

# The Impact of Body Image Preoccupation on College Adjustment



Joseph A. Guarneri<sup>1</sup>, David E. Oberleitner<sup>1</sup>, Lindsay M.S. Oberleitner<sup>2</sup>,  
Mark Beitel<sup>2</sup>, & Declan T. Barry<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Bridgeport, Department of Psychology

<sup>2</sup>Yale University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry

## Overview

- The physical and psychological adjustment to college is often a disorienting time for students. Upon entering college, students are met with a new set of societal, personal, and academic expectations that decide the degree to which they are able to adapt to their new lives (Tinto, 1993).
- Given the taxing mental demands associated with the college transition, as well as the increasing prevalence of mental illnesses among college students (Duarte, Ferreira, Trindade, & Pinto-Gouveia, 2015; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010), extensive research has examined the many psychological components that can effect students' college experiences.
- Yet, despite the extensive literatures centering around body image preoccupation and college students' psychological health/adjustment to college, there have been no studies that assess body image alongside college adjustment.
- The present study aims to fill this gap in the literature by examining the association of body image preoccupation and students' adjustment to college.**

## Purpose

- The present study aimed to further the empirical knowledge base on college transitions and adjustment by exploring the relationship between body image preoccupation and college adjustment.
- This study also sought to enrich the literature on body image preoccupation by tying the phenomenon to a widely researched psychological phenomenon in college adjustment.
- Given that body image issues are both historically and empirically tied more so to women than men (Cook & Hausenblas, 2011; Paap & Gardner, 2011), this study also serves to explore the effects of body image on college adjustment comparatively based on gender.

## Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between body image preoccupation and students' overall adjustment to college?
2. Are preoccupations with body image more detrimental to college adjustment for women?

## Hypotheses

1. Higher levels of body image preoccupation will be associated with lower overall adjustment to college.
2. Body image preoccupation will act as a predictor to negative college adjustment, and will do so to a higher degree in women than in men.

## Student Sample

- The present analysis draws from a sample of students from a small, private university in the northeastern U.S.
- The study's sample (n=145) mirrors the demographics of the university, with 44% of participants identifying as black or African-American, 36% white, 30% Hispanic, 13% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 16% other. Furthermore, 64% of the student sample identified as female, and the mean age of all participants was 19.

## Instrumentation

- The study utilized two questionnaires:
- College Adjustment Test (CAT;** Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharpe, 1999)
- Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ;** (Cooper, Taylor, Cooper, & Fairburn, 1986).

## Data Analyses

- All data were analyzed using SPSS. First, we conducted univariate analyses (**ANOVA**) to examine the relationship between students' levels of body image preoccupation and overall college adjustment (hypothesis 1). Median splits were used to designate "high" vs. "low" levels of body image preoccupation. See Table 1.
- To further explore this relationship, we utilized **multiple linear regression analyses** to further examine the extent to which body image preoccupation predicts negative college adjustment (hypothesis 2). See Table 2.
- Controls for body image, race, age, and club participation were also included to more precisely trace the total predictive effect of body image preoccupation on college adjustment (Mayhew et al., 2016).
- Analyses were stratified by gender, resulting in separate multiple regressions for men and women. See Tables 3 and 4.

## Implications

- The present study provides further evidence that psychological difficulties such as body image preoccupation can impact students' adjustment to college.
- This study expands and connects two separate knowledge bases by connecting body image issues to college student adjustment.
- Higher education and student affairs personnel must be mindful of the many pervasive psychological influences that may impact the students with whom they work.

## Results

- Hypothesis 1** – Participants with higher levels of body image preoccupation (score>17) reported lower overall college adjustment ( $F(2, 143) = 19.941, p < .000$ ). See Tables 1 and 2.
- Hypothesis 2 – Gender differences.** Data were analyzed comparatively by gender. A significant regression equation was found for men ( $F(4, 34) = 2.86, p < .038$ ), and women ( $F(4, 88) = 5.85, p < .00$ ). Body image preoccupation was a significant predictor of negative college adjustment for both models: **Men** ( $b = .85, CI=.02, 1.67, p < .044$ ); **Women** ( $b = .47, CI=.25, .69, p < .00$ ). See Tables 3 and 4, respectively.

## Results

**Table 1**  
ANOVA Between Body Image Preoccupation and Negative College Adjustment (N = 145)

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
Between Groups	11688.735	33	354.204	46.89*
Within Groups	22475.961	111	202.486	
Total	34164.696	144		

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 2**  
Summary of Multiple Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Negative College Adjustment (N = 145)

Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$
Body Image Preoccupation	0.46	4.71	.00**
Gender	1.12	2.29	.39
Race	-.49	.73	.04
Club Participation	3.99	1.97	.16*
$R^2$			.23
F			9.35**

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 3**  
Summary of Multiple Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Negative College Adjustment in Men (N = 45)

Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$
Body Image Preoccupation	0.85	.40	.31*
Age	-.61	.50	-.18
Race	-.48	1.52	-.05
Club Participation	8.57	2.57	.36*
$R^2$			.25
F			2.86*

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 4**  
Summary of Multiple Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Negative College Adjustment in Women (N = 100)

Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$
Body Image Preoccupation	0.47	.11	.00**
Age	-.29	.55	.42
Race	-.49	.85	-.05
Club Participation	2.14	2.45	.09
$R^2$			.21
F			5.85**

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

## Conclusions

- Body image does play an important role in impacting how both men and women adjust to college.
- Body image may be an important factor in future interventions addressing college adjustment.

**References**  
 • Cook, B. J., & Hausenblas, H. A. (2011). Eating disorder-specific health-related quality of life and exercise in college females. *Quality of Life Research*, 20(9), 1385-1390.  
 • Cooper, P. J., Taylor, M. J., Cooper, Z., & Fairburn, C. G. (1987). The development and validation of the Body Shape Questionnaire. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 6(4), 485-494.  
 • Hunt, J., & Eisenberg, D. (2010). Mental health problems and help-seeking behavior among college students. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 46(1), 3-10.  
 • Mayhew, M. J., Bowman, N. A., Rockenbach, A. N., Seifert, T. A., & Wolniak, G. C. (2016). *How college affects students: 21st century evidence that higher education works* (Vol. 3). John Wiley & Sons.  
 • Paap, C. E., & Gardner, R. M. (2011). Body image disturbance and relationship satisfaction among college students. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 51(6), 715-719.  
 • Pennebaker, J. W., Colder, M., & Sharpe, L. K. (1999). Accelerating the coping process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76, 528-537.  
 • Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*.