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Self-Esteem, Social Support, Collectivism, and the Thin-Ideal in Latina College Undergraduates

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Abstract

Thin-ideal internalization (TII) reflects agreement that thinness equates with beauty. TII is a risk factor for body dissatisfaction and eating pathology; this phenomenon and its correlates, however, are just beginning to be studied in Latina undergraduates. This study examined the ability of self-esteem, social support, and collectivism to predict TII in Latina undergraduates. It was hypothesized that higher levels of self-esteem, social support, and collectivism would predict lower levels of TII. Cross-sectional data were analyzed using multiple regression; the model was significant, $p < .01$. Although both self-esteem and social support negatively correlated with thin-ideal internalization, only self-esteem accounted for a significant amount of variance. Results indicate that investigations of self-esteem as a protective factor against TII in Latina undergraduates would be fruitful, as would how self-esteem and social support affect the relationship between TII and other variables. Implications and limitations are discussed.

Keywords

thin-ideal internalization; Latina undergraduates; self-esteem; social support; collectivism

A woman's thin-ideal internalization (TII) is a strong predictor of body dissatisfaction if she does not believe she meets this ideal (Stice & Whitenton, 2002). Body dissatisfaction detracts from quality of life and is a risk and maintenance factor for eating disorders (Stice, 2002).

Researchers have begun to investigate TII, body dissatisfaction, and eating disorders in undergraduates who are Latina.¹ Although Latino cultures historically have valued curvy female figures as beautiful (Gil-Kashiwabara, 2002), Latina undergraduates who attend schools with large White populations are surrounded by the thin-ideal and may internalize it as they acculturate to college culture. Cashel, Cunningham, Landeros, Cokley, and Muhammad (2003), for example, found no differences between Latina sorority members and White female undergraduates in TII. Many studies that compare Latina and White female undergraduates have revealed similar body-related worries (e.g., Shamaley-Kornatz, Smith,

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¹The term "Latina" is used in this manuscript to include women who identify as Latina, Latina-American, Hispanic, Hispanic-American, Chicana, Chicana-American, or with a nationality historically considered a Latin-American country.

& Tomaka, 2007) or that Latina undergraduates have higher rates of appearance concerns (George, Erb, Harris, & Casazza, 2007). Pidcock, Fischer, and Munsch (2001) uncovered that Latinas who dropped out of college after their freshman year demonstrated more drive for thinness than Latinas who returned for their sophomore year. Body dissatisfaction and pursuit of thinness are prevalent in Latina undergraduates, and the decreased likelihood to return to college that is associated with a desire to be thin indicates that idealizing thinness is a sign of distress in Latinas.

A handful of studies have considered TII and its relationships with other phenomena in Latina undergraduates. TII mediates the relationship between awareness of the sociocultural thin-ideal and body dissatisfaction for Latina undergraduates, but findings are mixed as to whether or not ethnicity serves as a moderator between TII and body dissatisfaction for Latina undergraduates (Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005; Warren, Gleaves, Cepeda-Benito, Fernandez, & Rodriguez-Ruiz, 2005). Additionally, TII predicts the degree to which Latino undergraduates are willing to jeopardize their health to lose weight (Blow, Taylor, Cooper, & Redfearn, 2010). The mediational role of TII between thin-ideal awareness and body dissatisfaction and the relationship between TII and willingness to risk one's health underscore the importance of examining factors that might serve as predictors of TII in Latina undergraduates.

One possible predictor of TII in Latina undergraduates is self-esteem. Self-esteem has been negatively correlated with or predicted TII in female undergraduates (e.g., Cordero & Israel, 2009) these research samples, though, were predominantly White. With respect to Latinas, self-esteem is integral to college adjustment (Toews & Yazedjian, 2007) and is likely to predict TII, also.

Like self-esteem, a Latina undergraduate's satisfaction with her social support potentially predicts TII. Satisfaction with social support is negatively correlated with TII (Stice & Whitenton, 2002) and buffers pressures to be thin in female adolescents (Stice, Spangler & Agras, 2001). For Latina undergraduates, perceived social support is the strongest predictor of academic persistence (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005) and promotes a sense of belonging on campuses where they are a cultural minority. It is possible that Latina undergraduates who feel unsupported by their social networks internalize the thin-ideal to gain others' approval.

Another prospective predictor of TII in Latina undergraduates is collectivism. Several researchers conceptualize Latino cultures as collectivistic (e.g., Matsumoto, Weissman, Preston, Brown, & Kupperbush, 1997). Individuals who identify with collectivistic cultures are more likely to have interdependent self-concepts and prioritize harmonious relationships with significant others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Collectivism is predictive of greater familial and perceived global support (Goodwin & Plaza, 2000). Collectivistic Latina undergraduates may be less likely to internalize the thin-ideal because they are oriented more toward their relationships than to their own appearances.

The purpose of this study was to examine the ability of self-esteem, satisfaction with social support, and collectivism to predict TII in Latina undergraduates. These variables were chosen because of their importance to TII in undergraduates in general or because of their importance to Latinas' identities. It was hypothesized that higher levels of self-esteem, satisfaction with social support, and collectivism would be negatively correlated with and able to predict TII in Latina undergraduates.

Method

Participants

Participants were 283 undergraduates from two campuses of a public university in southern California. All participants self-identified as female and as Latina. Data from four participants were removed from analyses because of graduate-student status ($n = 3$) or because of age (younger than 18 years old) per agreement with the host institution's institutional review board (IRB; $n = 1$). The final sample consisted of 279 participants. Regarding Latino subgroups, 55.2% ($n = 154$) were Mexican, 1.4% ($n = 4$) were Puerto Rican, 1.4% ($n = 4$) were Central American, 2.2% ($n = 6$) were South American, 1.1% ($n = 4$) were Spanish, 1.8% ($n = 5$) were of mixed heritage, and 36.9% ($n = 102$) did not specify subgroup. Age ranged from 18 – 52 years old ($M = 20.27$, $SD = 4.29$). Freshmen comprised 52.3% ($n = 146$) of the sample, whereas 13.6% ($n = 38$) were sophomores, 16.1% ($n = 45$) were juniors, 14.7% ($n = 41$) were seniors, 2.9% ($n = 8$) were fifth-year students or beyond, and .4% ($n = 1$) declined to state. Additionally, participants' mean BMI was 24.64 ($SD = 5.65$) and ranged between 15.50 and 50.41.

Instruments

Internalization-General subscale of the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire, Third Edition (SATAQ-3)—The Internalization- General subscale of the SATAQ-3 (Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004) was used to measure TII. This subscale consists of nine items; a sample item is “I would like my body to look like the models who appear in magazines.” Participants indicate their agreement with items on a 5-point Likert scale, with “1” signifying “definitely disagree” and “5” signifying “definitely agree.” Higher scores indicate higher levels of TII. Earlier versions of the SATAQ's Internalization subscale were found to be valid and reliable for Latina undergraduates, with Cronbach's alphas ranging .83 to .89 (Cashel et al., 2003; Warren et al., 2005). The Cronbach's alpha for the Internalization-General subscale in the current sample was .93. Total subscale scores were used in analyses.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (RSE)—The RSE is a 10-item measure of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965). The RSE has shown good convergent and discriminant validity (Crandal, 1973) and has been used in undergraduate samples (e.g., Cordero & Israel, 2009). A sample item is “I feel that I have a number of good qualities.” Participants respond to items on a 4-point Likert scale, with “1” indicating “strongly disagree” and “4” indicating “strongly agree,” with some items reverse scored. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem. Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, and Rosales (2005) found a Cronbach's alpha of .94 for the RSE in a sample of Latino undergraduates. Cronbach's alpha for the current sample was .86. Total RSE scores were used in analyses.

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)—The MSPSS is a 12-item survey that asks participants about the level of subjective support they receive from family and friends (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). The MSPSS is comprised of three subscales: Significant Other (sample item: “There is a special person who is around when I am in need”), Friends (sample item: “My friends really try to help me”), and Family (sample item: “I can talk about my problems with my family”). Participants indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a 7-point Likert scale, with “1” signifying “very strongly disagree” and “7” signifying “very strongly agree.” Higher scores indicate higher levels of perceived social support. Edwards (2004) found good construct validity for the MSPSS among Mexican-American adolescents and Cronbach's alphas of .61 .90, .88 for the Significant Other, Friends, and Family subscales, respectively. Cronbach's alpha for the MSPSS overall in the current sample was .93. Total MSPSS scores were used in analyses.

Individualism-Collectivism Interpersonal Assessment Inventory, Family Subscale (ICIAI-F)—For the sake of brevity, the ICIAI-F subscale was administered as a proxy for participants' levels of collectivism. The ICIAI-F is a 50-item subscale of the ICIAI that assesses participants' individualistic-collectivistic values and behaviors toward family (Matsumoto et al., 1997). Participants respond to items on a 7-point Likert scale, with "0" indicating "Not at all important/Never do it" and "6" indicating "Very important/Do it all the time." A sample item is "To identify yourself with family." Higher scores indicate a collectivistic orientation to family. Standardization of the ICIAI involved various samples including Latino undergraduates within the United States; Matsumoto, Weissman, Preston, Brown, and Kupperbusch (1997) note that the reliabilities calculated for the Latino participants were similar to those for the overall sample. The ICIAI demonstrates good convergent and discriminant validity, and the Family subscale is reliable when inquiring about values (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$) and behaviors (alphas = .88 – .90; Matsumoto et al., 1997). Cronbach's α for the current sample on the ICIAI-F in total was .95. Total ICIAI-F scores were used in analyses.

In addition to the aforementioned questionnaires, participants' height and weight were measured to calculate BMI.

Procedure

The host institution's IRB approved this study. Participants were recruited via class announcements and flyers. Participants signed an informed consent document and completed the questionnaires in paper-and-pencil format during individual appointments. A research assistant measured participants' height and weight at the end of the study. Participants were given the option of course credit for a psychology course ($n = 244$) or \$10 ($n = 39$) for their participation and information about body image.

Results

Alpha was set at .05. Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients among TII, self-esteem, satisfaction with social support, and collectivism. TII was significantly correlated with self-esteem and satisfaction with social support. TII was not significantly correlated with collectivism. Self-esteem was significantly correlated with satisfaction with social support and collectivism. Satisfaction with social support was significantly correlated with collectivism. Additionally, Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated between TII and age, and TII and BMI; these results were not significant thus age and BMI were not controlled for in analyses.

Data were analyzed using simultaneous multiple regression. The predictors were self-esteem and satisfaction with social support. Collectivism was not included as a predictor because it was not significantly correlated with TII. The criterion variable was TII. The model was statistically significant, $R^2 = .20$, $F(2, 275) = 34.34$, $p < .01$.

Table 2 displays information about the standardized coefficients and confidence intervals as well as partial correlations of the predictors with TII. Only the partial correlation between self-esteem and TII was statistically significant, $p < .01$; self-esteem accounted for approximately 19.36% of the variance in participants' TII.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if self-esteem, satisfaction with social support, and collectivism would predict TII in Latina undergraduates. Findings partially support the study's hypothesis. The model predicted a significant amount of variance in TII. Self-

esteem, however, accounted for almost all of the variance explained by the model. Satisfaction with social support was significantly correlated with TII whereas collectivism was not.

The relationship between self-esteem and TII found in this study is similar to other findings (e.g., Cordero & Israel, 2009). The results of this study underscore the potential of low self-esteem to influence Latina undergraduates' TII. It is possible that Latina undergraduates with low self-esteem look to the media for ways in which a woman can feel good about herself, and they learn that a woman "needs" to be thin to feel good. Prevention and intervention efforts for TII that include a component about self-esteem may be particularly beneficial for Latina undergraduates.

This study uncovered a positive relationship between self-esteem and satisfaction with social support along with a small but positive relationship between self-esteem and collectivism. Social support but not collectivism was also found to correlate with self-esteem in British and Spanish undergraduates (Goodwin & Plaza, 2000), whereas both social support and collectivism were positively correlated with self-esteem in Vietnamese-American adolescents (Lam, 2005). Perhaps Latina undergraduates who integrate their relationships into their self-constructs and are satisfied with those relationships have higher self-esteem and are less vulnerable to turning to the media for a definition of a worthy, valued woman.

Although satisfaction with social support and collectivism did not make unique contributions to the model, these variables might play a role in TII in Latina undergraduates. Its negative relationship with TII renders satisfaction with social support a potential mediator or moderator of the relationship between TII and other variables for Latina undergraduates, as has been seen in other populations (Stice, 2002). Regarding collectivism, it was surprising that collectivism was not correlated with TII. Various studies have shown that collectivism is a component of Latinos' identities. Matsumoto et al. (1997) found that Latino undergraduates were more collectivistic than Anglo undergraduates; there were no significant differences between Latino, Asian-American, and African-American undergraduates. This study's results indicate that collectivism toward the family is not associated with TII in Latina undergraduates, despite that the present sample's collectivism scores were comparable to those of the Latino undergraduates in Matsumoto et al.'s sample and were more collectivistic than not. It is possible that collectivism affects other variables that are related to TII. Future studies of Latina undergraduates that utilize various methodologies should consider the impact of satisfaction with social support and collectivism on the relationships between TII and other variables.

Limitations of this study pertain to its methodology. A major limitation is the use of cross-sectional data, which precludes the ability to make causal inferences. Participants' socioeconomic statuses (SES) were not assessed, resulting in an inability to describe participants' SES and include it as a variable in analyses. The lack of an acculturation measure might limit the conclusions that can be drawn from this study. Blow et al. (2010) found that acculturation was unrelated to TII in a sample of Latino undergraduates. Perhaps other variables investigated in this study relate to each other differently according to acculturation. The vast majority of participants who indicated the Latino subgroup with which they identify reported that they were of Mexican heritage, which precluded data analyses by subgroup. Future research could attend to the aforementioned limitations by using methods that establish temporal order of the variables and incorporating SES, acculturation, and subgroup into the framework. Future directions also include examination of the utility of extant models of TII, body dissatisfaction, and eating pathology in Latina undergraduates, and how best to tailor prevention and intervention efforts. It is imperative

that researchers, educators, and practitioners understand the needs of Latina undergraduates and learn how to help them maintain a healthy sense of wellbeing.

Research Highlights

- Self-esteem, social support, and collectivism as predictors of thin-ideal internalization (TII)
- Studied predictors in Latina undergraduates
- Self-esteem and social support negatively correlated with TII
- Only self-esteem accounted for a significant amount of variance in TII

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Table 1

Pearson Product-Moment Correlations among Measured Variables

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	M	SD
1. SATAQ3INT	--					26.56	9.07
2. RSE	-.44*	--				32.63	4.77
3. MSPSS	-.23*	.36*	--			70.93	13.50
4. ICIAI-F	-.09	.12*	.34*	--		220.13	36.80
5. BMI	.01	-.12*	-.00	-.01	--	24.64	5.65
6. Age	-.06	.10	.01	-.02	.26*	20.27	4.29

Note. Based on the number of participants with complete data for each variable, *N* ranged 274–279. SATAQ3INT = Internalization-General subscale of the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire, Third Edition; RSE = Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale; MSPSS = Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support; ICIAI-F = Individualism-Collectivism Interpersonal Assessment Inventory, Family Subscale; BMI = Body Mass Index.

* $p < .05$ (two-tailed).

Table 2

Simultaneous Regression Analysis for Predictors of Thin-Ideal Internalization

Predictor	β	t	p	95% CI	r	Partial r
Self-Esteem	-.41	-7.14	< .01	[-1.00, -.57]	-.44*	-.40*
Satisfaction w/Social Support	-.08	-1.37	.17	[-.13, .02]	-.23*	-.08

*
 $p < .05$