Sociology 101

Period 8/ January 5, 2015

For this project, I wanted to examine how different cultures perceive beauty based on weight. To do this I was guided by the following research questions:

Q1. Is there a correlation between a persons culture and the way they perceive beauty based on weight?

Q2. Is a person being “fat” or “thick” a spin media has put on body image or an actual belief?

Q3. Is there a way to identify the “line” in which person changes from being perceived as “thick” to “fat” or vice versa?

I believed that after doing my research, I would find that African American and Hispanic male and females alike would find women who are a larger size to be more attractive than women of a smaller size. In addition, I believed that after doing my research, I would find that White and Asian male and females alike would find women who are a smaller size to be more attractive than women of a larger size.

To conduct my research, I used articles such as “Why Black Women Are Fat” by Alice Randall, The New York Times. “Ideal Weight Varies Across Cultures, But Body Image Dissatisfaction Pervades” study results by Temple University, published by TheScienceDaily. “Black women, heavier and happier with their bodies than white women, poll finds” by Lonnae O’Neil Parker, The Washington Post. “Cultural Obsessions with Thinness: African, American, Latina, and White Women” by Becky W. Thompson. “Sociology: Exploring the Architecture Of Everyday Life” by David Newman. As well as a survey I had conducted.

My Survey Questions had included:

Q1. What is your gender?

F M

Q2. Which ethnicity do you identify with?

African American Caucasian Hispanic Asian

Q3. Which of the following below, including the ones after, do you consider to be “fat”?

Q4. When searching for a partner (look wise) how important is their body type to you?

( 1 being very little if any importance, 5 being most important)

1 2 3 4 5

Q5. Which of the following below, including the ones after, do you consider to be “fat”?

Q6. Would you find a “fat” girl ( look wise) attractive?

Yes No

Q7. Would you find a “thick” girl ( look wise) attractive?

Yes No

I distributed my survey to 58 people. The sample group had consisted of 4 Asian males, 6 Asian females, 11 Caucasian males, 9 Caucasian females, 5 Hispanic males, 6 Hispanic females, 6 African American males and 11 African American females. I had chosen this sample group because I am testing the correlation between a persons ethnicity with their perception of beauty based on weight, therefore I had needed to survey more than one ethnicity. Furthermore, I had also distributed the survey to both males and females in order to make the sample group I had tested represent the entire ethnic group as accurately as possible.

The Results:

To the question of “ Which of the following, including the ones after, do you consider to be “fat”? ( The white picture)

50% African American males thought a BMI of 4 and above to be fat

72% African American females thought a BMI of 6 and above to be fat

80% Hispanic males thought a BMI of 4 and above to be fat

66% Hispanic females thought a BMI of 4 and above to be fat

75% Asian males thought a BMI of 4 and above to be fat

50% Asian females thought a BMI of 5 and above to be fat

63% Caucasian males thought a BMI of 4 and above to be fat

63% Caucasian females thought a BMI of 3 and above to be fat

This question had displayed a hidden bias among ethnic groups.

When analyzing this question with question 5, I found that consistently almost every ethnic group had chosen a smaller BMI and weight bracket for the Caucasian picture than they did the African American picture. Statistically, Caucasian women tend to suffer the most with body issues and eating disorders, also, many Caucasian models have a thinner body type. This is displayed with “Twiggy” form the 1990s as well as the recent Victoria Secret Fashion Show. Since Caucasian females tend to be the most weight conscious along with the frequency of thin Caucasian females depicted as beautiful, many may feel that it is unacceptable for a Caucasian female to be overweight.

To the question of: When searching for a partner (look wise) how important is body type to you (1 being no importance 5 being of most importance)?

66% African American males found appearance to be very important (4)

63% African American females found appearance to be some what important (3)

60% Hispanic males found appearance to be some what important (3)

50% Hispanic females found appearance to be very important (4)

75% Asian males found appearance to be non important (2)

50% Asian females found appearance to be of no importance (1)

63% Caucasian males found appearance to be very important (4)

45% Caucasian females found appearance to be very important (4)

This question is important because it displays the amount of importance ethnic groups set on body image. This is important when analyzing the behavior and the value of vanity in the ethnic groups I had tested. For example, The Caucasian males had stated they value body type to be very important. This, allows me to analyze why Caucasian women tend to prefer leaner bodies successfully, because white men put a high importance on a leaner body image when searching for a partner. Therefore, if a Caucasian women wants to please their husband, or find a significant other, they partake in achieving a thinner figure. Also, Asian females placed no importance on their partners looks, this may be because Asian females look at different aspects of a partner than their looks. Since many Asian families view marriage as the joining of both families, Asian females tend to value the success, the religion, and other cultural values that they feel is more important than appearance.

To the question of: Which of the following women do you consider to be “fat”? (The black picture)

66% African American males thought a BMI of 6 and above to be fat

63% African American females thought a BMI of 6 and above to be fat

66% Hispanic males thought a BMI of 6 and above to be fat

50% Hispanic females thought a BMI of 6 and above to be fat

75% Asian males thought a BMI of 8 and above to be fat

50% Asian females thought a BMI of 7 and above to be fat

54% Caucasian males thought a BMI of 6 and above to be fat

63% Caucasian females thought a BMI of 5 and above to be fat

This question had a very different response than the similar question earlier in the survey. Overall, most people I had tested had chosen a higher BMI number as being too large fore the African American women than they did the white women in the previous picture. This, seems to be because the depiction of African American women such as Beyonce Knowles or Josephine Baker (fuller figured women) makes it socially expectable for African American women to be larger than other ethnic groups. In turn, statistics have shown that African American women tend to have the highest weight bracket in America, perhaps the frequency of larger African American women sets a stereotype that all African American women are bigger therefore their standard for large is higher than other groups.

To the question of Would you find a “fat” girl attractive (look wise)?

83% African American males said no

72% African American females said yes

100% Hispanic males said no

66% Hispanic females said yes

50% Asian males said no

66% Asian females said no

72% Caucasian males said no

45% of Caucasian females said no

The results to this question are rather interesting. Statistically, African American females tend to be larger than other ethnic groups, making their response to this question correspond to my initial hypothesis. However, African American males did not agree with the females the way I had suspected. When analyzing the next question it is apparent that there is indeed a different connotation behind the words “fat” and “thick”. Furthermore, all Hispanic males said “no” to this question, I suspect it is because Hispanic culture values displaying the female body with less clothing more than other cultures do, making Hispanic males find a leaner body in their counterpart important. With the assimilation of Asian immigrants into American culture, they seem to have adopted some American ideal body images making them value a leaner figure as well. Lastly, Caucasian males and females alike had chosen no to this question as suspected. Overall Caucasians tend to value a thinner body more than other cultures.

To the question of Would you find a “thick” girl to be attractive (look wise)?

83% African American males said yes

100% African American females said yes

100% Hispanic males said yes

83% Hispanic females said yes

50% Asian males said yes

!00% Asian females said yes

81% Caucasian males said yes

100% Caucasian females said yes

This question had a sharp contrast to the questions before. Its seems many prefer a “thicker” body over one they consider to be “fat”. Thus, confirming that there is indeed a difference between the perceived beauty of someone “thick” and “fat”. This, seems to stem from media influence, for example, celebrities such as Beyonce Knowles or Kim Kardashian who idolize their curves as well as songs like “All About That Bass” by Meghan Trainor which displays the desire to be “curvy”. However, when looking at the results of the previous question, it seems that too curvy may be unattractive.

My overall analysis:

It is clear that there is a correlation between a persons ethnicity and the way they perceive beauty based on weight. Some cultures believe that having a fuller figure symbolizes a families wealth as opposed to other cultures who believe that a fuller figure displays a lazy lifestyle. Both pictures of the White and Black women in the survey I distributed had been labeled 1-9. The numbers under each woman represent a certain BMI which consists of a specific weight intervals. The first picture represents 100.0lbs and increases in increments of 10.0lbs, as the number under the women increase, assuming they are all the same height, the picture increases the woman’s body fat content making the weight gain unhealthy thus increasing their mass. When analyzing the results to my survey I found that overall African American males and females tested prefer a weight bracket of about 150-160lbs. Asian males and females had preferred a weight bracket of about 160-170lbs, Hispanic males and females had preferred a weight bracket of about 150-160lb, and Caucasian males and females had preferred a weight bracket of about 130-140lbs. The preferences in average weight from minorities to Caucasians differed 33lbs which equals about 6.3 dress sizes. These results show statistical significance. As obesity rates increase throughout America, American culture has shifted the perception of beauty from the almost unattainable “Twiggy” weight of the 1990’s to a “thick” weight in the 2000’s. This shift had occurred through agents of socialization such as media and celebrities that lead by example such as Kim Kardashian or Beyonce Knowles, (both of which have a fuller figure) that has influenced many women’s self esteem giving some slightly overweight or broader framed women who are healthy the chance to be perceived as beautiful. However, to the unhealthy women it had given them a confirmation bias that men prefer larger women, therefore their unhealthy actions are justified. Culturally, minorities had display a greater appreciation for weight than Caucasians, specifically African Americans. This, was consistent in my survey as well, however, the reasons behind why African American men and women alike have this greater appreciation vary from aesthetics to even politics. Aesthetically, “Many black women whose sane, handsome, successful husbands worry when their women start losing weight” this is due to the “…frequent assertion that African-American culture embraces larger body types” as well as being influenced by women such as Beyonce and Josephine Baker which portrays the belief that “bigger is better”. Politically, “fat black woman can be a rounded opposite of the fit black slave, that the fatness of black women has often functioned as both explicit political statement and active political resistance.” Thus displaying a functionality behind valuing larger African American women other than for appearance purposes. As shown in my results, other minority groups such as Asians and Hispanics value larger women as well. Historically, those of royalty were heavier displaying their lavish lifestyle making weight gain desirable to first generation immigrants. However, “…second generation immigrants tend to display greater dissatisfaction with their bodies compared to their first generation parents.” This is a result of second generation immigrants assimilating themselves into American culture, thus adapting the social standards of beauty. “The process of shifting values to the host culture from the culture of origin. As this occurs, the dominant standards of beauty are internalized” thus, women from minority groups adhere to standards similar to what the media portrays as being desirable. Social standards affect Caucasians as well, for example, the increasing lower retail sizes in high end stores cause Caucasian adolescents in particular to view themselves as larger than they actually are. “Being apart of a higher socioeconomic class, many Caucasians purchase designer clothing which typically manufacture size zero outfits..” This, makes Caucasians more self conscious about fitting into higher end clothing, making a thinner body more desirable. This desire for a thinner body creates other economic opportunities such as weight loss programs, prescriptions, foods and other forms of healthy living. Therefore, the smaller the clothing, the more Caucasians, (young adults in particular) purchase items to aid weight loss. This is displayed in the 2007 fashion phenomenon when designer Nicole Miller had been the first to create a sub-zero size for a 23 inch waist, the size of a junior soccer ball. Which sparked fear that “less-than-zero-sizes will become a status symbol among young girls who glorify razor-thin bodies”. Furthermore, the advertisement of these higher end retail stores tend to display thinner Caucasian models which inadvertently makes Caucasian males prefer a leaner body type as opposed to minorities. Although each ethnic group views beauty based on weight differently, it is evident that there is a growing issue throughout America with weight across all cultures. Due to media and other social influences there is indeed a different connotation behind the word “fat” and “thick”. The “line” in which a person changes from “fat” to “thick” (and vice versa) is difficult to pin point since different ethnic groups have different views on body image. However, the general conclusion that can be made after analyzing the results is the “line” seems to be where a person changes from being bigger than some people but smaller than others (a comparison based on observation) to a person who is unhealthy overall.

Work Cited

In the article entitled “Why Black Women Are Fat” by Alice Randall, The New York Times. The author describes the functionality, the frequency, the benefits and thought processes of being a larger black women. She explains the rational behind being bigger both aesthetically and politically. I used this in my research to determine why African American women tend to favor being bigger over other ethnic groups.

In the article entitled “Black women, heavier and happier with their bodies than white women, poll finds” by Lonnae O’Neil Parker, The Washington Post. The article gives statistics and polls as well as economic information on why white women are more weight conscious than black women. I used this in my analysis to compare the polling’s Parker found with my survey results. Since they were consistent I was then able to provide additional information with other articles as well as my own observations to elaborate.

In the article entitled “Cultural Obsessions with Thinness: African, American, Latina, and White Women” by Becky W. Thompson. The author describes the cross cultural views of weight gain and the cultural aspects of first generation and second generation immigrants as well as historical content to provide evidence of her own findings. I used this in my analysis to interpret why the ethnic groups I had surveyed chose what they had.

In the article entitled “Sociology: Exploring the Architecture Of Everyday Life” by David Newman. The author describes the economics of being overweight namely in white women. The article provided me with the information I had needed to give substantial evidence as to why white women are more inclined to vewi themselves as larger than they actually are.