

African American Women and Friend Groups: The Association Between the Presence of White
Friends, Body Dissatisfaction, and Disordered Eating Behaviors

by

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Abstract

Thus far, there have been mixed findings that African American women are protected from body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. The ethnic makeup of college campuses, racial identification, and the presence of White friends in peer groups are all factors that may affect the association between body satisfaction and disordered eating for African American women. This paper examined whether body satisfaction, disordered eating, and racial identification varied depending on participants' enrollment at either a historically Black college (HBC), or two predominantly White colleges (PWC's). Survey responses ($N=317$) were collected, and demonstrated that African American women at PWC's showed higher levels of body dissatisfaction, lower levels of racial identification, and a higher prevalence of disordered eating behaviors than their peers at the HBC. Additionally, the presence of White friends moderated the relationship between racial identification and disordered eating among African American college-aged women at PWC's. African American women do not uniformly experience body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, and relationships with peer groups as well as environments play a role in shaping these attitudes and behaviors.

Keywords: body satisfaction, racial identity, African American women, peer groups, predominantly White colleges

African American Women and Friend Groups: The Association Between the Presence of White Friends, Body Dissatisfaction, and Disordered Eating Behaviors

There is a growing concern that negative body image is causing serious and long-lasting ramifications on the lives of women living in the United States (Grabe & Hyde, 2006). Body dissatisfaction and low appearance esteem have been linked to serious mental health consequences for women, including a higher risk for depression and low self-esteem (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Tylka & Hill, 1994). Furthermore, the formation of this negative body esteem and its strong relationship to the pressures of adhering to the thin ideal have also resulted in an extremely high prevalence of disordered behaviors among women; specifically, adolescent and college-aged women (Lovejoy, 2001; Parker, Nichter, Nichter, Vuckovic, Sims, & Rittenbaugh, 1995). Research has also suggested that the attitudes and beliefs of friend groups have a significant effect on the development of an individual's body image attitudes and also disordered eating behaviors (Gibbs, 1986). Particularly among African American women, interracial friendships have been found to have a profound impact on body image (Greif & Sharpe, 2010). This study aims to explore how ideas about race, friendships, and environment come together to shape how African American college-aged women feel about their bodies.

Body dissatisfaction can vary within different populations of women (Grabe & Hyde; Sabik, Cole, & Ward 2010; Warren, Gleaves, Cepeda-Benito, Fernandez, & Rodriguez-Ruiz, 2005). Although a large portion of research has been dedicated to the consequences of body dissatisfaction among European American women, significant differences have also been found between their behaviors and beliefs and those of Asian American and African American women (Sabik, et al., 2010; Sanchez & Crocker, 2005). Specifically, research has shown that there is a decreased incidence of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders among African American

women (Grabe & Hyde, 2006; Parker et al., 1995). Many have described this phenomenon as a result of a kind of “buffering effect.” The idea is that this “buffering effect” is caused by various protecting facets of African American culture, such as more accepting attitudes towards curvy bodies or a decreased emphasis on appearance when defining self-worth; factors that may decrease the harmful effects of the thin ideal on African American females (Poran, 2002; Root, 1990). However, the lives and experiences of African American women are not homogenous, and the literature on body image among this group should reflect this fact. Much of the existing literature on body image in the African American community has assumed that African American women are uniformly protected from body dissatisfaction solely because of their race (Parker et al., 1995; Poran, 2002). This oversight has given way to a more recent discussion on how African American women of different backgrounds come to think about their bodies and identities in nuanced ways (Oney, Cole, & Sellers, 2011; Sabik et al., 2010).

African American women attending historically Black colleges (HBC’s) and African American women attending predominantly White colleges (PWC’s) have been found to exhibit a wide range of views and experiences that greatly affect how they think about their race, their identities, and how they come to think about their bodies (Hesse-Biber, Livingstone, Ramirez, Barko, & Johnson, 2010). Research supports the idea that African American women attending predominately White colleges are at a greater risk for internalizing White norms of beauty, and also display a variety of attitudes regarding identification with the African American community. (Hesse-Biber et al., 2010). These varying levels of identification with the African American community play a role in shaping women’s body esteem, as it has been found that a weaker sense of racial identification with African American communities at PWC’s may put women at a higher risk for developing body image issues and eating disorders (Akan & Grilo, 1995; Hesse-

Biber et al., 2010; Root, 1990). In order to address this, our study aims to look at how the racial identity of African American women at PWC's and HBC's might be associated with their body esteem and eating behaviors.

Social and peer support also plays a pivotal role in shaping body ideals and eating behaviors among women of all backgrounds (Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, Muir, 1999).

Researchers argue that members of the same peer groups often exhibit almost identical views on body image and display very similar eating behaviors. Levine, Smolak, and Hayden (1994) and Gibbs (1986) found that levels of weight-management and body esteem among peers were often reflected in an individual girl's own efforts at maintaining and controlling her weight. Despite this fact, very little research has been done to investigate how friendships among women, and especially of African American women, may play a significant role in shaping body esteem (Greif & Sharpe, 2010). This study aims to address these gaps in the research by looking at how the experiences of racial identification and the influence of peer groups in the lives of African American women come together to shape their body esteem.

Racial Differences in Body Image and the Buffering Effect

When looking at women of various racial/ethnic backgrounds, African American women exhibit fewer dieting behaviors and also are significantly less preoccupied with their bodies than their White counterparts (Casper & Offer, 1990; Parker et al., 1995). According to Makkar and Strube (1995), African American women feel less concerned about being "fat," less preoccupied over body image, and display fewer disordered eating attitudes. These findings have been attributed to many different facets of African American culture, all contributing to this "buffering effect," which reduces levels of body dissatisfaction within the African American community. One largely accepted theory is that African American women may reject the thin ideal as a way

to resist and reject notions of conforming to White standards of beauty (Allan, Mayo, & Michel, 1993; Grabe & Hyde, 2006). A strong proponent of this theory, Collins (1990) argues that the acceptance of Afrocentric ideals of beauty, which center on uniqueness and creativity, actually allows African American women to free themselves from the rigid appearance ideals imposed on White women. Parker et al. (1995) further supports this idea with research showing that African American girls defined beauty very differently than their White, Asian American, and Mexican American peers. Instead of focusing on an extremely fixed notion of what is beautiful that emphasizes the importance of weight, the African American girls who participated in the study instead placed more emphasis on a sense of individuality, style, and attitude. As a result, this study found that 70% of African American participants were satisfied with their bodies and their weight; in comparison, 90% of their White peers reported dissatisfaction. African American culture has also been found to be more accepting of women with curves and of different builds, further distancing African American women from the White western thin ideal (Lovejoy, 2001; Parker et al., 1995).

Parker et al. (1995) further theorized that these unique perceptions of beauty found among African American culture reflect a deeper and different relationship that African American women have with their communities. As reported by Lovejoy (2001), a more supportive African American community that encourages the rejection of White idealized norms of beauty, in conjunction with a more accepting definition of what is beautiful, creates an atmosphere of tolerance that explains African American women's generally positive feelings about their bodies. On the other hand, as pointed out by Sabik et al. (2010), although there has been a large portion of literature devoted to the buffering effect, it has often failed to acknowledge differences among African American women in the extent to which they are

buffered. Helms, Jernigan, and Mascher (2005) point out specific aspects of African American culture that contribute to creating this buffering effect: one of the most significant of these is engagement with African American culture, and also how women come to feel about being African American.

African American Identity

Root (1990) argues that it is becoming increasingly difficult for African American women to escape the idealized standards of beauty promoted through White culture, as messages about White western appearance ideals are becoming increasingly pervasive and harder to ignore throughout society. This phenomenon contributes to the finding that African American women are feeling more and more pressure to adopt and conform to beauty standards other than their own, and therefore increasingly susceptible to feelings of body dissatisfaction. As supported by Akan and Grilo (1995), and Pate, Pumariega, Hester, and Garner (1982), higher levels of disordered eating can be found among individuals in minority groups that internalize the White, western thin-ideal. This has led to what has been termed “double jeopardy” for African American women, as they now must confront beauty standards of both White and African American communities (Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1987).

In comparison to other ethnic groups, African Americans have higher levels of self-esteem and a strong sense of community attachment (Lovejoy, 2001). Positive self-esteem has been linked to positive feelings about one’s race in the African American community, as it has been found that members of minority or stigmatized groups can find support and strength from strong group and racial identification in the face of adversity or discrimination (Oney et al., 2010; Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998). This high self-esteem often translates into higher levels of body esteem and decreased incidences of eating disorders among African

American women. This finding has been repeated in numerous studies, but it is equally important to acknowledge that identity formation and community attachment is definitely not uniform among all women (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Differences in class, background, and upbringing diversify the levels and ways in which African American women incorporate their identities into shaping their body esteem.

African American women who report race as being less central to their identities have been found to exhibit higher levels of body dissatisfaction than women who do not. Makkar and Strube (1995) conducted a study in which African American women were exposed to images of both White and Black models, and were then asked to rate their own attractiveness. In their results, they found that women who identified highly with African American culture were much more likely to reject White standards of beauty. As reported in their (1995) study, after being exposed to pictures of the White models, participants who were high on African self-consciousness actually rated themselves as more attractive, and the models as less attractive. In contrast, their low African self-conscious peers were more likely to rate themselves as less attractive after exposure to the models. Henrickson, Crowther, and Harrington (2010) also found that African American women of various ages and levels of education were much more likely to exhibit higher levels of disordered eating if they identified more closely with White culture. Additionally, Sabik et al. (2010) surveyed undergraduates and found that a higher drive for thinness was associated with African American respondents who reported higher levels of identification with other ethnic groups. This association, however, was not found among the European American and Asian American women involved in the study.

Holding nuanced views of African American culture can influence how much race plays a factor in shaping attitudes about life (Roberts et al., 1998). In the realm of racial identification,

there are differences between global, overall attitudes towards race and personal, private ones (Oney et al., 2010). It has been found that individual views regarding how African American culture fits into society as a whole may have less of an effect on body esteem than personal and private identification with African American culture. Oney et al. (2010) explained that assimilation ideology, or the emphasis on embracing similarities between African American and White culture, did not have a moderating relationship between body attitudes and self-esteem in their study. What was more important was how the participants personally felt about being African American, and also how they felt about African Americans as a group. Furthermore, Akan and Greilo (1995) found that the degree of assimilation attitudes within the African American participants of their study was unrelated to eating, dieting, and body esteem. What did matter was low self-esteem, internalization of the thin-ideal, and public self-consciousness (or the attitudes participants believe others have towards African Americans).

Social context: Predominantly White Colleges vs. Historically Black Colleges

Differences in racial identification are important when looking at the lives of African American college-aged women. As reported by Roberts, Cash, Feingold, and Johnson (2006), college and school campuses are “breeding grounds” for negative body image attitudes and the development of eating disorders. Research also suggests that college campuses can often exacerbate racial differences in body image attitudes (Roberts et al., 2006). For African American females, the college experience is significantly altered when comparing those at predominantly White colleges (PWC’s) and those at historically Black colleges (HBC’s). According to Jackson (1998), many African American women attending PWC’s often feel conflicting pressures to both adhere to the societal expectations and traditions of the African American community, and also negotiate within the predominately White norms of their college

campuses. As also reported by Hesse-Biber et al. (2010), this dynamic can create a multitude of pressures on African American women struggling to adopt and stay true to certain ideals of both communities.

These increasing and double pressures are particularly important when considering that the internalization of White western ideals may lead African American women to have reduced racial identification, putting them at a higher risk for developing body dissatisfaction (Jackson, 1998; Roberts et al., 2006; Hesse-Biber et al., 2010). In congruence with this idea, the research of Mullholland and Mintz (2001) revealed that African American women attending PWC's reported a higher risk of eating disorders than their peers at HBC's. It is interesting to note that although their study included African American women who were members of sororities on campus, there were no significant differences in the levels of eating disorders between sorority and non-sorority members (a finding not repeated among White women), suggesting that some levels of African American identification were lessening the impact of the thin-ideal on these women (Mullholland & Mintz, 2001). Hesse-Biber et al. (2010) further reported that for women who enter PWC's with diminished racial identification, campuses can pose a risk for developing negative body image attitudes and disordered eating behaviors. In their study, Abrams, Allen, and Gray (1993) found that African American female college students who reported rejection of their black identity were more likely to report negative body image attitudes and disordered eating behaviors that were linked to the development of actual eating disorders. Additionally, African American women attending HBC's report lower levels of disordered eating than their peers at PWC's (Gray, Ford, & Kelly, 1987; Hesse-Biber et al., 2010; Mulholland & Mintz, 2001). These factors are important when looking at African American women attending colleges across the country, and essential in understanding how nuances in African American

identification can have significant and important ramifications on the development of body esteem in different college campus contexts.

Friendship/ Peer Group Influences

Peers and social groups are an integral part of identity formation, and the members of one's peer group likely impact body image attitudes and eating behaviors. As a part of Crandall's (1998) study, the eating behaviors and attitudes of women in certain college friend circles were observed and analyzed. Although participants displayed a variety of eating attitudes and behaviors at the beginning of the year, the women resembled each other so closely by the end of the year that their eating behaviors could actually be predicted by those of their close friends (Crandall, 1998; Paxton et al., 1999). Furthermore, it has been found that friend groups also are likely to have similar levels of physical attributes, and also share health-risk behaviors (Bercheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971; Paxton et al., 1999). In their study, Paxton et al. (1999) explored clusters of friend groups within 523 adolescent girls, and found that friendships played a significant role in predicting the body image attitudes and eating behaviors of the girls themselves. They found numerous trends within friend groups, including finding that groups that scored higher on body image dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors also displayed higher levels of body comparison, more weight-based teasing, and their friends having a significant impact on their dieting behaviors (Paxton et al., 1999).

Although these findings are significant, it is important to consider how friendships may play a more nuanced role in terms of African American women and body image. According to the literature, the social support systems within the African American community are hypothesized to be a large part of why African American women have better body esteem (Lovejoy, 2001). However, as the internalization of western thin ideals is theorized to play such a

large part in decreasing the effectiveness of these protective factors, it is important to look at how a diverse friend circle may also influence body esteem. Among college women, researchers have found that while interracial friendships increase for White students in college, they actually decrease for many African American women (Stearns, Buchmann, & Bonneau, 2009). Among a number of other factors, Stearns et al. (2009) cited the ethnic makeup of college dormitories, as well as the race of one's roommate, as having the greatest influence of the number of interracial friendships formed during college (2009). This study also posits that a lower prevalence of interracial friendships on college campuses may be a result of college being the first opportunity for many students to form same-race friendships.

The idea of a decreased prevalence of interracial friendships in college is important when considering how peer groups may influence body esteem. Abrams and Stormer (1999) found that only for African American females did the presence of an ethnically diverse friend or peer group cause an increase in the levels of internalization of the White western standards of beauty. Interestingly, the White, Latina, and Asian American girls involved in the study did not reflect the same results. Unfortunately, the literature has not revealed similar studies looking at how the ethnic makeup of friend groups could play an important role in the development of body esteem. This finding, in conjunction with the data on the influence of the attitudes of friends on body image, has led us to look at the presence of African American vs. African American and White friendships among the women in our own study.

Present Study

Throughout the literature on body image, the mechanisms behind why African American women display lower levels of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating have often been overlooked. Studies frequently attribute better body esteem among African American women to

protective factors associated with African American culture. However, they often do not take a closer look at the fact that African American women engage with culture and their communities in extremely nuanced ways. As a result of this, our study aimed to break down how African American women feel about their racial identity, and further look at how this attitude affected their body esteem. Furthermore, as friendships have also been shown to play a significant role in the development of attitudes about the body, as well as disordered eating behaviors, we did not expect that differences in racial identification would explain all of the differences found among our participants. We hypothesized that friendships also influence the shaping of attitudes regarding body image and the possible development of disordered eating behaviors among some populations of college-aged women.

This study specifically focused on differences among African American college women at PWC's and HBC's due to the significant differences in ethnic identification and body esteem have been found among women at these schools. As women at PWC's are often faced with multiple pressures in regards to ethnic identification, we hypothesized that these women may also display lower levels of private regard, or feel less positively about being African American, compared to their counterparts at HBCs. This decrease in ethnic identification and private regard could also lead to these women to become more vulnerable to the internalization of White western body ideals, and therefore more likely to display disordered eating attitudes and behaviors.

Additionally, we wanted to investigate whether the presence of White friendships would play a significant role in the body esteem of African American women. As the campuses of PWC's are significantly more diverse than those of HBC's, we hypothesized that women attending PWC's would be more likely to have diverse friend groups that included White

women. Because many studies have shown that racial identification explains some, but not all, of the differences among body image in White and African American women, we also focused on whether the presence of White friends is associated with body esteem. Specifically, we hypothesized that the presence of White friends may moderate the relationship between private regard and disordered eating behaviors.

Hypothesis 1: African American women at the PWC's will have lower levels of private regard and also higher levels of dieting and body dissatisfaction.

Hypothesis 2: African American women at PWC's will have more White friends than their counterparts attending the HBC.

Hypothesis 3: For African American women at the PWC's, the percentage of White friends they have will moderate the relationship between dieting and private regard, such that a higher amount of White friends will be associated with higher dieting behaviors.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from college campuses around the United States, as a part of a larger, ongoing longitudinal study. This study was designed to gather information about the daily life experiences of African American college students. The overall study recruited four hundred and twenty six undergraduate students (109 men and 317 women). However, only female participants were included in the present study. All of these women were self-identified African American, first through fourth year students, aged 17 to 30 ($M=19.8$ years, $SD=.87$) attending universities located in three different regions of the United States. University 1 is a historically Black college of medium-size, located on the East Coast ($n=111$). Both University 2 and 3 are

large predominantly White universities ($n=206$); however, University 2 is situated in the Southeast and University 3 is in the Midwest.

Procedure

Participants were contacted using various methods. At the historically Black university, fliers and classroom announcements provided students with relevant information pertaining to the study. The project was advertised as a study aiming to research African American students' racial identity and its influences on their daily experiences. At the predominately White universities, students were contacted via telephone and email communication. The Offices of Registrar provided contact information for students who identified as African American. At all three universities, prospective participants were notified that a payment of \$15 was offered in exchange for participation.

Different sets of recruiters were in charge of gathering participants at each university. At the historically Black University, there were 3 African American recruiters (1 man and 2 women). At the predominantly White college located in the Southeast, there were 4 recruiters involved, all of African American descent (1 man and 3 women). Recruitment at the predominantly White college in the Midwest was conducted by two African American women, one Asian American man, and one European American woman. However, the Asian American woman and European American man solely handled telephone and email recruitment. Before participants officially joined the study, the recruiters at all three schools asked potential students screening questions in order to make sure that they were above the age of 18 and identified themselves as African American. Once the eligibility of each student was established, a meeting time was set up within the proceeding two weeks in order for the student come into a lab and complete the web-based survey. The survey included measures regarding racial identity, racial

experiences, demographics, body image, eating habits, and other areas that are not specifically relevant to this particular study.

Measures

School Classification. Participants were separated based on the school that they attended, and the data were analyzed based on the type: either predominantly White colleges or the historically Black college. There were two hundred and six participants who attended the predominantly White colleges, and one hundred and eleven participants who attended the historically Black college.

Body Dissatisfaction. The Body Ideals Questionnaire (BIQ) was used in this study in order to assess levels of body dissatisfaction in the participants. The BIQ consists of a 22-item scale of body attitudes, broken up into two different parts: Body Image Importance and Body Image Discrepancy (Cash & Szymanski, 1995). Both the Body Image Importance scale and the Body Image Discrepancy scale assessed various aspects of the body and appearance: hair, skin complexion, weight, height, hair texture and thickness, facial features (eyes, nose, ears, and facial shape), muscle tone and definition, body proportions, weight, chest size, physical strength, physical coordination, and overall physical appearance. Also, there were items included in the scale that were original to this study, and aimed to capture aspects of body image that might be of particular concern to African Americans, such as hair texture or skin complexion. The Body Image Importance scale measured how strong a person's feelings are towards specific aspects of their appearance. For example, one of the items asks, "How important to you are your ideal body proportions?" (0=not important, 3=very important). The Body Image Discrepancy questions measure how a person evaluates their body in comparison to their ideal. One of the questions included "My ideal body proportions are: (0=*exactly as I am*, 3=*very unlike me*).

The scores of the Body Image Importance scale and the Body Image Discrepancy scale were combined to create a weighted discrepancy score. The weighted body image discrepancy scores were recoded using the procedures specified by Cash & Szymanski (1995). The Body Dissatisfaction scores included the weighted self-ideal items from the importance scale (“*exactly as I am*”), and the recode insures that a score of 0 is not possible for the cross-product scores (Cash & Szymanski, 1995). The scores for this measure range from -3 to 9, with a higher score indicating more body image dissatisfaction and discrepancy with the ideal. Participants who did not complete more than 2/3 of the questions on the scale were dropped from the analyses. For each subscale, participants must have filled out at least 7 items to be included in the analysis. The internal consistency reliability estimate for Body Dissatisfaction has been reported as $\alpha=.77$ (Cash & Szymanski, 1995). In this present study, the alpha for Body Dissatisfaction was .81.

Disordered Eating. The EAT-26 (Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983) is a twenty-six item scale designed to assess disordered eating. The scale consists of three subscales: dieting, bulimia, and oral control. The dieting subscale aimed to measure participants’ attitudes towards food, their levels of preoccupation with putting on weight, and their behaviors to prevent doing so. A sample item from the dieting subscale includes “Aware of the calorie content of foods that I eat” (1=*always*, 6=*never*). The dieting subscale had an alpha of $\alpha=.87$. The bulimia subscale aims to measure the participants’ bulimic tendencies, and contains items such as “Have gone on eating binges where I feel like I may not be able to stop” (1=*always*, 6=*never*). The bulimia subscale had an alpha of $\alpha=.83$. The oral control scale is designed to evaluate how other people view the participant’s eating habits and attitudes, and includes questions such as “Feel that others would prefer if I ate more” (1=*always*, 6=*never*). However, in this study, only the bulimia and diet subscales were used in order to assess the eating and dieting behaviors and attitudes of the

participants. A higher score on the measure indicates higher levels of disordered eating pathology. The EAT-26 scale has an internal reliability of $\alpha=.90$ (Doninger, Enders, & Burnett, 2005).

Racial Identity. The Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity-S (MIBI-S: Martin et al., 2010) was used in order to assess aspects of racial identity among the respondents. This scale is a shortened version of one created by Sellers et al. (1998) and includes 27 items. Questions in all of the subscales are evaluated on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale measure, all of which were tested and validated by Martin et. al. Although the scale includes many subscales corresponding to all the constructs of the MIBI, only the private regard subscale was used for data analysis in this study. Private regard refers to how the respondents themselves feel about being black. This scale featured three items, and a sample item is “I am happy that I am Black.” A higher score on the public regard score implies that the respondent feels positively about being Black. The scores for this scale were calculated by averaging what the participants put down for each item. In this study, the alpha for private regard was ($\alpha=.64$).

Body Mass Index (BMI). Respondents used self-report to provide information on their height and weight, and both were used to calculate their Body Mass Index. This was calculated as the weight in pounds divided by height in inches squared, all multiplied by 703. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2009), the common ranges for weight using the BMI are underweight (<18.5), normal weight (18.5-24.99), overweight (25-29.99), and obese (>30). For the present study, the mean BMI for women at the predominantly White colleges was 24.80 ($SD=5.3$), and the mean for women attending the historically Black college was 25.7 ($SD=6.1$). This puts the average participant within the normal weight range, but very close to the overweight classification. However, it is important to acknowledge that the weight classifications

based on BMI ranges may not accurately represent African American women. Jackson, Ellis, McFarlin, Sailors, & Bray (2009) found that BMI scores, as they were primarily formed based on measurements from European Americans, may over-classify African American women as being overweight and obese. In all of the analyses, BMI was used as a control variable.

Friendship Diversity. A ratio was created in order to properly represent the total number of white friends reported by the participants of the study. Participants were asked to list their ten closest friends, in order of closeness, and for each, to include the friend's gender and race. This ratio was formed by dividing total number of white friends by the total number of white and black friends reported. For women at the PWC's the mean ratio of white friends was .21 ($SD=.31$), and for women at the HBC the mean ratio of white friends was .004 ($SD=.03$).

Results

In order to assess differences in the ratio of white friends among women at PWC's and the HBC, we used t tests to compare the means of the predictor and dependent variables included in the study. We then assessed the correlations between all of the variables separately for women at the different types of school.

After this, the steps outlined by Aiken and West (1991) were followed in order to test for moderation in the women attending predominantly White colleges, as women at the HBC reported a ratio of White friends close to zero. In order to test this moderation, we centered all of the independent variables included in the interactions. Then, we created our interaction terms by multiplying our specified centered variables. By regressing the dependent variables, dieting and bulimia, we were able to look at these predictors separately. Our last step was to graph any significant interactions based on scores of one standard deviation above and below the mean for these variables.

Differences at the PWC's and the HBC

First, in order to assess whether the participants attending HBC's and PWC's had significant differences on the measures of BMI, body dissatisfaction, friend ratio, private regard, dieting behavior, and bulimic behavior, we compared their means. A number of significant differences were found. As hypothesized, women at the PWC's reported significantly higher ratios of White friends (see Table 1) than women at the HBC. In contrast, women at the HBC reported significantly higher levels of private regard, indicating that on average women at these schools felt more positively about being Black. Furthermore, women at the HBC also reported higher appearance esteem on average, as assessed by lower scores on the BIQ (which assesses dissatisfaction). The women did not differ significantly on levels of BMI. It is interesting to note that at both the PWC's and the HBC, women scored very similarly on both the dieting and bulimia measures.

We further examined differences in students at PWC's versus students at the HBC through the use of correlations (Table 2). It was found that for students at both the PWC's and the HBC, BMI was significantly positively correlated with body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, BMI was also significantly positively correlated with dieting behaviors and bulimia. This indicates that at both the PWC's and HBC's, women who scored higher on the BMI scale also reported higher levels of body dissatisfaction, as well as higher levels of disordered eating behaviors. Furthermore, body dissatisfaction was significantly positively correlated with dieting at both the PWC's and the HBC. The results show that women reporting higher levels of body dissatisfaction were more likely to exhibit dieting behaviors, regardless of type of school. Finally, at both the PWC's and the HBC, there was a significant positive

relationship between dieting and bulimia. The more women engaged in dieting behaviors, the more likely they were to also exhibit bulimic tendencies.

As expected, there were some significant correlations that were solely found at the PWC's. First, there was a significant positive correlation between body dissatisfaction and bulimia at the PWC's, indicating that women at this type of school were more likely to exhibit bulimic tendencies if they also had high levels of body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, these schools were also the only ones to report a significantly negative relationship between BMI and friend ratio. This indicates that the higher women scored on the BMI scale, the less likely they were to report having white friends. As mentioned before, the friend ratio at the HBC is very close to zero, so we wouldn't expect to find this relationship among that population of women. Interestingly, there was also only a significant negative correlation between private regard and friend ratio at the PWC's. This finding showed that for women at these schools, there is an inverse relationship between feeling positively about being black, and the number of white friends one has. Furthermore, there was a significant negative relationship between body dissatisfaction and private regard. This correlation at the HBC was not significant, but was nearly the same size; and, the significance was also affected by the fact that there were more students at the PWC's. The larger sample could have led to more significance. This relationship also might indicate that women at these schools who scored higher on body dissatisfaction also felt less positive about being black. Lastly, the PWC's were the only schools to report a significant negative relationship between private regard and both dieting and bulimia. This reflects that women at PWC's who exhibited more dieting and bulimic tendencies tended to feel less positively about being Black.

Moderation Analyses

Due to significant relationship between friend ratio and body esteem found only at the PWC's, we limited our moderation testing to this population. We followed the steps of Aiken and West (1991) and used regression analyses to examine whether private regard moderated the relationship between friend ratio and dieting at the PWC's. We subtracted the means from our continuous predictor variables (private regard, friend ratio, and BIQ) in order to center the variables. Next, our interaction term (private regard x friend ratio) was calculated by multiplying their centered variables. We included BMI as our control variable. As shown in Table 3, among African American women at PWC's, high BMI and high body dissatisfaction were associated with greater dieting. The results also indicated that there was a significant relationship between body dissatisfaction and bulimia. Furthermore, there was a significant interaction between private regard and friend ratio on dieting scores, indicating moderation.

A graph of this interaction (Figure 1) indicated that African American women who were high on private regard and low on White friend ratio were the only group to exhibit significantly lower dieting behaviors. This supported our hypothesis in that if African American women reported feeling good about being black as well as had a low percentage of white friends, then they would also report less dieting. African American women high on private regard, but high on number of white friends, exhibited similar dieting as women low on private regard and regardless of percentage of white friends. This finding shows that even if the women reported feeling good about being black, if they also reported a high ratio of white friends, they exhibited similar dieting behaviors as women who felt less positively about being black (regardless of the number of white friends reported). These results showed that only the women who were both low on white friends and also felt good about being Black displayed decreased levels of dieting.

Discussion

This study focused on the prevalence of disordered eating behaviors and body dissatisfaction and their influence, together with racial identification and interracial friendships on body image among African American college-aged women. Specifically, we compared levels of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating in women attending predominantly White colleges (PWC's) and a historically Black college (HBC) in the United States. We explored whether the feelings these women had about being Black affected their reported levels of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors. This study also assessed the number of interracial friendships between African American and White women at both of these types of schools. Last, this study evaluated whether the number of White friends, relative to the number of both African American and White friends, of African American women attending a PWC moderated the relationship between how women felt about being Black and disordered eating behavior.

In agreement with our first hypothesis, African American women attending HBC's reported higher levels of private regard and body esteem than their counterparts at PWC's. In this study, women attending HBC's felt better about being Black and were more satisfied with their bodies than women attending PWC's. There is support that this result can be rooted in the strong connections that African American women have with their community, which emphasizes a more flexible and unique definition of what is considered beautiful (Hesse-Biber et al. 2010; Collins 1990). This strong community engagement may contribute to a decreased pressure to adhere to the thin-ideal, and therefore also promote higher levels of body esteem.

We believed that the environments of predominantly White colleges could lead to the weakened senses of racial identification, and in turn increased instances of body dissatisfaction among African American women attending these institutions. Hesse-Biber et al. (2010) reported

that the campuses of PWC's can often present an environment where African American women feel conflicted between adhering to the ideals and expectations of the African American community, as well as those of the predominantly White culture of campus life. This double pressure may offer one explanation for the lower levels of racial identification found in the women attending PWC's in this study; African American women at PWC's may be unable to ignore the culture and values of a predominantly White community. It is rooted in the very structure of the education system and environment at these schools. By displaying fewer interracial friendships with White women, as well as being at a campus that does not necessarily prescribe or promote the beliefs of the White western thin ideal, African American women at HBC's may not be exposed to the same cultural pressures in regards to their bodies.

Furthermore, it is also important to acknowledge that women with higher racial identification could also be more likely to choose to attend an HBC in the first place. As a result, it is possible that African American women have shown lower overall levels of body dissatisfaction in both this and other studies.

Supporting our second hypothesis, the results indicated that on average, African American women attending PWC's had a higher percentage of White friends than women attending HBC's. This could be due to a number of factors. Interracial friendships in college have been found to increase through interactions in arenas such as classes and dorms, with the race of one's roommate having a significant influence on the number of interracial friendships that students form in their first year (Stearns et al., 2009). By having a campus that may be predominantly White, it is more likely that an African American woman could form friendships with other White women. At the HBC, African American women represent the majority, and therefore have a greater chance of to having friends that are African American as well. As a

result, it is much more likely that a student attending a PWC, versus a student attending a HBC, would experience an environment for interracial friendships to form.

Our correlations further emphasized the complicated relationship that African American women have with body esteem. This is evidenced by this study's findings regarding the relationships between BMI, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating. At both types of schools, BMI was positively correlated with body dissatisfaction, dieting, and bulimia. This implies an association between how high women in this study scored on the BMI scale, that is, their weight relative to their height, and the likelihood they also experience body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors. This is consistent with literature regarding body image of women living in the United States, but inconsistent with some literature regarding body esteem in African American women. As reported in Grabe and Hyde (2006), much of the literature on body image suggests that although African American women have been found to weigh more on average than White women, they also tend to be more satisfied with their bodies, implying that the relationship between weight and body esteem is not as strong for African American women (Akan & Grilo, 1995). Although African American women tend to be *more* satisfied with their bodies than White women, this pattern does not imply that African American women are immune from body dissatisfaction, or that their satisfaction is unrelated to their weight. Hrabosky and Grilo (2007) found that increased weight was associated with increased body image concern in African American women, and O'Neill (2003) found that African American women display no less risk for binge eating and bulimia than their White peers. These findings reinforce the importance of not assuming women from particular ethnic groups are impervious to the damaging and pervasive messages of the thin ideal in the United States.

This study also reinforces the association between body dissatisfaction and the development of eating disorders in college-aged women, regardless of campus environment or race. For women at both the PWC's and HBC's, there was a positive association between body dissatisfaction and dieting behaviors. In other words, women who reported higher levels of body dissatisfaction were also likely to report higher levels of dieting behaviors. As reported in Warren et al. (2005), body dissatisfaction is one of the most researched and significant risk factors for the development of eating disorders. Moderate levels of body dissatisfaction are normative in women attending college, with the highest rates of body dissatisfaction found to reach almost 80% of women in the university environment (Silbersteing, Striegel-Moore Timko, & Rodin, 1988; Warren et al., 2005). Furthermore, this study reported a positive correlation between dieting and bulimic behaviors, implying that African American women who showed higher levels of dieting behaviors also displayed an increased chance of exhibiting bulimic tendencies. In agreement with our research, Lowe, Gleaves, and Murpy-Eberenz (1998) found that weight-loss dieting is one of the most significant precursors to the development of bulimia nervosa. This finding once more highlights the importance of not generalizing that African American women are uniformly protected from experiencing the negative consequences of body dissatisfaction.

Consistent with the literature, there were some findings regarding body image that were significant solely among women attending PWC's. First, for African American women attending PWC's, there was a significant relationship between body dissatisfaction and bulimia such that there was an association between women who scored higher on body dissatisfaction, and those who were also likely to report bulimic behavior. As previously mentioned, both Mulholland and Mintz (2001) and Gray et al. (1987) found that women at HBC's exhibited fewer disordered

eating tendencies than women attending PWC's. This supports the idea that there may be factors at historically Black colleges that provide some level of protection to African American women from developing disordered eating behaviors. This could come from the decreased risk of internalization of White western standards of beauty, and also the opportunity to escape from the "double jeopardy" of social pressures that women at PWC's often have to face (Hesse-Biber et al., 2010). Also, it is once again important to acknowledge that women who already experience levels of protection from the thin ideal may also be more likely to choose to attend an HBC in the first place.

Furthermore, women at the PWC's displayed a significant negative relationship between BMI and number of White friends reported. This points to the influence of cultural pressure in regards to certain body sizes, as the BMI of African American women seemed to be associated with the number of White friends they reported. These differences in BMI and percentage of White friends could occur for a multitude of reasons. Predominantly White beauty norms emphasize a smaller physique as essential in defining beauty, and friends have been found to be a fundamental factor in the communication and internalization of these messages (Wood & Petrie, 2010). It is possible that if African American women have a larger amount of White friends, the risk of internalization of these messages about the importance of achieving the thin ideal is greatly increased. As a result, women with a predominantly White friend group may also start to embody the disordered eating behaviors found so prevalently in the White community (Grabe & Hyde, 2006; Poran, 2002). As Crosby and Zubin (1990) state, people are most likely to compare themselves and learn from individuals who share the same or similar status as they do. It is also important to consider that African American women who have internalized this ideal might be more likely to have White friends. In the case of African American women, literature

has often assumed that their community consists of other African American women. However, for women attending predominantly White colleges, this is untrue and could explain differences in body image, and in this case types of bodies, which are endorsed and embodied by the different communities of women that African American women affiliate themselves with.

Also, only women attending PWC's displayed a negative correlation between their feelings about their race and body dissatisfaction. The research regarding differences in body esteem between women at the two types of schools is consistent with this finding, with Mulholland and Mintz (2001) and Hesse-Biber et al. (2010) specifically reporting associations between a decreased sense of racial identification among women at PWC's and body image dissatisfaction. This also implies that for women attending HBC's, their body image is not related to their racial esteem, such that if they do dislike their bodies, it is not necessarily linked to how much they like other aspects of themselves such as their race. However, the African American women attending PWC's reported a significant negative relationship between private regard and disordered eating. These findings all point to racial identity as an important piece of the puzzle in understanding differences in body satisfaction in African American women, supporting the necessity of research involving African American women to include racial identity as a factor when examining body esteem and disordered eating behaviors.

Our third hypothesis was supported in that the ratio of White friends to total number of friends reported by African American women at PWC's moderated the relationship between private regard and dieting behaviors. For African American women at PWC's with high levels of private regard, individual differences in the percentage of White friends affected levels of disordered eating behaviors, such that only women reporting both a low ratio of White friends and also high private regard reported decreased levels of dieting behaviors. This finding suggests

that only African American women who felt positively about being Black and also reported a low number of White friends showed lower levels of disordered eating behaviors. In all other cases, the combination of private regard and amount of White friends did not offer any sort of resistance to the presence of disordered eating behaviors for African American women at PWC's. Even if women reported high levels of private regard, if they also reported a high level of White friends, they were just as vulnerable to dieting behaviors as women who had low private regard.

The implications of this finding add important nuances to the discussion of both disordered eating behaviors in African American women, and also the effectiveness of racial identification as a protecting factor from the internalization of the thin-ideal in African American women. Racial identification has often been offered as one explanation for the significant differences in levels of body esteem found among women in different ethnic groups. As explained by Rogers Wood and Petrie (2010), a strong sense of affiliation with one's ethnic group has often been hypothesized to serve as a significant buffer to stop or significantly reduce the levels of internalization of the thin ideal that African American women experience. Our study is consistent with this research; however, it raises the issue that ethnic group identification cannot fully protect women from internalizing negative attitudes and behaviors with regard to the body. For African American women, being surrounded by a community of friends could help support the rejection of societal messages promoting negative attitudes and disordered eating behaviors as the norm, and also could play an important role in how these women develop body image attitudes and disordered eating behaviors; however, only if they also have private regard.

African American women at PWC's have an increased chance of exposure to the thin-ideal through friendships with White women; as a result, they may also have a significantly

increased risk of internalizing these ideals and behaviors that many White women use to maintain this ideal. Friendships among women have been shown to have considerable influence over the development of body image attitudes and disordered eating behaviors, and it has been reported that the overall attitudes and eating behaviors of whole friend groups can often predict the behaviors and attitudes of individual members of these groups (Crandall, 1998). Examining the relationship of interracial friendships found between African American and White women at PWC's has a distinctly different impact on how these African American women, in comparison to African American women with predominantly African American friend groups, come to understand and appreciate their bodies. African American women have been found to define beauty in ways that emphasize personal style, individuality, and creativity instead of over issues of weight (Parker et al., 1995). In contrast, predominantly White culture tends to emphasize the importance of being thin in order to be considered beautiful (Nichter, 2000). These differing cultural values in regards to body image affect the attitudes and behaviors of women that ascribe to them, and additionally, can be transmitted and reinforced through their friendships.

An increase in the level of internalization of White standards of beauty in African American women has been directly linked to the development of body dissatisfaction among women in other studies: Abrams and Stormer (1999) reported that African American women were the only racial group (Asian American, Latin, and European American women were also included) to display increased levels of internalization of White standards of beauty through the presence of interracial friendships. This may be a result of a number of factors, but it is important to acknowledge that Women in this study who maintained their friendships within the African American community reported significantly lower levels of internalization and awareness of the thin ideal by also displaying less disordered eating. Our finding is consistent with previous

research indicating that levels of racial identification significantly impact African American women's levels of body esteem (Lester & Petrie, 1998; Poran, 2006). According to Hesse-Biber et al. (2010), African American women attending historically Black colleges have shown stronger levels of racial identification, in turn lower amounts of disordered eating symptoms and greater body satisfaction than those attending predominantly White colleges (Gray et al. 1987; Mulholland & Mintz, 2001).

This finding also implies that there are multiple factors that must come into play in order for African American women to display lowered levels of disordered eating: racial identification *and* the presence of Black friends. This is interesting to note, as much of the literature that focuses on racial identification as a sufficient protector of African American women from disordered eating behaviors does not discuss the importance that friendships may have on these findings. The results of this study suggest otherwise, and when designing interventions to help boost body esteem and reduce disordered eating among African American women, it is essential that raising racial identification not be the only focus. There must also be an emphasis on reducing the power of the thin ideal from being pervasive among African American peer groups. This speaks to the real power that the thin ideal has over women from all different backgrounds in the United States, and especially to the difficulty of avoiding the development of disordered eating behaviors at PWC's. The necessity of having friends that do not necessarily prescribe to the majority in order to escape the influence of these thin ideals demonstrates the power that these norms have over college women.

The major ideas explored in this study are essential in broadening knowledge surrounding differences in body esteem within communities of women in this country. Recognizing that women are not a homogeneous group allows for a much more knowledgeable discussion in

finding important ways to fight the negative consequences of low body esteem that detrimentally affect the lives of so many women in profound and powerful ways. African American women are too often absent from the discussions focused on fighting the negative messages that promote low levels of body esteem and high levels of disordered eating behaviors among women. By assuming that African American women are protected from body dissatisfaction and eating disorders, the psychological community is reducing the chance that women dealing with these very real concerns can be acknowledged and helped in effective ways. The finding that the presence of White friendships has such a significantly detrimental effect on a group of women who have generally been found not to display high levels of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors can lead researchers to pinpoint how these negative processes work, and in turn may be able to teach women effective ways to resist internalizing these harmful attitudes and behaviors. Further, this could help women from all backgrounds come to understand unrealistic standards of female beauty, and in the long run truly prevent the negative body image attitudes and disordered eating behaviors from having such a crippling effect on the lives of women as they do today.

Limitations and Future Directions

There were several limitations that should be addressed within our study. Although we explored the significance of White friendships on the body esteem and disordered eating behaviors of African American women, we did not look at how the friendships of women from other ethnic groups may also offer protection to African American women from internalizing these ideals, or how these relationships may increase their levels of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors. As suggested by Poran (2006), ethnically diverse women feel different pressures in regards to body image, and friendships with women from other ethnic

groups may or may not protect women from being susceptible to these negative body esteem attitudes and disordered eating behaviors associated with other cultures. However, as White women tend to score highest on levels of body image dissatisfaction and African American women tend to display the lowest amounts of these behaviors and attitudes, our study managed to cover the effects of the broadest range of body esteem attitudes and disordered eating behaviors.

Furthermore, our study only included African American college-aged women. As demonstrated in this study, African American women display a range of attitudes and behaviors specific to different contexts. Women of different classes and education levels may display significantly different responses to the interracial friendships than women in this study, so we cannot generalize our findings to people beyond the population included in this study. Also, the peer groups of older women may not necessarily influence their body esteem as much as adolescent and college-aged women. However, as women in college have been found to display the highest levels of disordered eating behaviors and negative body image attitudes, it was extremely relevant and necessary that they be included and the focus of this discussion.

Conclusion

This study brings to light the multiple factors that work together to develop body image attitudes and the presence of disordered eating behaviors in African American women. African American women are not uniformly protected from the internalization of the thin ideal as a byproduct of being Black, and feeling good about being Black also does not afford women immunity from experiencing disordered eating behaviors. Immediate environment, close friends, and community pressures all come together as mechanisms through which African American women come to understand and experience their own bodies. This study emphasizes that women

of different ethnic groups develop their body esteem in incredibly nuanced ways, and a broad range of attitudes and behaviors that all come together to shape how they understand and appreciate their bodies.

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Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Item	<i>African American women at PWC's</i>	<i>African American women at the HBC</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>		
BMI	24.80 (5.27)	25.73 (6.05)	-1.42	-.16
BIQ	.99 (1.34)	.65 (1.35)	2.09*	.25
Friend Ratio	.21 (.31)	.004 (.03)	7.02***	.94
Private Regard	6.24 (.82)	6.47 (.58)	-2.57*	-.32
Diet	2.27 (.94)	2.26 (.84)	.09	.01
Bulimia	1.68 (.80)	1.60 (.69)	.81	.11

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Note. Comparisons among African American women at Predominantly White Colleges and at the Historically Black College for body image, friend ratio, private regard, and disordered eating measures.

Table 2

Correlations Among Primary Variables for African American women at PWC's and the HBC

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. BMI	—	.40***	-.17*	-.01	.29***	.18**
2. BIQ	.31**	—	.06	-.22**	.38***	.41***
3. Friend ratio	.05	.08	—	-.18**	.00	.02
4. Private regard	-.03	-.18	.07	—	-.18*	-.15*
5. Diet	.38***	.21*	.09	-.11	—	.64***
6. Bulimia	.23*	.11	.02	-.10	.57***	—

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Note. Correlations between body image, friend ratio, private regard, disordered eating measures for African American women at Predominantly White Colleges (above diagonal) and at the Historically Black College (below diagonal).

Table 3

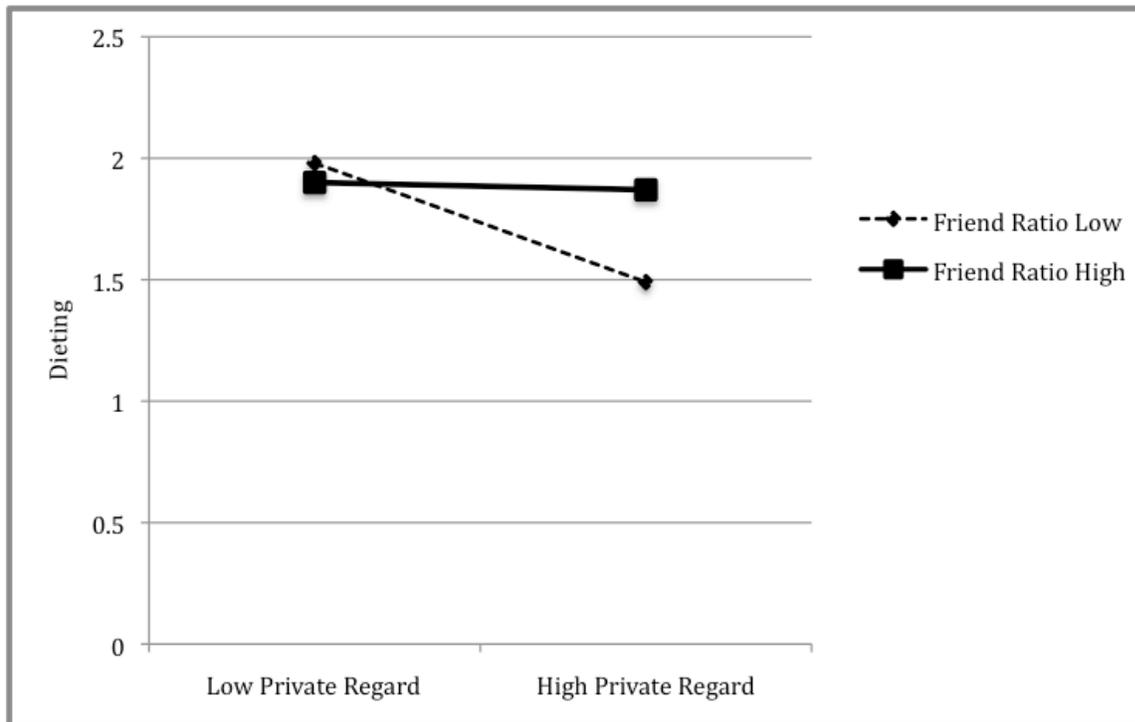
Regression Analysis of Body Esteem, Disordered Eating, and Friend Variables of African American Women at the PWC's

Variable	DV = Dieting			DV = Bulimia		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β
BMI	.04	.01	.21**	.01	.01	.10
Private Regard	-.14	.09	-.12	-.03	.07	-.03
BIQ	.19	.05	.28***	.21	.04	.39***
Friend Ratio	.16	.21	.06	.11	.17	.05
Private Regard x Friend Ratio	.53	.22	.18*	.13	.18	.05

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Note. Regression analysis summary for variables predicting dieting and bulimia among African American women at Predominantly White Colleges. For Dieting, $R^2 = .21^{***}$. For bulimia, $R^2 = .20^{***}$.

Figure 1



Moderation Analysis

Note. The interaction of friend ratio and private regard predicting dieting in African American women.