participants believe Black women are becoming more empowered within themselves and their culture. Moreover, those individuals believe that ideal beauty standards concerning skin complexion and hair texture are dissolving, a variety of Black women are featured in the media, and Black women are overall satisfied with their bodies. Conversely, a cluster of participants believes that skin complexion beauty ideals still exist and Black women are dissatisfied with their hair texture and overall body. It is recommended that future research be conducted in order to explore the bifurcation in participants' responses. Specifically, research is needed that explores

if some Black women are sharing distinctive experiences and/or influences that may impact their perception of Black women's body image and/or body satisfaction.

A common statement used among participants is "I cannot change who I am." When participants expressed that they didn't feel pressured to conform to either body shape or skin complexion beauty standards, they mostly responded that they accept who they are because they cannot change it. Therefore, future studies should examine if Black women are truly empowered and accept their bodies because they love who are and what they look like or if the attitude is more so defeatist in that because they cannot change it, they might as well accept it. Perhaps an interesting question would be if Black women could change their body shape or skin complexion, would they change it?

Past research show that African American women partially judge their level of attractiveness based on men's desires of their particular race. Black women believe that Black men prefer larger women. In addition, research shows that Black men are more likely to date an overweight woman than White men which supports black women perceptions (Molloy, & Herzberger, 1998; Cachelin, Rebek, Chung, & Pelayo, 2002; Demarest, & Allen, 2000). Women of color believe that Black men find a woman to be shapely "thick" as most attractive. Black women from Hesse-Biber et al (2004)'s same focus group comments on their perspectives on men's desires of attractiveness. "Guys want you a big butt, big chest and just stacked, they just want to be very healthy...They don't want anybody that is real real skinny, that can't get up" (Weight, Dieting and Appearance section, para. 2). Additional comments were made from Parker's et al. (1995) research, "I think pretty matters more to guys than me...They want them to be fine, you know what guys like, shapely. Black guys like black girls who are thick ---full figured" (p. 108). Since Black men prefer larger women, Black women do not have to fit into the

idea of “thinness” and still satisfy the opposite sex desires of attractiveness (Molloy, & Herzberger, 1998). Moreover, the results of this study illustrate that some Black women began to challenge their own looks, bodies and personalities when Black men decide to date outside their race. Therefore, future research should explore the impact of men desires on beauty standards of attractiveness and African American women’s body satisfaction.

Although 83% of participants stated they are satisfied with their bodies, many participants expressed they were more influenced and pressured by beauty standards of attractiveness when they were younger. To that end, understanding body satisfaction among African American female adolescents is recommended for future research. Specifically, the following questions are worthwhile: “Are adolescent Black females more likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies than Black adults and if so, why?” and “Is it something that can be prevented or is it just part of the developmental stage?” and finally, “What occurs as adolescents become adults that increases their body satisfaction or helps them to be less influenced beauty ideals?”

Past research suggests Black women have greater body satisfaction than Caucasian women (Allan et al., 1993; Altabe, 1996; Cachelin et al., 2002; Demarest & Allen, 2000; Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Hesse-Biber et al., 2004; Miller et al., 2000; Parker et al., 1995; Patel & Gray, 2001). However, Flynn and Fitzgibbon (1998) criticize many studies for using weight satisfaction as the only means of evaluating body satisfaction. Although separate beauty standards exist among Black women, there were not any findings within this study that suggest Black women perceive themselves as having a more positive body satisfaction than Caucasian Americans. This study was not intended to measure if Black women have a more positive body satisfaction than Caucasian women. However, this exploratory study has provided an opportunity to understand more in depth how African American women think and feel about

their bodies. Moreover, this study has introduced other variables such as hair texture and skin complexion in addition to body shape when measuring beauty standards of attractiveness. Therefore, now that more data has been collected on self-perception and body image among Black women, further research is recommended to re-explore and measure if African American women have greater body satisfaction than Caucasian women.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how African American women think and feel about their bodies. Specifically, this study examines how Black women define beauty among variables such as body shape, skin complexion, and hair texture, if African American women ages 18-30 compare themselves to media images, and if comparison to these media images impacts African American women's body satisfaction. In addition, this study explores if African American women feel pressure to adopt beauty standards within the dominant culture, the role of racial identity, and its relationship with social comparison behavior.

The findings of this exploratory research by interviewing twelve African American women illustrate that different beauty standards of attractiveness exist in the Black community within U.S. culture. Even though interviewees articulated standards of beauty for women in the Black community, there was a lack of uniformity in how these women felt about their own attractiveness: some identified with the Black beauty standards, while others did not. In addition, opinions varied regarding Black women's engagement in social comparison behavior and its relationship with racial identity as well as body satisfaction.

Limitations exist regarding how Black women define social comparison behavior and racial identity, self-identification of participants, and the lack of Caucasian women included in this study. However, this research still provides rich data exploring Black women's perceptions

of beauty among other issues within the Black community. Future research, including the exploration of other age groups of Black women along with other suggestions provided in this conclusion, is recommended.

While much information exists on the relationship between body image and self-perception, past research has primarily focused on college-aged Caucasian women. This study was able to provide a thorough exploration regarding self perception and body image among African American women ages 18-30. Moreover, this study not only contributes to the lack of research between the intersection of body image and African American women, but it also provides rich data in respect to the African American subculture.

Research supports that many African American women have not adopted the ideal thinness as a standard of attractiveness (Allan, Mayo, Kelly, & Michel, 1993; Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Parker et al., 1995). In fact, some studies suggest that the models in idealized images are too different from Black women; that is, relevant standards of comparison are not readily available for African American women (Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Frisby, 2004; Parker et al., 1995). This study was able to narrow down the dimensions of defining perceived similarity of idealized images among Black women by illustrating that media images are not a reflection of women in general as some participants found dissimilarity in the body shape of media images as a whole, more so than race.

Past research show that African American women are considered to have a more positive body satisfaction than Caucasian women (Allan et al., 1993; Altabe, 1996; Cachelin, Rebek, Chung, & Pelayo, 2002; Demarest & Allen, 2000; Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Hesse-Biber, Howling, Leavy, & Lovejoy, 2004; Miller et al., 2000; Patel & Gray, 2001; Parker et al., 1995). However, Flynn and Fitzgibbon (1998) criticize many studies for using weight satisfaction as a

primary measurement to evaluate body satisfaction. In addition to body shape, this study was able to explore additional variables of body image including skin complexion and hair texture. Furthermore, this study has illustrated that body image among African American women is a very complex phenomenon where many elements such as self-presentation, style, health, media, community etc. impact the way African American women think and feel about their bodies.

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Appendix A - Women's Dress Size Chart

Table A.1 Women's Dress Size Chart

	XS	S		M		L		XL		XXL	
SIZE	(2)	(4)	(6)	(8)	(10)	(12)	(14)	(16)	(18)	(20)	(22)
Bust	33"	34"	35"	36"	37"	38½"	40"	41½"	43"	45"	47"
Waist	25"	26"	27"	28"	29"	30½"	32"	33½"	35"	37"	39"
Hips	35"	36"	37"	38"	39"	40½"	42"	43½"	45"	47"	49"
Arm (Reg.)	30½"	30¾"	31"	31¼"	31½"	31¾"	32"	32¼"	32¾"	32¾"	32¾"
Arm (Pet.)	29"	29¼"	29½"	29¾"	30"	30¼"	30½"	30¾"	30¾"	31½"	31¼"
Arm (Tall)	31¾"	32"	32¼"	32½"	32¾"	33"	33¼"	33½"	33¾"	33¾"	34"

Source: <http://www.eddiebauer.com/custserv/custserv.jsp?sectionId=102&subId=303>

Appendix B - Interview Questions

Objective 1: How do Black women define beauty and standards of attractiveness?

** Although beauty is in the “eye of the beholder”, there is still a general consensus regarding what is considered beautiful within a culture. This is known as the standard of attractiveness. This term will be used through this interview.*

- 1) How do you personally define beauty? Attractiveness?
- 2) How is beauty defined in the Black community? Attractiveness?
- 3) Do you consider your own appearance attractive? Why or why not?

1.1 Does weight influence level of attractiveness?

- 1) In your opinion, are Black women striving to become a certain body shape? Explain
- 2) In your opinion, within the Black community, how important is body shape?
- 3) Do you believe that Black women with a large body shape are considered attractive within the Black community? Explain.

1.2 Does skin complexion and hair texture influence level of attractiveness?

- 1) How would you describe the preferred skin complexion among Black women? Hair texture?
- 2) In your opinion, within the Black community, how important is skin complexion? Hair texture?
- 3) What other factors do you take into consideration when determining Black women's beauty and attractiveness?
- 4) *Do you think a strong sense of personal style and attitude is important when defining African American beauty? Explain

1.3 Does racial identity impact level of attractiveness?

- 1) How would you define racial identity?

- 2) When you hear the term racial identity, are there particular personality traits that come to mind? Explain
- 3) Do you think it is important for Black women to have a strong racial identity to be considered attractive? Explain.

Objective 2: Do the media impact Black women's body satisfaction?

****The media has a tremendous amount of influence on people and their preferences. Let's talk about body satisfaction for American women as a whole and the role of media images.***

- 1) In your opinion, how do mainstream media impact body satisfaction?

2.1 How does body shape impact body satisfaction?

- 1) Do you think Black women's body satisfaction is influenced by beauty standards depicted in mainstream media concerning body shape?

2.2 How do variables of skin complexion and hair texture influence body satisfaction?

- 1) Do you think Black women's body satisfaction is influenced by beauty standards depicted in mainstream media concerning skin complexion? Hair texture?
- 2) Overall, do you think Black women are satisfied with their skin complexion? Hair texture?

2.3 How does racial identity impact body satisfaction?

- 3) In your opinion, do you think having a strong racial identity impacts body satisfaction among Black women? If so, how?

Objective 3: Do African American women feel a sense of pressure to conform to White standards of attractiveness?

3.1 Do Black women feel pressured to adopt White standards of attractiveness concerning weight?

- 1) Do you think that Black and White women have different body shape standards?

Explain.

- 2) If so, are you more likely to identify with Black or White women's weight standards of attractiveness?

3.2 Do Black women feel pressured to adopt White standards of attractiveness concerning skin complexion and hair texture?

**Now we will refocus on beauty standards of attractiveness within the African American community*

- 1) Do you think that American culture has set an expectation for Black women to wear certain hair styles in order to be considered attractive as depicted in the mainstream media?
- 2) If so, do you conform to hair expectations that are depicted in the mainstream media?
- 3) Do you think that American culture has set an expectation for Black women to be a certain skin complexion in order to be considered attractive?
- 4) If so, do you conform to skin complexion expectations that are set by American culture?
- 5) Within the Black community, do you think Black women feel obligated to look similar to White women in order to be considered attractive?

Objective 4: To what extent do Black women engage in social comparison behavior to media ideals?

- 1) Do you compare yourself to White models in fashion magazines, television and other advertising mediums when evaluating your own attractiveness? Black models? (How often?)
- 2) Do you compare yourself to other Black women including friends and family when evaluating your own attractiveness? White women? (How often?)

4.1 To what extent do Black women perceive similarity with fashion media images?

- 1) In general, do you think fashion models portrayed in media images are a reflection of Black women? Why or why not?
- 2) When looking at fashion media images, can you imagine yourself being a fashion model? Why or why not?
- 3) Overall, do you think you look similar to the fashion models represented in media images? What about weight specifically? Skin complexion? Hair Texture?

Objective 5: What is the impact of social comparison behavior among African American females aged 18-30?

5.1 How does social comparison behavior impact overall body satisfaction?

- 1) Describe your ideal body shape. Do you feel your appearance and body shape reflects this ideal image? Explain.
- 2) Describe your ideal skin complexion and hair texture. Do you feel your skin complexion and hair texture reflect this ideal image?
- 3) Are you happy and/or satisfied with your weight? Why or why not? Skin complexion? Hair texture?
- 4) Is there a body part in particular that you are not happy and/or satisfied with? Explain.
- 5) What do you feel is your best physical feature?
- 6) Overall, are you satisfied with your body?
- 7) In your opinion, would you say that few, many or most Black women are satisfied with their overall body satisfaction? Explain.

5.2 What is the relationship between social comparison behavior and racial identity among Black women aged 18-30?

- 1) Do you feel that racial identity influence Black women to compare themselves to media images? If so, how?
- 2) Do you feel that racial identity influence Black women to compare themselves to other Black women? If so, how?
- 3) Do you feel that racial identity influence Black women to compare themselves to White women? If so, how?
- 4) Do you believe that your racial identity influences you to compare yourself to Black women instead of White women or vice versa? Explain

5.3 Do images of models from various backgrounds have a negative effect and/or positive effect on the body satisfaction of African American women?

- 1) What type of media are you exposed to on a regular basis? **Take a moment to think of people that you see within the media. These are the models I would like you to refer to when answering the following questions.*
- 2) Do you compare yourself to non-Caucasian models in fashion magazines, television and other advertising mediums when evaluating your own attractiveness?
- 3) Do you think that media images of non-Caucasian models impact body satisfaction among African American women? If so, how?
- 4) Do you think that media images of Black models specifically impact body satisfaction among African American women? If so, how?

In addition, background questions will include:

- 1) What dress size do you normally purchase?
- 2) Would you classify your skin complexion as: Light, Medium or Dark

- 3) Is your hair texture natural or straight?
- 4) What is your height?
- 5) What social class do you identify with?
- 6) If you had to describe where you are from, what would you say?
- 7) Describe the people in the community in which you grew up?
- 8) What is your education level?
- 9) What is your age?

Appendix C - Scholarly Manuscript

Fulfillment of this thesis requirement has been met by providing a scholarly manuscript based on the study's findings to the student's major professor, Dr. Melody LeHew. In addition, this manuscript will be submitted for review to the Clothing & Textiles Research Journal.