

"YOU LOOK LIKE A SKINNY WHITE GIRL": BLACK CULTURAL EFFECTS ON THE
BODY IMAGE OF THIN BLACK WOMEN

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the

Valenti School of Communication

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

By

Donielle Pace

March 2016

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the impact that the thick body image expected of black women, which is portrayed through the black media culture, has on thin black women and their connection within their black culture. The biocultural model theory was used to study the emotional influence the thick body image has on the thin black woman. Using the qualitative data analysis method, one-on-one interviews were conducted among 10 black women who self-perceived themselves as thin. According to the study, thin black women do suffer from an emotional disconnect and displacement from their black culture because they do not possess the thick body image expected of them.

KEYWORDS: thick body image, skinny, black media culture, black women

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

One evening while I was at a friend's baby shower, I received one of the biggest insults from her mother. Her mother had not seen me since high school, and I know that I was a size or two bigger in high school. When I went up to her to speak and refresh her memory of me, she instantly said, "Hey, Donielle! Girl, you look," she paused to examine me from head to toe, "like you need to eat! Here! Get you a plate, and put a whole lot of food on there!" She shoved a plate in my hand.

I smiled to cover up the way I truly felt—like something was wrong with the way I looked. It was evident as I looked around at all of the black women in the clubhouse that I was the slimmest one, but now I felt like I was different from all of them, even my friends that I grew up with since elementary school. Most of them, if not all of them, had gained a sizeable amount of weight since high school and filled out in the butt, hips, and thigh areas—became "thick" as black people refer to when women are large in those areas. I was the only one who had not gained any weight; actually, I had lost weight since high school.

My friend's mom's comment was something I've heard all my life. Although I weighed more in high school, I was still never considered "thick" amongst my family and within my black community and culture. In school, I was teased and called names such as "Sticks" or "Toothpick." I've been given suggestions on what I should eat: "Girl, you need to eat a pork chop sandwich or sausage. You need some meat on your bones." I cannot count the number of times I have heard these comments and still hear them from many of the women in my family, including my mother. Even

worse, when I turn on the TV, listen to a rap song, or scroll down my timeline on Instagram, I am constantly reminded that my skinny body frame is abnormal within my black media culture. Many might ask, “What’s wrong with being skinny?” Truthfully, there should be nothing wrong with the way anyone looks whether they are skinny or a little overweight. (At this very moment I found myself deleting words that could offend someone who is overweight, and didn’t think twice about typing the word skinny. Really, either word—fat or skinny—can be offensive.) However, we all deal with images that suggest whom we should exemplify.

In the black culture, black women have a tough image to uphold. My family, especially my mom and aunt, always exclaim that I am too skinny and need to gain weight. My mom even went as far as to give me remedies that she thought could help me gain weight, like eating ice cream every night before bed or drinking shakes every day. Research regarding black women’s positive feelings about weight is usually evaluated through the lives of black women who consider themselves as having a “thick” body frame (Hesse-Biber, Howling, Leavy, & Lovejoy, 2004). This research reveals that the positive attitudes black women have about their body image is aligned with their upbringing from the women in their family who teach them to embrace a beauty opposite of the dominant White Western norms of beauty (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004). But that’s only one side of black women’s attitudes about their body image. Black women like me who don’t meet the standards of the ideal body image of a black woman are noticeably missing.

While the media touted thin, I was trying to figure out ways I could look like how I was expected to look as a black woman—thick. Between dealing with ridicule

and seeing my sisters fill out in those areas that made them thick, I would do anything I could in order to gain weight. Even after having kids, my weight dropped more. Nothing I ate or did made me look like the women who surrounded me in everyday life. I suffered from insecurities all my life and felt that things would be so much better for me if I could just get a big butt, wider hips, and thick thighs. My ideal weight was to be able to fit at least a size 9 because that would mean that I was at least in the beginning stage of being thick. In the black culture, “thick” means that a woman is sexy and beautiful. “Thick” is a term that plenty of black women who are of larger size use to describe themselves. In the black community and culture, “thick” is described as a woman who has thick thighs, a big round butt, and wide hips. For some, it may even mean a thin waist to accentuate those physical attributes.

Researchers who have compared influences on white and black women regarding the thin ideal found that black women were generally more accepting of their bodies (Greenberg & La Porte, 1996; Hesse-Biber et al., 2004; Powell & Kahn, 1995). Hesse-Biber et al.’s (2004) study reveals one reason why black women are not chasing the thin body image like white women. Consider this conversation held from a focus group in their study:

Joy: Fat and thick are two different things.

Pam: When a girl is thick she has sturdy thighs...

Sasha: In the right places

Pam: It’s not flabby stuff. A girl can have big arms but not be fat.

Joy: Guys want a big butt, big chest, and just stacked, they just want you to be very healthy.

Sasha: Big...beans and rice!

Joy: That's right!

Sharon: They don't want anybody who is real skinny, that can't get up. They want you to be fat and thick and healthy.

Sasha: I mean not overflowing fat.

Sharon: They want like Queen Latifah, proportioned, proportioned in certain areas.

Tiffany: All they care about is big butt, big chest, and what's between the legs.

Sasha: 36, 24, 36.

Joy: Yeah that's it, that's what you got to get.

They don't want skinny women?

Everyone: No! They want a big booty. Who would want a skinny woman?

(53)

While many researchers have set out to understand the disconnect of attitudes of body images between white women and black women, the research has only revealed one side of the story. There is a dissatisfaction within the black woman community, but it is opposite of the mainstream ideal of body image and beauty. That last question and response from the focus group discussion leads me to my study. If the black culture does not accept thin black women, how does a skinny black woman fit within her own black community? Is she normal? Does the black community accept her? Does she have a place within her own black culture?

Rationale and Objective

One day in my Qualitative Methods class, our professor showed us a documentary about obesity and people who develop eating disorders because they are overweight. Although I empathized with the participants in the documentary, I realized that we typically—if not always—examine one dimension of weight. Skinny is not everyone's desired body image, especially if you are a black woman. Seeing as though I am a skinny black woman, examining this other perspective of weight was important to me. I set out to see whether there were women like me, who not only receive the same ridicule for being skinny, but also, at times feel some form of displacement from our own black culture. My class paper sought to understand a different aspect of body image. Now my thesis explores how the thick body image expected of black women, which is portrayed through our black media culture, affects the thin black woman's connection to her black culture.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The thin body image ideal placed upon women in America and derived from the modern Western idea of beauty has stigmatized what many women (and men) consider beauty (Kwan & Fackler, 2008; Saltzberg & Chrisler, 1995). The ideal American body image that is fostered within mainstream media is thin and tall with large breasts (Tylka & Sabik, 2010). Many women aspire to live up to the ideal body image expected of them (Danso, 2013). As a result, those women experience an increased dissatisfaction with their body image due to comparing their actual body image and the ideal body image (Danso, 2013).

A considerable amount of the research has demonstrated that eating disorders and/or extreme dieting are linked to the ideal image of a thin body image (for a review, see Kwan & Fackler, 2008). Because of sociocultural factors and promotion in social comparisons, eating disorders are common trends for women (Granberg et al., 2009). However, this observation is not seen much among black women because of the different cultural values and beliefs; they usually show to have a positive attitude regarding their body image (Franko & Roehrig, 2011).

The History of Black Women and Thick Body Frame

Black Women Don't Want to Be Skinny White Models

Compared to black women, white women showed a higher level of dissatisfaction with their body (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004). Hesse-Biber et al.'s study (2008) revealed a consistent satisfaction amongst black women involving their weight even if they were considered overweight. Black women tend to identify with

a more thicker-framed body image than white women, and have a lower tendency to develop eating disorder habits that are geared towards losing weight (Granberg et al., 2009; Gordon et al., 2010). Black women's view on weight is different because they accept overweight or obese weight as normal (Abrams et al., 1993). They believe that a thicker body image means that you are more attractive and appealing (Reddy et al., 2011; Stephens & Few, 2007). Therefore, they try to avoid any form of dieting and weight-loss techniques that may alter their body shape to a smaller size (Danso, 2013). The participants in Hesse-Biber's (2004) study, who were black women, solidified the ideal shape is "thick"—curvaceous with wide hips, a round buttocks, and ample thighs (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004). As many of the black female participants praised their "thick" body frames, it revealed that black women do not adopt the modern Western idea of beauty when it comes to body image (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004). The solid and consistent support of having a thicker body frame from members of the black community is the main factor for black women's resistance to the mainstream media ideal body image (Poran, 2006).

The Thicker, the More Powerful and Wealthier

Desiring to have a more curvy and thicker body frame is not a new trend that has spread throughout the black woman community. This idea that black women should have a thick body frame can be recorded way back in certain areas of African history. Possessing a thicker body frame for black women meant more than just the sexual orientation that it tends to represent in today's time (Jackson, 2013). The weight and shape of their bodies symbolized their level of authority and economic status (Ratner, 2002). Many men and women of African descent preferred having a

larger weight mass as they viewed the corpulence as a symbolism of wealth for women. In contrast, women who possessed a slimmer body frame were seen as poor, delicate, weak, and diminutiveness. These women were seen as inferior to men, and had to take on all roles of domestication (Ratner, 2002).

However, this was not the case in black family households. The black women were of larger size, and in turn, ran their household (Ratner, 2002). Even if the husband was in the home, the woman still took charge and took the lead role in the house (Ratner, 2002). Most of the black women portrayed signs of strength and power. Even stereotypical characters, such as the Mammy, were shapely black women who ran theirs and other's homes (Offutt, 2013).

Sarah Baartman: The Unintentional Jezebel

Although in some areas black women with curvy and shapely bodies were seen as strong and powerful, and in other countries, thicker-sized black women symbolized wealth, another stereotype surfaced, which sexualized the black woman because of her curvaceous body frame (Jackson, 2013; Offutt, 2013). Before the Jezebel stereotype/character name was given, black women were already seen as sexual objects unintentionally.

Many people may have heard of Sarah Baartman. Sarah Baartman is one of the most famous black women in our black history. She is not a Harriet Tubman or a Rosa Parks—meaning she did not fight for the equality of her fellow blacks. However, she has sparked controversy and research (Gordon-Chipembere, 2006; Jackson, 2013). A Khoikhoi woman from the Gamtoos Valley of South Africa, Sarah Baartman, was placed on display as an exhibit or freak show for her large buttocks.

Much of her life is unknown as well as her real name, but even after her death, the doctors still displayed her body parts (Gordon-Chipembere, 2006; Jackson, 2013).

Sarah Baartman was objectified and sexualized, even until this day, because of her “thick” body frame that makes up the ideal image that black women are expected to have. The objectification and glorification of large buttocks, wide hips, and thick thighs have been the body image that black women have adored to claim (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004). Black women are less likely to be self-conscious about weight gain because they want to have to the “thicker” body frame, which is opposite to white women (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004). Some black women feel that the men wanted a woman with “meat on her bones,”; they do not desire a woman of thin or skinny shape (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004). Despite research that states black women emasculate their black men (Offutt, 2013; Ratner, 2002), black women still express their need to want to be wanted by their black male counterparts, who prefer women of a “thick” body image (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004).

Drake Likes His Girls BBW (Big, Beautiful Women)

Music is definitely an intricate part of the black community’s culture. Our Hip Hop culture has shaped much of what we think of our culture as well as others (Blanchard, 1999). However, the music, television, and even social media cultural influence has also molded an idea of black women that do not represent every black woman. The black women who are part of the Hip Hop culture—rappers and video vixens, women who are the objects in music videos—are sexually objectified through visual representations, such as music videos, and lyrical content (Bartlett, 2011). For example, Sir Mix-a-Lot’s 1992 Hip Hop smash hit song, *Baby Got Back*,

glorified a woman having a large butt. In the actual music video for the song, the camera hones in on all the women's butts and hardly captures their faces. Their butts are objectified and gazed upon in the music videos (Bartlett, 2011).

Muhammad's (2007) study revealed that black girls consistently noted that they mainly saw "half-naked women" in videos. "Black girls are too entrapped by histories of Black womanhood that equate Black female bodies with sexual labor and immorality. We could not imagine them any other way— premature video vixens doomed to victimhood, modern day Hottentots, on display like Sara Baartman" (Muhammad 2007, pp. 89-90).

Although Sir Mix-a-Lot's hit song, *Baby Got Back*, was released in 1992, and the messages about black women's bodies have not changed thirteen years later. The rapper Drake raps in a song that he is featured on with fellow rap label mate, Nicki Minaj, "She say I'm obsessed with thick women and I agree/Yeah, that's right, I like my girls BBW." The abbreviation, BBW, means big beautiful women, which refers back to the "thick" body image. Through the help of Hip Hop sexualizing the black woman's body, it sustains black women to remain in that Sarah Baartman era. "The relationship between the exploitation of Sarah Baartman's body and the participatory nature of video vixen's actions is the way the buttocks is sexualized as spectacle" (Bartlett, 2011, pp. 6-7). Nowadays, unlike Sarah Baartman, video vixens actively participate in contributing to the objectification and sexualized idea of black women and their body parts (Collins, 2005). These images portrayed of black women give false expectations and hidden fascinations that this is the reality of all black women (Bartlett, 2011).

Postmodern Illness

It is evident that people experience illness in different forms, not just physical pain that derives from some type of disease (Morris, 1998). Most illness conditions are quite different from those conditions in the past, and change along with the eras (Gottschalk, 2000; Morris, 1998). In our world today, there are so many things environmentally that contribute to illness conditions, such as anxiety or emotional distress (Morris, 1998). Because of the stress of life events, mood disorders have become present (Wortham, 1999). Our culture affects much of what we feel, what we think, how we view the world itself, and even how we view ourselves. We are influenced daily through our media and community. Brega and Coleman (1999) suggest that black women, as a unit, are secured from negative interpretations and comments concerning their weight because they have accepted the biocultural perspective regarding body image standards based on the black culture's body image ideal although they pay attention to the dominant American body image ideal as well. The exposure and influences are so vital in our lives that they have become instrumental in the development of many mental disorders that fall in the category of postmodern illness (Gottschalk, 2000; Morris, 1998).

Morris (1998) argues that in order to fully understand the postmodern illness phase of our age, we must accept the fact that biology and culture, both, work together. There are more than just diseases that people are battling with physically, but people are struggling with diseases that affect them mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, which is why we have to dig deeper into a person's background culture in order to fully understand why they may be experiencing certain postmodern

illnesses (Morris, 1998). According to Wortham's (1999) two models illustrated, one suggests that an individual's biological state affects their emotional state, therefore, determining their personal experience and how they behave within their environment. However, the second model suggests that an individual's social environment influences both, personal experiences and behavior, which affects someone's emotional state, and as a result, causes disruption within their biological state. The second model is the one I want to focus on. Since our culture affects the way we view ourselves, culture cannot be overlooked when examining the emotional effects that thin-framed black women may have due to the "thick" body-framed image that they are expected to have. Emotional distress does fall under the umbrella of postmodern illness (Gottschalk, 2000; Morris, 1998). Therefore, using the biocultural model is the best theory to implement in order to examine the effects that a thin-framed black woman could have while trying to maintain a role within her own culture. Seeing that this thesis explores the effects of the black culture's body image ideal on thin-framed black women, it is imperative that we understand the dynamics of the culture and their view on body image within the black community, family, media, and culture. Past research has shown that the constant stigma of possessing the media's ideal body image and beauty has contributed to many emotional illnesses among women, in general.

The Biocultural Model

The biocultural model suggests that culture influences the human biology and the human biology repetitively reshaped by the influences of culture (Morris, 1998). Biology and culture work together. There is a synergetic relationship

between biology and culture (Hinton, 1999). Throughout a person's life, biology and culture become dependents upon one another, and in turn, transform each other (Levenson, Soto, & Pole, 2007). This is a continuous process within a person's lifetime. Biocultural synergy expects experiences, which becomes dependent on the environment to provide those experiences (Hinton, 1999). As biology and culture continue to interact, they develop what is considered "mutual impress," where they, both, take part in changing each other.

In order to deal with postmodern illnesses, the biocultural model is able to deconstruct the mechanistic view of life (Morris, 1998). Not saying that with many illnesses that the traditional biomedical approach does not work, but it is important to now take a look in a more biocultural approach as many illnesses are not easily diagnosed or treated (such as postmodern mental illnesses) (Morris, 1998). Implementing the biocultural model will help gain more clarity and knowledge regarding certain illnesses that the typical procedure and/or medication cannot effectively cure (Morris, 1998). Encouragement of the biocultural model helps us to understand the different facets of what living a healthy life means (Morris, 1998). Our culture shapes a lot of who we become and how we view certain issues and ideas, and can affect our health in different areas.

The biocultural approach, not only examine humans as biological, social, and cultural beings, it also views the biological variability of a human to how one responds and adapts to their environment, mainly within their own cultural environment (Khongsdier, 2007). Through the conceptual framework of the biocultural model, it helps gain a clear understanding of the vital synergy among

human biological/phenotypic, psychological, and socio-cultural characteristics in response to the environment (Khongsdier, 2007). The most essential areas to study for the biocultural approach are demographic, genetic, and phenotypic (Khongsdier, 2007). Using a biocultural approach not only examines the actual illness, but it aids in gaining a more comprehensive view on why an illness may be affecting someone or why they are experiencing the illness altogether. It takes a deeper examination into someone's personal background history and every day cultural life in order to obtain the extensive knowledge on how to properly view and treat a person's health condition.

Biocultural Approach to Emotions

It is important to examine emotions as this thesis seeks to explore whether there is a relation between the "thick" body image ideal expected of black women and how it affects skinny black women. Emotions can be a determining factor of life and death because it controls the short and long term effects of abandonment, loss, deprivation, and trauma (Wortham, 1999). Wortham (1999) argues that there are three dynamics of emotions: a) signal-emotions are communicative, relational, and representational b) drive-emotions develop drive because they are motivational, organizational, prioritize, and recruit c) information-process-emotions help detect and gain attention, influence learning, and stimulate the memory. Emotions are affected by culture based on individual-environment interaction. Based on an individual's interactions within their environment will determine their motivations, perceptions, behavior, and physical attribute (Wortham, 1999). Individuals are

shaped by culture and act a certain way that is (Wortham, 1999). The emotion system is impacted by biology and culture (Levenson, Soto, & Pole, 2007).

As the attention is geared towards emotions, it will help to look deeper into what allows culture to stimulate the emotion system. In the deep part of the brain is the autonomic system, which mediates homeostasis by two subsystems—sympathetic and parasympathetic—that allows influences from both external and internal stimuli (Geertz, 2010). All of these subsystems function together and are connected to the limbic system and executive control system (Geertz, 2010). The limbic system is where the emotions lie and the executive control system is where our senses of self develop and occur, and these systems are linked to our nervous system that can be affected by a variety motives at any time (Geertz, 2010). Therefore, an individual can be manipulated to conform to a dominant set of values, beliefs, and principles.

The dual embodiment concept integrates the development and process of the perspectives regarding emotions (Wortham, 1999). Wortham (1999) suggests dual embodiment solely relies on the developmental process and recent advances in vast areas of developmental biology and relies on the ontogenetic processes and its environmental contribution that shapes the course of development. Because ontogeny is set as a co-construction of organism it is dependent on the proximity of an individual's interaction with their environment. Individuals can then become actors of cultural construction of everyday life becoming dependent on internalizing the cultural schemas (Shore, 1996). According to Donald (2001), the biological brain was motivated by its growing need to become included in cognitive communities,

therefore, sharpened its communication and dispersed activities to a host of brains through culture, which led to symbolic thought and language. Through Donald's perception, biology influenced culture, as opposed to other theories, such as Morris (1998), who argues that they influence each other. Either way, biology and culture can both affect the emotions of an individual once manipulation occurs, which can influence and shape their ideas, values, and beliefs about society, and most importantly, themselves.

Summary and Research Question

The biocultural model demonstrates a significant relationship between biology and culture (Morris, 1998). As the growing number of illnesses surface within the postmodern illness spectrum, it is reasonable that a different approach is used in order to treat and understand these different illnesses, especially those that deal with mental health disorders (Morris, 1998). Past research regarding the effects of body image and weight for women due to the media's stigma of beauty, has shown that there is a direct effect emotionally (and mentally), mainly among white women (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004). Even the research about black women demonstrates that black women are satisfied with having a larger body mass (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004). Research has discovered that black women are not as worried about obtaining or maintaining the mainstream media "thin" body image, and demonstrated that black women enjoyed having curves and a thicker body frame. Unfortunately, these researchers have only examined weight from the obesity and overweight perspective or as a comparison of the emotional effects on different races and/or ethnicities.

Given the lack of research towards the other side, mainly within the black media culture where “thick” body images are praised within all areas of the black culture and media, this thesis could add to the research regarding cultural effects and weight. My study is guided by one overarching question: *How does the perceived cultural “thick” body frame for black women influence the way thin-framed or skinny black women feel about themselves as black women?*

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

To best answer the research question, I conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 10 black women, ranging in age from 27-34, who self-perceived as thin or skinny. I used purposeful and snowball sampling to recruit them. For matters of convenience and time, I chose participants regardless of their job status, relationship status, and demographic characteristics; however, I was aware that their ethnicity, social and economic status, and education levels could likely affect the way they perceive the images of black women in the media and culture, as well as the ways in which they view health.

Data Collection

After receiving IRB approval, I conducted semi-structured interviews that proceeded naturally through give-and-take conversation. I devised and used an interview guide; however, I encouraged the participants to share their experiences and stories beyond my preplanned questions. The interviews ranged from 17-45 minutes. With each participant's permission, I audio recorded and then transcribed the interviews.

The focus of my interviews with each participant was to elicit perceptions, ideas, observations, and personal stories and experiences regarding the body images of black women in the black culture. I explored the participants' personal definitions of beauty, how they believed physical image can be socially and culturally constructed, and how the images portrayed within the black culture and community affect them. I did not provide any examples or representations that

displayed images of black women portrayed in the black media culture for them to evaluate; rather, I prompted them to use their own general recollections of the images they see within the black media culture centered around black women when formulating their answers. Then, I redirected my participants' focus on their own experiences and stories in regards to the ways in which their family members and friends contribute to their personal definition of beauty and body image. In addition to asking about possible influential behaviors, I probed about specific conversations with or comments from family members and friends that have contributed to their personal definitions of beauty and body image.

Data Analysis

I used a constant comparative method to conduct a thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews. Using this method enabled me to establish themes from the data and then link the themes together to create a larger story. To do so, I moved back and forth among the data to look for commonalities, differences, and emergent themes (Tracy, 2013). First, I read each transcript individually for a general review of the interview. Then, I read through the transcripts a second time and manually coded the data. Coding continued until I sufficiently collapsed the various codes into three themes and five subthemes that best described the patterns I saw in the data. I detail these themes in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

To answer the research question—How does the perceived cultural thick body frame for black women influence the way thin-framed or skinny black women feel about themselves as black women?—I collapsed the codes into three primary themes. As shown in Table 1, the participants are influenced interpersonally and culturally, which I will discuss in detail with numerous examples from their own words. To orient to this discussion, I first describe how the participants view their bodies, in general. I use pseudonyms throughout to protect participant confidentiality.

Table 1: Primary Themes

If I Was Thicker, I'd Be Happier	
Interpersonal Influence	Skinny Is Not Healthy
	I Don't Belong to Them
Cultural Influence	Competing for Curves
	Curves Mean Power
	Double Standards

If I Was Thicker, I'd Be Happier

When asked to describe themselves to me at the beginning of our interviews, all participants said that they loved that they were slim or small in size. As the interviews progressed, some of them contradicted these assertions; however, being small in size is something that they all seemed to finally accept once they realized

that gaining weight was not part of their DNA. Janet said, “I used to try to purposely gain weight and do things to be bigger, and it just never worked. And I just accepted this is how I am, and how my body was meant to be.” Still, she confessed that gaining weight would make her feel happier:

If I could change something about myself, I would be about ten pounds bigger. Because I know that I’m skinny. I would like to be a little bit bigger, and I feel that would make me happy, but it doesn’t mean that I am unhappy with the size that I am. If I had a choice, I would be bigger.

Immediately after saying that, Janet felt the need to reiterate to me that she was happy with her size. It seemed that she wanted to clarify to me that just because she wanted to be bigger in weight did not mean what she stated at the beginning of our interview was not her truth.

Along with Janet, Tamia also felt that gaining ten extra pounds would satisfy her more: “Yes I would like at least 10 pounds of muscle weight.” Before this comment, like Janet, Tamia stated that she loved her slim body now that she is an adult. Actually, she seemed to be one of the most confident participants who spoke about her body frame; however, the desire to acquire more weight, even though she stated she wants muscle weight, reveals that she might still struggle with her slim physique. Interviewing Tamia was challenging because it seemed as though she wanted to make me believe that she no longer suffered with self-esteem issues now that she is an adult and feels as though she is not as impressionable or naïve like she was as a teenager. However, if she were truly content and accepting of her body’s physique, the thought or desire to acquire more weight would not be in talks for

consideration.

Debra also claimed that if she obtained more weight, meaning filling out in the appropriate places—butt, thighs, and hips—she would be a lot happier. She even professed that she felt more beautiful when she had a thicker weight size. “When I do steer from my thicker side, I do feel less beautiful,” she said. “Personally, I would love to have a little bit more weight on me because I feel healthier, and I’m more happy when I have more weight.” Just like the other participants, Debra stated in the beginning of our interview that she did like the fact that she was slim, but then revealed that she preferred a thicker weight.

Debra’s weight alters the way she feels about herself. She seemed to be one of the participants who opened up more about her true dissatisfactions with her body, although she began the interview stating that she loved her slim look. Realizing instantly that Debra loved to talk, I was able to build a more comfortable relationship with her more than most of my participants because I kind of stepped back from the guided questions and allowed her to express her opinions, ideas, experiences, and beliefs freely. She had a lot to say during our interview, which actually was the longest in length.

Like Debra, Nicky expressed that she wanted a fuller look, specifically in the right areas. She stated, for example, that she refused to work out because she would be upset if she lost her butt:

I’m very scared to work out because I know if I work out, I’ll lose my stomach, but I’ll lose everything else too. I’m trying to hold on to the little legs and booty. It’s the perfect size for me. It’s not too big; it’s not too little.

I've tried to change it by dieting and exercise like juicing. But I'm not consistent because I would see the change, or at least think I see the change, and I would be like my booty getting smaller, so then I would stop. I can't lose booty.

Nicky's self-consciousness about losing her butt correlates to the "booty" desired by the black community. The perk in her voice as she spoke about her "new booty" showed a satisfied emotion compared to her tone when she discussed earlier in the interview that she never saw anything sexy about her body. "It took me a long time to see anything sexy about my body because I always felt super skinny and out of place based off what society likes now," said Nicky. "I'm finally starting to accept my body because I like that I'm slim now. I don't have to worry about overweight issues. I'm finally starting to see curves, but not the curves I want." The last part of her comment uncovers her desire to want more than what she actually has even though she does claim she has a "booty" now.

Lorraine admitted to trying different methods to gain weight while in college. "Dieting? I didn't try to lose weight; I tried to gain weight. I would drink protein shakes, consume more calories a day, and take like protein pills." When I asked her why she tried all those different methods to gain weight, she responded, "When I was in college, I was like 115, and I liked how I looked at that weight."

Many of the participants mentioned that they tried to make sure they kept their stress levels down because they would lose weight easily once they began to stress over situations that occurred in their daily lives. "I am however conscious of my weight in stressful situations due to the fact I lose weight under stress," Tamia

confessed. None of my participants desire to lose weight. They are extremely conscious of trying to at least maintain the weight that they have even if they cannot gain the desired extra ten pounds.

Across the interviews, the participants seemed to show slight dissatisfaction with their size despite their constant assurances that they were content with their body shape and size. This signaled to me that contentment does not mean complete satisfaction, and if given the opportunity, each of my participants would accept having more weight on their bodies, but they all stated that plastic surgery to get it was out of the question. In conclusion, they all admitted that being thicker in weight would make them happier than the weight they are at the moment.

Interpersonal Influence

Skinny Is Not Healthy

Many of the participants acknowledged that their family members and friends show concern for their health, and this concern stems from their body weight. As an interviewer, I was able to sympathize greatly with my participants when they began to discuss the negative commentary directed towards them regarding their weight from their family members. In the beginning, when most of them began to describe in detail how their families considered them unhealthy because of their small size, I could hear the irritation and hurt in their voices as they shared their stories and experiences. Some even said they still get these involuntary comments frequently from their family and friends. No matter how the comments made them feel, most of my participants claimed that they understood that their families were coming from a place of true concern, but some participants still

expressed that it affected them. Majority of them acknowledged the fact that their weight fluctuates and there is nothing they can do about it at times; however, their family associated their slim frames to them possibly not taking care of themselves or being unhealthy.

According to the data collected and analyzed, weight has a lot to do with the way the black community, mainly close family and friends, determine whether you are taking care of your health properly. The participants collectively stated that people with “weight on them” are considered healthier than those who are skinny. Some participants claimed that their family members would not think they ate, may have formed an eating disorder such as anorexia, or were too stressed. Regardless, family members figured something personally was going on with the participants to justify why they were so slim.

Debra, for example, made it clear that her family could tell whether she was in a good place in her life because of her size. If she dropped weight, then she must be stressed and not happy; conversely, if she gained some weight, she must be happy and at a good place in her life. “I hear comments like, ‘Oh, you look sick. What’s going on?’” said Debra. “They start to feel or sense that I’m probably stressing or that something is going on and I’m just not saying anything. If I pick up weight, they feel like I’m happy.” When I asked her how her family would describe her appearance now, she stated, “My family would probably say that I am at my right weight presently, and will say that I am happy.”

Another participant, Sheila, also felt that her family believed that skinny was not healthy, and verbalized it to her with no filter. While discussing the comments

and involuntary concerns that her family would solicit to her, she kept taking brief pauses in between explaining her family's perception of her physically. Sitting in the interviewer seat, I was able to observe her through her pauses before she spoke, and it seemed like she wanted to be careful on how she spoke on that particular topic regarding her family. As an observer, it came across as though she was trying not to reveal complete negative feedback from her family members. I'm not sure if it was so I would not pose any judgments on them, but she protectively stated that she understood her family's concerns about wanting her to not only be healthy but look like it as well. But she was less concerned about me preconceiving her friends in a certain way because she briefly noted that she felt that her friends' comments resonated from "hate" or "jealousy." However, with her family, she tried to emphasize that they were genuinely concerned and wanted her to be healthy:

I think they just want me to gain weight. They think I'm really little, but I don't think it's out of jealousy or anything, at least from my family's perspective. I think they just want me to be a little healthier. A little bit thicker. . . a little bit healthier.

Another participant, Kim, said she doesn't hear verbal comments, but her family's looks and stares communicate concern:

You have family members who may not say nothing, but you can tell by their looks that they're worried. They want to make sure everything is okay, even though, they may not come out and ask you. But you can just tell concern in someone's voice. So I have those family members who will not say nothing, but you can tell they're concerned. Like the smallest I've gotten was 100 flat,

and that was when my dad was sick. They didn't say anything, but they were concerned.

She then went on to describe some possible reasons why some of her family members considered skinny unhealthy. "And I just think that when you don't have a fullness to you—like when I got down that small—certain bones that shouldn't show start to show," said Kim. "So I think that's where that concern comes in. When you lose weight, you have things that begin to protrude that you know normally wouldn't show."

Kim showed a level of understanding with her family members wanting her to look healthier, but the more she discussed their concerns about her weight, she finally disclosed that it did bother her, even while making it clear that she loved her body size. "Even though they don't say it, I still kind of know where it's going, so it still kind of bothers me," she admitted.

Lisa told me that her grandmother would always ask if she was hungry, but naturally she just hardly ever had an appetite. "My grandmother would try to get me to eat, but I never really had an appetite. I would mainly eat fruit and that would be all." She, like the other girls, mentioned of wanting to have extra weight. Being a ballet dancer, however, she cannot afford to have too much weight gain due to the vigorous and intense dance choreography. "Being a dancer, you have to have a straight figure. You have to be stick figured pretty much because of all the technical moves you do." Having a career as a professional ballet dancer, I think, helped Lisa accept her slim frame.

According to a few of my participants, in the black family household, skinny is not a good sign for health. Healthy means that you have to be considered “thick” or at least possess a fullness to you. If you’re skinny or too skinny in their perspective, either you are suffering from an eating condition or your health is failing. When you have the desired “thick” weight—described as “healthy” or a “healthy weight”—then you are taking care of yourself properly. As a result, the black household is concerned when someone is slim or too slim, and either voice or closely observe their family members. In their minds, something is wrong with that person’s health if they are what they consider to be “too skinny.”

In addition, the black household associates weight with your emotional stability. As some participants mentioned, their family members would assume something was wrong with them if they got down too small in their opinions, but if the participants met their families’ acceptable weight then they must be happy in their life. Moreover, black families obviously accept the idea of postmodern illness diseases, such as stress and depression, has a direct impact on one’s health physically, because many of the participants stated that their families assumed that something was wrong emotionally, which caused them to lose so much weight, and therefore, possess an unhealthy body physique.

You’re Not Part of Our Family

Many of my participants stated that the media doesn’t have a direct influence on the way they feel about themselves, but their family’s thoughts, opinions, and comments impacted them greatly. Cherry said her family is whom she looks up to, especially her mom. She described the women in her family as strong-minded

women, whom she hopes to eventually emulate in some way in her life. “I would say the media, no...my family, yes, because they are who I look up to. It helps me strive to monitor my behavior,” she answered when I asked if she felt any influence from the media. In her mind, the women in her family are direct representations of the type of woman she should become.

Both Tamia and Lorraine stated that their families always complimented them on their shapes, which helped them embrace their shapes more. Tamia said, “I’ve always been told I have a great shape from family, friends, and strangers. I’ve been told I have “the perfect figure” and “they wish they were my size.” Similar to Tamia, Lorraine disclosed, “I was always called the slim-thick one.” Lorraine has an older sister, who is seen as much slimmer than her, so her family’s comments, she shared, would be in comparison to her sister.

In opposition from the positive comments from family members, Tedra, did not feel that same way about her family. Tedra’s conversation regarding not only her family’s comments to her, but her placement within her family, got very personal and emotional. Although she tried to laugh off the negative comments from her family, there was a pain that was present within her eyes. Tedra revealed that her family, for the most part, often say she does not fit in or belong with them based on her shape and size:

A lot of the women in my family are both top and bottom heavy. Really big hips, butt, breasts, and I don’t have any of that. It’s definitely an ‘I don’t belong to them.’ They’ve even gone as far as to say in my face that I just don’t

fit in. From physically to my personality, a lot of my family feel like I don't fit in with them.

As an interviewer, I felt like I had to hold back my emotions, so that the interview could continue. Reflecting back on that moment, however, I think that I could have shown a more empathetic reaction because, even though my family has never verbally excluded me, their comments have made me feel as if I were the oddball.

Compared to my sisters, who were thick in the hips and butt, I only had large breasts (at a time until my last child; now I no longer have large breasts) that no one in my family possessed. So, with Tedra's story, I held back a lot of my own experience when I feel that if I would have opened up to her more, she would not have felt the need to conceal her real emotions. She laughed off the comments regarding her family deliberately making her feel isolated from them, but when she grew a little silent, I could sense that her family's comments and actions towards ostracizing her based on her size and shape affected her.

Another participant, Nicky, explained how the comments from her family members affected her as well:

I was called Skinny Minnie all my life. I did have a cousin who commented that I didn't have a booty or shape. It had hurt my feelings because I was like, Dang I want a shape. Like, Why can't I have a shape? She has a nice ass body. I think we were having a conversation about where our butts come from.

Nicky said she isolated herself from her family because she felt like they did not understand her and she did not fit in with them.

Despite how much we feel that media influences the way we feel about ourselves, it is evident within the black culture that much of our influence comes from our family. We are more concerned about what our families think and how they perceive us versus the outside world. The approval of our families is important in the way we perceive ourselves, behave, and think. Not only do we want their approval and acceptance, we tend to believe that we should also possess a lot of the same physical features to feel like an official family member.

Cultural Influence

Competing for Curves

Black women are known for having shapely bodies—big butts, thick thighs, and wide hips. The stated ideal within the black culture is that black women are “thick,” which gives them an exotic or distinct appearance apart from other races and/or ethnicities. Many of the participants felt strongly that a black woman’s shape is what makes her noticed. According to Nicky:

In society, that’s all we have. Black women have big booties and nice thighs. That’s where their beauty comes from. That’s what’s been taught to us since Sarah Baartman. If you don’t have that then you’re nothing. If you ain’t got ass or a shape, you ain’t nothing,

Nicky firmly felt that, although she has much to offer, she will always be judged on her appearance first before anything else:

At the end of the day, without a shape I don’t think that I will make it to level that I want to make because that just adds to the portfolio. She’s smart, she’s pretty, and she’s got a nice ass body. That’s what people look at first. Before

they read about you, they're going to look at what you look like first. Then they're going to want to research more into you. If you're not bringing nothing to the table then it's just like, 'well it's just another black girl. Let's just throw in the back with everyone else.' Because you don't have that exotic look like that "wow, pay attention to me."

Across the interviews, my participants believe there is a strong competition with who has the largest butt, thicker thighs, wider hips, and thinner waist. Lorraine described that many black women in media now have a more superficial look, "Big butts, fake butts, big breasts, fake breasts, long weaves, and fake eyelashes." She then went on to say, "I think all black women come in all shapes and sizes. It's just now black women are leaning more towards 'I have to look like this' in order to be accepted and that's not true."

Of course, black women are portrayed to have that shape already, but now they are desiring more as other races/ethnicities are finding ways to develop those same shapes that distinguished black women for so long from other women through implants and injections. The participants all felt that the concept of injections and implants to create "thicker" shapes is taking a turn for the worst. As Debra stated:

It's for competing with having a bigger butt and a smaller waist. As a black woman, we already had that. They always used to down it when it was something just of us. But how they slip it in is that they bring in your Caucasian or European woman, who never had anything, but they put this butt on her and shaped this woman into what they wanted her to look like. And they push it into the media, and then it's like wait a minute—why is this

particular community, who normally isn't shaped like this, now has a shape.

Now it has become a fad. Now they're going to get the butt because now it's accepted.

In order to keep up with celebrities like Kim Kardashian, black women have joined the epidemic of injecting their bodies to get even bigger butts because now society has accepted the curves, but the curves are not only on black women anymore. As Nicky mentioned, without those curves, where does a black woman stand in society if that is no longer her symbolic feature? A thick, curvaceous body is what has seemed to define a black woman for so long. Now, they have to compete with others against the one thing that represented them for years, and was even mocked and frowned upon.

Each of my participants had strong views regarding this subject as all of them denied wanting to get any injections or implants in those particular areas, except Kim, Tamia, and Lorraine, who admitted that they thought about getting breasts implants, but still said that they would never actually get them done.

In agreement with Debra and Nicky, Kim did think that these women who are considered "black girl thick" get the attention on all forms of media, and that is probably why the epidemic of enhancements are increasing. According to Kim:

From social media to TV, everything is just big butts, big breasts. . .I would say the thighs too. I guess I would use the term thick. Yea, I would use the term thick. Everything on the body is thick. They're parading around in the videos. Everything you look at has those types of women in it. Those are the ones that are getting the attention from the rappers and from whoever.

Those are the ones who are getting picked, so those are the ones who are being seen. Those are the ones that they want us to see.

Kim also noted that the attention these women are receiving impact other women, whether they may admit it or not. She said:

We're starting to see how strong of an effect social media has. There are people that try to act like it doesn't affect them, but behind closed doors you don't know what people are dealing. You know people deal with their own issues. I definitely feel that is why you have females going out there getting butt injections because they're looked up to especially through the different social media—Facebook, Instagram, Twitter—their pictures are getting retweeted or getting the most likes. Mostly everything that's out there is about trying to get that attention. You know, trying to stand out. Everything is about likes now. Conforming to so many things just to be liked or seen.

Along with competing for attention, the participants feel that they are now also in competition when it comes to just keeping the black family household together.

Having a thick body figure is more than just about looks—it is what shapes a black woman and her place within her own culture. According to my participants, black women are in competition just to hold a position in not just society, but within their own community and maintaining their household, and it is even harder when you do not possess that “thick” body frame at all. Most of my participants feel as though they are not even noticed like the next girl who has the “big booty,” especially by their own black men.

Of all the participants, Debra was the most passionate when it came to the competition that black women feel that they are in with, not just with each other, but with other races/ethnicities because now it seem as though black men are gravitating to the other women of race and ethnicity because they are “thick.” As she explained:

Black women, who already have butt, now need a little bit more butt because the competition is getting real. We compete against ourselves already. When we saw that these other races started to come in our community and take our men, our kids, our friends—we’re like wait a minute—what’s wrong with me? People are pretty much killing themselves to compete. We don’t want to lose our families, which consist of our men and kids. You either roll with it or you get rolled over.

Debra opened up more on this topic when she shared a personal story about one of her friends who felt the need to compete with another girl because her boyfriend was attracted to the other girl because she had a bigger butt. Debra stated that her friend felt that if she would just get a bigger butt her boyfriend would want her more, so she made the decision to get butt injections to enhance the butt she already had. “I asked her what would make her want to get that,” said Debra. “And she said that her boyfriend some years back was attracted to this other girl who had a real big, huge butt. So she went and got the injections because she felt that would make him like her more.”

Lorraine’s comments about black men preferring women of thicker shapes affirmed what Debra stated, and how Debra’s friend felt and why she ended up

going to drastic measures of enhancements to keep her man at the time. “I do feel that they want a woman who is thick. They want the fine, thick black girl.”

Some of the participants discussed that in certain settings they feel overlooked because they do not have those exotic features that make them stand out. Sheila admitted that she sometimes feels ignored in certain social and professional settings. Besides the fact that she does not get taken as seriously because she does not look her actual age, she also thinks that she gets bypassed because she does not possess the desired physical assets to compete with the other women in these different surroundings. “When you go out, all you see are the women with big ass or big breasts,” she said. “It makes you think what if I had this or what if I had that?” Going to the extreme of injections and implants is out of the question for her, like the other participants noted, but she does feel the competition when she attends certain social outings.

Competition will have us thinking that we are lesser than the next person because we see what they have and how they got it, and we try to figure out how can we one up on the next person. Like Nicky suggested, “You have to beat the competition. And some girls really feel like they don’t have nothing else to offer besides that.” As my participants expressed, if you do not possess those specific “thick” body features, you are just another black girl—nothing special. As a result, some women may struggle with insecurities and low self-esteem, which causes them to want to alter their bodies to be a step ahead in the game, so they will not get passed over.

Curves Mean Power

While conducting this research, I discovered that weight determines your level of authority in certain cultures and countries. It was surprising to me that Nicky had the same viewpoint. Never did I think of my weight symbolizing a certain position or role that I hold. I've always thought that my work ethic and accomplishments reflected my power or signified my potential. Nevertheless, Nicky gave examples of women on different calibers of success, like Oprah, Beyonce, and even women like Black Chyna, (who was known as a stripper at first, but now has obtained a ton of success). As Nicky gave her accounts on why she felt that women who were curvaceous held a level authority, it seemed that through her constant comments regarding not losing her "booty" she feels that she will not get to the level of success that she hopes to if she does not obtain a shapely figure. The more she gave her explanation on why she felt like women who were "thick" in shape possessed the most power and higher level of success, her "I love everything about me" mirage began to peel away. It was obvious that she desired to have that "look" that would give her the power she hopes to have one day. "At the end of the day, without a shape I don't think that I will make it to the level that I want to make because that just adds to the portfolio," she said.

The tables turned during our interview process because Nicky actually started to question me on the images that I see of black women who hold a certain amount of power who do not have any curvy shape to them. It was different being on the other side of the interview process, but it was a devastating realization to me when I could not give not one example of a black woman that I see who holds some

form of authority or power who were shaped like me—a skinny shape. The women who started to pop up in my mind were Oprah, Beyonce, and even Michelle Obama (she may not be as thick as the others, but she does a defined, curvy shape). Unfortunately, Nicky had made a point. At that moment, I no longer was just the interviewer; I felt like I became a student relearning the value of what powerful worth I thought I possessed. According to Nicky:

I feel like women who have more curves have more authority. If you just think about women who are curvaceous they seem to get whatever they want, and they don't even have to work hard for it. It just gives you a more kind of woman in charge kind of appeal. Everyone always saying, 'Oh. . .these hoes winning.' Yea, they're winning because they have curves. Everybody's gravitating towards that, and they're presenting it in an unorthodox way. However, they are on the right track when it comes to getting what you want. With your curves and your body shape, you have this authority. Think about the women you know you know who have no body that's up there. How many women you know are up there and have no body who hold a position of power? NONE! You can't think of one. Like when Beyonce started getting kind of skinny small, she started falling off a little bit. You don't see anybody with that power with no curves—no body—childlike body. You don't look at a woman with no curves with respect because you don't look at her as a woman. Like based off of her appearance, she looks like a child. And you don't treat them with the same respect that you treat a woman.

This was one of the most interesting conversations out of all the interviews I conducted with the other participants because I started to feel that I held no significant position or will not hold one if I remain having this slim shape. While I was trying to get information from Nicky on how she is affected by the thick body images portrayed of black women in the black culture, she had me reflecting and analyzing how much more I am affected by the this ideal “thick” body images expected of black women. As much as I did not want to agree with her observation and opinion, her justifications seemed to hold some form of validity.

Even another participant, Sheila, agreed to an extent. She said, “I don’t necessarily feel powerless, but I do feel like they don’t take me as serious or to my age value as they should.”

To think as a black woman that you have to look a certain way in order to get respect and superiority really baffles me. Black women who may not have the best backgrounds or worked hard to become successful in the way that I envision someone working hard to become successful are seen as a power figures. Women like Nicki Minaj and Black Chyna all hold a position of power, and they are only known for having large butts, like Nicky suggests:

Like Black Chyna, she has businesses but no one ever talks about her businesses or know her for anything besides her ass. We’re so blinded by her ass and body that no one sees the other stuff that she’s doing. Deelishis and K. Michelle came out of nowhere. Now look at them, they’re winning once they got body.

In conclusion, curves hold a lot of power that I never thought about, which is why I can understand more why black women and women, in general, seem to want the curvy look. For example, Kim Kardashian is not a black woman, but she is definitely a woman who is glorified for her “thick” curves (large butt), has covered the front pages of many magazines with captions implying that she is a powerful figure, and gained her fame and notoriety from a leaked sex tape. Now, she is seen as a powerful woman in charge. This idea or reality can be upsetting because it leaves slim women in a state of feeling powerless if they have no curves to show off a more womanly appeal to grab the attention that gives them an influence over others. They are not seen or taken serious, and their success is not equivalent to the other black women, and other women, who have “thick” body frames.

Double Standards

The comedian and actress, Mo’Nique, made her comedic debut by her famous phrase, “Skinny bitches are evil.” Everyone would fall into tears with laughter as she would degrade and belittle skinny women in an attempt to uplift larger-sized women. Although I chuckled at her jokes about skinny women as well (I figured they were just jokes), I started to feel a separation even more between skinny women and thick or fat women. Friends would tell me I was the “skinny fat friend,” meaning that I was the one cool skinny friend that hung with thicker women. The comments and jokes may have been tolerable for me at times, but I knew that I could not go up to any of my friends who were getting beyond the “thick” body frame, and talk down to them.

Unlike me, Tedra was not a fan of Mo’Nique because she made her feel like there was a problem with her being skinny. According to Tedra:

For the longest I hated Mo’Nique because she would go on and say, “Skinny women are evil,” . . . actually “skinny bitches are evil.” And I would be like what the hell? Just because I’m thin, I’m evil? But I can’t walk up to fat people and say, “Fat bitches are . . . (laughs). I can’t because it’s a size deficit. I mean, I can’t win that battle. But people can walk up to me and say, “Ooh you skinny.”

When it comes to weight and body size, there is a double standard that is quite prevalent. We have been trained to show sensitivity to women who are of larger size, but there are no rules when it comes to what others can say to skinny women.

All of the participants feel like they have to watch what they say or even how much they eat when around women who are larger than them. They noted that they get criticized for needing to workout as if the only people who should be working out are those who obviously have overweight issues. Debra said how her friends or people around her would react if she even mentioned the idea of needing to workout:

We can never say the same things they say to us. We have to hush ourselves if we say we need to exercise. They’re like, ‘Girl, sit down somewhere.’ I’m sorry that I get out of breath the same way you do. I still get out of breath. See, the problem with people is that genetically some of us can’t get big as nothing.

One issue that many of my participants indicated was that they all feel like they have to be silent and accept the taunting from women of larger size and even some men. Verbally, they want to fight back and defend themselves from the mockery directed at them, but they know if they said anything to the same effect to someone of larger size, they would be seen as “skinny evil bitches.” As Janet stated:

People make a lot of comments and they never come off as rude, but those comments like—‘Oh, you’re so skinny,’ but vice versa, if a skinny person came up to a bigger person and say something like that, ‘Oh, you’re so fat,’—it’s rude. But it’s not taken as the same regard when those comments are directed towards a small person.

Lisa, also, encountered situations where was teased all the time for having a tiny physique. “I got it pretty much all my life. ‘You’re too skinny. You like a stick.’ And they would just say other harmful things to me, but I knew that I couldn’t say anything like that back to them.”

With being a skinny black woman, it seems like you not only have to endure the sarcastic and rude comments that people tend to think are not rude just because you’re skinny, but you also have to silence yourself and digress from defending yourself from those who think it is okay to call you names or judge you based on the fact you’re skinny. The bottom line is that no one likes to be teased, especially for something physically they have no control over. Many of my participants have all tried to alter their appearance by overeating and doing things to try to gain weight or, at least, get a big booty, but none of it worked because being skinny is their physical makeup.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

Based on the data collected from the interviews, the ideal “thick” body image expected of black women does have an effect on black skinny women. Though most participants stated that they loved their slim bodies, there were different influences that demonstrated that they still struggle with being a skinny black woman within the black culture.

In relation to Morris’s (1998) biocultural method, the black culture has a lot to do with the way skinny black women see themselves and place themselves within the black culture. Furthermore, the culture has direct impact on how they look at their physical biology. This study demonstrates that our culture influences the way we think, feel, and act. Every participant confessed that her community, especially family, affects the struggle they have reconciling the way they looks with the women in their families or the black women portrayed within the black culture. Brega and Coleman (1999) claimed that black women were shielded from negative interpretations and comments regarding body image because of their biocultural perspective, but they did not look into the actual black culture to analyze the issues that are prevalent about weight and body image.

Most of the way my participants viewed their body depended on how their family, and some friends, perceived them. The media does not make up the dominant influence on black women when it comes to body image; our families and close culture affects the way we view ourselves in regards to our body image. Like

white women and other women of race and ethnicity, skinny black women seek to one day possess the ideal body image expected for black women (Danso, 2013). Compared to other black women who possess a thick body image, skinny black women show a level of dissatisfaction with their bodies because it does not fit in with the women who are in their circle. My study shows opposite findings from previous research that stated that black women have a more positive attitude towards body image (Franko & Roehrig, 2011; Hesse-Biber et al., 2004). Most of my participants claimed that they would gain weight if they could just to look like what is expected of them. Some have even tried to overeat, which is not the typical eating disorder discussed in the mainstream media, just to gain the desired weight to become happier with their body image (Reddy, 2011).

In the black culture, it is common and familiar for black women to identify with a thicker framed body image (Gordon et al., 2010). Therefore, with the black community making up the largest statistics for obesity, black people do not see obesity as an issue. In fact, they accept and promote the idea of being on the heavier side (Danso, 2013). My participants' desires for more weight and curves reflect the idea that in the black culture a thick shape—big butt, wide hips, thick thighs, and possibly a small waist—is considered to be more attractive. Many of my participants exclaimed that they feel overlooked in a social setting where most of the women have that thick shape that they desire at times to have. Isolation can also be considered a form of postmodern illness because mentally the person is suffering from acceptance and belonging. Most participants claimed that they did not feel isolated from the black women community; however, they feel like they go

unnoticed and not taken seriously. Mentally, some of my participants revealed a fear that they may not ever get seen for their accomplishments in order to get to the level of success that they hope because they do not possess the desired and admired “thick” shape.

Emotions are affected by our culture and how we interact within our environment because our environment will determine our motivations, perceptions, behavior, and physical attribute that we perceive of others and ourselves (Wortham, 1999). In my study, my participants showed emotional effects that stemmed from their cultural environment, and how those emotional effects determine the way they get along within their black culture and family and their ideal image of themselves. Wortham (1999) mentioned that these emotions based on our interactions in cultural environments have a life and death determining factor because of its short and long term effects. Battling with the idea to maintain or desiring to obtain the ideal “thick” body image for black women can cause many short term decisions that could have long term effects. For example, Debra’s friend, who got butt injections to keep her boyfriend, is now suffering severely and is not sure if she will pull through. The emotional system is impacted by our culture and environment and cause mental instability (Geertz, 2010; Levenson, Soto, & Pole, 2007).

Seeing as though only black women who self-perceived as skinny participated in the study, my results only contribute to a portion of this topic where many other forms of data can be collected and studied. Future research should include a focus group along with more in-depth interviews just to gather a similar group of women together to see the type of dialogue they would have with one

another. It would even allow the women to see that there are other women who experience the same type of criticism regarding their body size and shape.

Also, the participants that I interviewed claimed that they did not want to do any surgeries or injection enhancements to make their body look like the “ideal black woman image.” But there are many black women who have had injections and implants. (I actually know some women personally who have gotten injections to obtain the ideal thick body image because they were skinny all their lives.) I think it would be enlightening to interview black women who have had surgeries and injection enhancements to understand more fully how the black media culture influences their reasons for getting something done to their body. Another aspect that can be studied is teenagers or college women because many of my participants admitted to their weight being more of an issue as a teenager rather than an adult. Also, as a teenager, we are more impressionable, so I am curious to find out whether the images that young black girls are exposed to affect the way they view themselves, and if they seek to obtain that particular thick ideal body image expected of black women.

In the meantime, it is imperative that we stop putting so much emphasis on body image and making one feel like an outsider if they do not fit into that desired image. There are so many other accolades that black women, and women in general, have to offer besides the way their body is expected to look.

Conclusion

In conclusion, black skinny women are affected by the “thick” black woman image that is represented within the black culture. Although all of them stated that

they liked their slim frames, they all wished that they had a little bit more weight in the right areas—butt, thighs, and hips—which revealed that they were not completely content with their size and shape. Also, many of them stated that they did not feel isolated from the black women community, but did feel isolated from their families based on their families' comments and perceptions of them regarding their skinny frames.

As a result, my study has demonstrated that skinny is not always accepted within the black culture, and the resistance affects skinny black women, which causes them to battle with whether they like their thin frames or they want to be shaped like “other black women.”

Body image is an issue that has been ongoing for years. Identifying what is considered the ideal body image has caused many effects among women as they strive to please what is expected of them. The participants in my study feel that weight will always be an issue in the black community in general, and skinny black women will never be accepted. Where does this leave them in the black culture? Acceptance of constant ridicule and criticism from others who larger in size than them, and they continue to stay silent. A few of the participants expressed to me in their last comments from our interview how much they appreciated the topic of weight and body image finally being seen through their point of view. They feel unrepresented as far as being affected by weight and body image issues, and this study finally gave them the voice that had been silenced for years. Regardless if someone is considered overweight or underweight, the constant stigma of what

they should look like according to others will affect them no matter how much they try to accept whom they are and what they look like.

APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

Opening

Thank you for agreeing to this interview. I expect it to take approximately 1 hour, depending on your answers. Please know that there are no right or wrong answers and I am interested in your thoughts, ideas, and stories. So I may focus on the interview and not on taking notes, I would like your permission to tape this interview. Your comments will be strictly confidential. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Questions

1. Describe yourself to me.
 - A. What do you like about yourself? Why?
 - B. What would you like to change about yourself? Why?
2. How do you feel about your body?
 - A. What do you like?
 - B. What would you change?
 - C. What makes you feel that way? Have you always felt that way? When did you feel differently?
3. Have you ever tried to change your body? Explain.
 - A. Diet?
 - B. Exercise?
 - C. Plastic surgery?
4. Based on their stated preferences, how would your friends and/or family describe your appearance (size and shape)? Why?
5. Describe the images of black women you mostly see portrayed through media: TV, music videos, magazines, and social media.
6. Do images in the media (and your family's/friends' views) influence how you feel about your appearance (size and shape)? Why or why not?

- A. Do you feel isolated from the black women community at times because of your size and shape? Explain.
- B. Because of your body type, do you more closely identify with another race and/or ethnicity? Explain.

Closing

Is there anything else you'd like to tell me? Once again, thank you for your time.
Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns at a later time.

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