

Body Image Perception and Dieting Trends of College Students

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Introduction

In the world where body image acceptance and appreciation are vital parts of life among many Americans, there is a great amount of peer pressure placed upon young American adults to have a model perfect body. A significant amount of pressure to be socially accepted is placed upon college students, in particular. Everyone looks a certain way, dresses in the same clothing and goes out to the same spots in town. Although it's not necessarily a stated fact that going to college makes you more self-aware and self-conscious, for those who have experienced college life, they know the truth. Body cathexis, the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction people have with their bodies and their bodies' separate parts (e.g., face, breasts, hips, waist, thighs, and feet) is an integral part of self-concept, body image, and self-esteem (Trautmann, Lokken-Worthy & Lokken, 2007). The truth is that when you enter college, you are faced with a more subjective peer response, new lifestyle routines and new eating habits. Because of all these negligible factors, many students resort to binge dieting, unhealthy eating habits and hazardous health decisions.

College women report high levels of body dissatisfaction and weight concerns. Concerns about one's weight, dieting, and related behaviors are so prevalent among college-aged women that they often are considered to be a normative part of the female college experience (Celio, Luce, Bryson, Winzelberg, Cunnig & Rockwell, 2006). Upon entering college, students are faced with the self-unexplored territory of a college lifestyle and surroundings. Many students become more self-conscious of their body image perception, and resort to dieting and irregular consumption patterns. Body image dissatisfaction and low self-esteem are central factors in

developing eating disorders. Experimentally induced dieting failures lead to decreases in self-esteem, which may make subsequent restraint efforts more difficult (Baird, McIntyre & Theim, 2007).

By understanding the positive and negative connotations of self-perception and hazardous dieting, we can better understand how proper health plays a vital role in our daily lives. By increasing awareness through this research study and engaging college students by questioning their own hazardous habits, we can set forth for a better college atmosphere overall.

Literature Review

Body-image dissatisfaction is not uncommon and can adversely affect individuals' psychosocial functioning and quality of life. "Various surveys and a meta-analysis implicate a worsening of body image over the past several decades, especially among women and possibly among men" (Cash, Morrow, Hrabosky & Perry, 2004, p. 1081). The research conducted by Cash, Morrow, Hrabosky & Perry (2004) conveyed a cross-sectional study that examined changes in multiple facets of body image among 3,127 college students from 1983 through 2001; the same standardized assessment was used in 22 studies conducted within the same university. Results confirmed non-Black women's increasing body-image dissatisfaction until the early or mid-1990s, after which, significant improvements occurred in terms of overall body-image evaluation and overweight preoccupation among both non-Black and Black women, despite heavier body weights. A reduction over time in women's investment in their appearance was also evident. Men's body image was relatively stable during the 19-year period (Cash et al., 2004).

One example of hazardous health decisions includes binge drinking and high levels of alcohol intake that can contribute to an extremely unhealthy lifestyle and can cause weight gain.

Throughout a recent investigation conducted by Robert L. Peralta (2002), students reported altering their eating and drinking patterns, self-induced purging, or exercising to stave off unwanted weight gain believed to be caused by alcohol use (Peralta, 2002). It is also known that overweight and obesity proportions have reached an epidemic high in all age groups in the United States; this causes a major risk factor for premature mortality and morbidity. “Currently, two thirds of US adults are overweight and more than 15% of US adolescents are obese. Between 1991 and 1997, the greatest increase in obesity was found among 18- to 29-year-olds and those with some college education, the prevalence of obesity further increased 14% to 21% among those with some college education” (Huang, Harris & Lee, 2003, p. 83).

“To meet societal expectations of an ideal body, individuals use appearance-management behaviors such as exercise, dieting, surgery, and apparel selection” (Rudd & Lennon, 2000, p. 153). Researchers have found a relationship between one’s self-concept and the clothing one wears (Dubler & Gurel, 1984). How one feels about one’s self appears to affect clothing choices, and reciprocally, the clothing one wears affects one’s feelings about the self (Kwon, 1991). Given the link between body-image dissatisfaction and eating disorders and the link between body-image dissatisfaction and clothing avoidance behaviors found in previous research conducted by Kwon & Parham (1994), as well as research conducted by Shim, Kotsiopoulos & Knoll (1990), it seems likely that there is a positive correlation between the presence of disordered eating pathology will also impact clothing practices.

Studies have shown that there is a strong correlation between body dissatisfaction and negative peer pressure. With this, it is only logical to conclude that our peers are the main influence over our body image perception. Although many may state that they could care less about their overall appearance and claim that they do not care what others think, the truth is that

everyone cares. It does not matter if it is the tiniest amount of care; the fact is that they care. When a student endeavors into dangerous acts and consequences of unhealthy practices regarding their body, someone needs to step aside and question the reasoning behind all of this. Have we all inflicted a self-induced masochism? Honestly, this is the only logical conclusion when we face the fact that life threatening body conditions would not even be a factor in our world today if peer accepted everyone just as they are, no strings attached.

Methodology

To collect data for this research report, a questionnaire (Appendix A) was randomly distributed to 30 University of Florida students enrolled in the “Writing for Agricultural and Natural Resources” class. The questionnaire consisted of 14 questions: four multiple choice, four Likert Scale, two ranking, one short answer, and three demographics. Two in-depth student interviews were also conducted (Appendix B); one was interview with a female and the other with a male.

The purposes of the questionnaire and interviews were to assess how college students perceive their body image and how they participate in dieting trends—especially upon entrance to college. The main reason for conducting this research is to have a sufficient amount of evidence to present to college students upon their entrance into their choice college. It is a whole new world and scenario, as mentioned before, and it is vital for prospective students to know the danger and serious risks associated with malpractice dieting procedures and ill body image perceptions. Students need to be aware of the fact that they are here to obtain a college degree, not to look like a super model. This information allowed the researcher to determine what measures must be taken to better inform students about the potential risks associated with

extreme dieting and/or poor body image perception, so that they may better enjoy their college experience without the worry of irrelevant priorities.

Minimal costs were incurred for printing; the total amount spent equaled \$9.00 for 30 questionnaires. The greatest cost for the researcher was the time and commitment spent on the project as a whole. Time requirements included: seven hours of internet research, two hours collecting and interpreting data through the questionnaires and two interviews, and six hours constructing the research report.

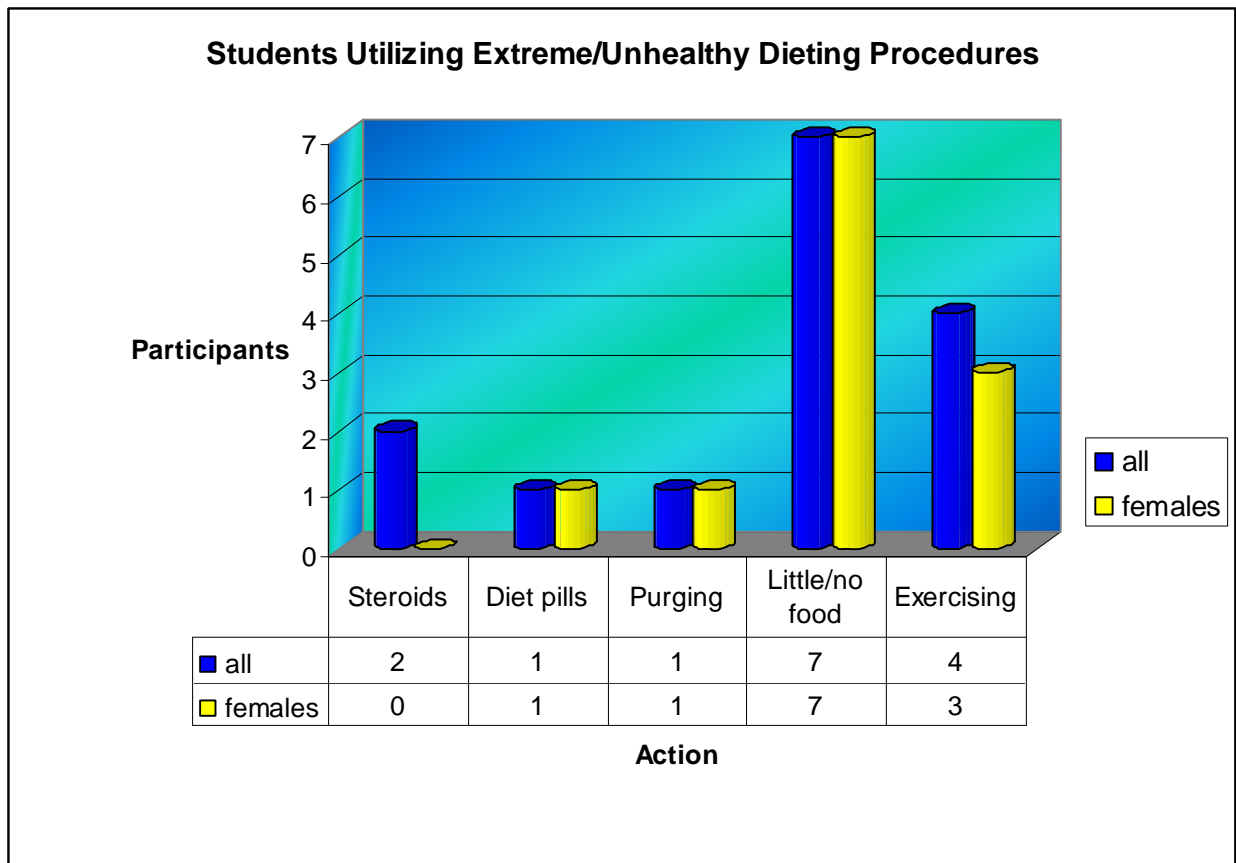
Results

After distributing the questionnaire to 30 participants, the 22 returned surveys were analyzed in-depth for pertinent information to this research study. Eighty-two percent (n=18) of the students were female and 18% (n=4) were male. The average student age was 21 years. Student majors ranged from animal science to wildlife ecology and conservation. In-depth interviews were conducted with one male and one female.

When asked whether they agree or not to the statement: "I tend to always be on some sort of a "diet" and/or exercise on a regular basis," 50% (n=11) agreed with this statement. Of those students (n=11), 91% (n=10) agreed that they have "participated in a "diet" or have exercised more upon my entrance to the University of Florida." When respondents were asked to compare how they evaluate their body image compared to how their doctor evaluates them, 45% (n=10) evaluated their body image to be less acceptable than what their doctors consider their bodies to be. When questioned what influences their eating habits the most, majority of students agreed that they "eat food that tastes good, but is not necessarily healthy for me, because it relieves stress."

Thirty-six percent of the respondents (n=8) agreed with the statement: “I became more self-conscious of the way I look upon entering the University of Florida.” When asked if they have utilized any of the following to influence their dieting, 9% (n=2) have used steroids, 5% (n=1) have used diet pills, 5% (n=1) have purged their food, 32% (n=7) have eaten little or no food at all, and 18% (n=4) have exercised heavily or in an extreme manner. Taken from the previously mentioned sample, the percentage of females respondents that utilized these practices were as follows: 0% (n=0) utilized steroids, 100% (n=1) used diet pills, 100% (n=1) have purged their food, 100% (n=7) have eaten little or no food at all, and 75% (n=3) have exercised heavily or in an extreme manner. (Please refer to Figure 1)

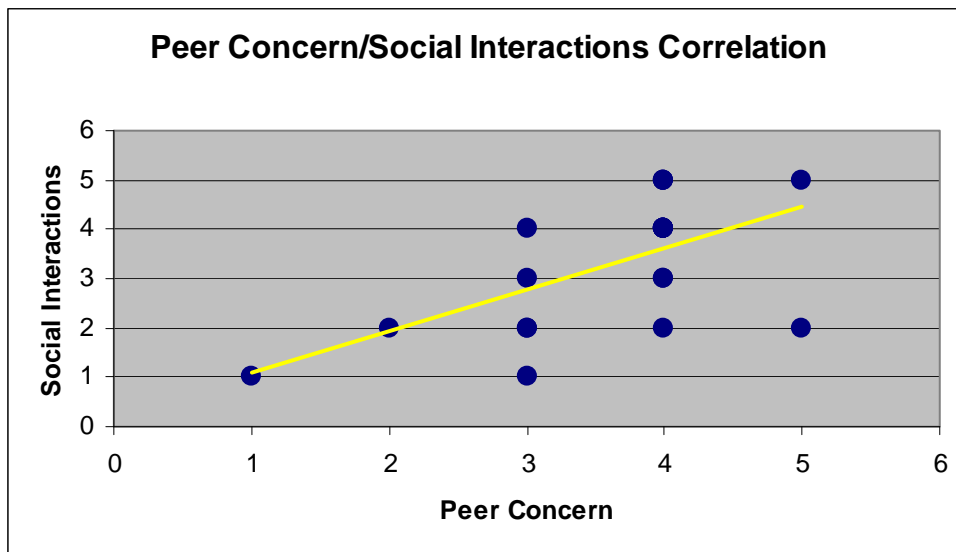
Figure 1



Ninety-one percent (n=20) of the respondents agreed with the statement: “I am concerned with the way my peers perceive the way I look.” All participants (n=22) agreed that the grade they receive in a class is the most important to them, ranking above social interactions and looking good for class.

When looking at comparable relationships between the questions asked, there was a 0.6 positive correlation between participants who are concerned with the way their peers perceive them (question 7) and self image perception affecting social interactions (question 8). With a ranking of “5” being the most applicable, the correlation is represented below in figure 2:

Figure 2



In other words, participants that agreed with the fact that they are concerned with the way their peers perceive them also agreed that their self image affects their social interactions. There is a positive correlation and a direct relationship between the responses for the two questions asked in the distributed questionnaire.

The two students interviewed had completely different ideals when it comes to not only body image, but exercising altogether. When asked if they feel that there is a certain amount of peer pressure to look or appear a certain way, respondent one (female) stated “Yes I do feel that there is peer pressure placed on the students to look a certain way,” while respondent two (male) stated “No, myself, personally, I don’t feel pressured to look a certain way, I’ve never been judged on my appearance.” When asked if they feel that the way they perceive their body affects their participation in social activities, respondent one stated “Yes, I won’t go out with my boyfriends friends to lake Wauburg and I didn’t go into the water because I didn’t like the way I looked in my bathing suit in front of my boyfriend’s friends,” while respondent two stated “No, I basically do whatever I want.” Both interviewees had dynamically different views and opinions regarding the research topic; please see Appendix B for in-depth notes of the interviews conducted.

Conclusion

The data collected from the 22 completed questionnaires and the two interviews indicated that college students require further education regarding the potential risks and hazards associated with extreme dieting and/or dissatisfaction of body image. The hypothesis that there is a greater need for information related to college students’ hazardous body image perception and dieting trends was proved correct. The fact that any college students participate in dangerous dieting trends, such as diet pills and purging, creates the acknowledgement that there are malpractice diets taking place and a need for a greater knowledge is imperative.

The questionnaire and the data collected targeted and responded to a serious health risk to the students at the University of Florida. The subject needs to be taken seriously and programs

need to be implemented to convey to incoming students that the 'ideal' body is not worth risking your health for. Although men and women had a completely different view regarding body image perception and dieting altogether, eighty percent of females agreed that they felt more self-conscious upon entering the University of Florida, while only 10 percent of males agreed. The in-depth interviews reinforced the hypothesis that females are more self-conscious and self-regulatory of their dieting behaviors than males. Most males responded that they eat what they want, when they want, when asked what the most important influence on their consumption patterns is.

Overall, it is healthy to watch what you eat and to maintain proper health; however, when extreme dieting and/or body image dissatisfaction occurs, there is a need for intervention. By understanding both the beneficial and detrimental affects of each dieting act and image perception, college students will be better prepared to responsibly care for themselves and to implement healthy lifestyle decisions.

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Timetable

This research project is to be completed over a two month time period beginning in the middle of October and ending in the middle of December. A list of approximate dates of when project components are expected to be completed is listed below:

October 16.....	Identify research problem
October 17.....	Develop a research plan
October 18.....	Begin researching the topic
October 22.....	Submit research guide
October 24.....	Draft questionnaire
October 29.....	Peer review questionnaire
October 31.....	Submit questionnaire
November 5.....	Conduct personal interviews
November 6.....	Revise Questionnaire
November 6.....	Project draft proposal
November 7.....	Peer review of proposal
November 9.....	Submit proposal
November 14.....	Distribute questionnaire
November 19.....	Revise proposal
November 26.....	Draft research report
November 30.....	Peer review research report
December 5.....	Submit research report

Projected Costs

This proposal projects a \$675.00 cost for conducting the research. The budget is broken down into the following elements:

Copies of questionnaires	\$15.00
Internet Research	\$110.00
Labor Costs	\$550.00
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TOTAL COSTS	\$675.00