

Low endorsement of feminine norms of thinness and increased depressive symptoms predict risky sexual behavior among young African American women.

BACKGROUND

Compared to White women, Black women are at increased risk for HIV and sexually transmitted infections (CDC, 2018). Previous research on predominantly White women has shown that negative body image reflects conformity to the thinness ideal (James et al., 2001) and predicts high-risk sexual behaviors (Larson et al., 2011; Kvaalem et al., 2011). This may have similar relevance for Black women in conferring risk—and this effect may be amplified by depressive symptoms (Thames et al., 2018). We focus on young adulthood given the greater saliency of thinness norms and increased risky sexual behavior during this period (Voelker et al., 2015).

Hypothesis: The relationship between conformity to the thinness ideal and risky sexual behavior is moderated by depressive symptoms such that for women who are relatively higher on depressive symptoms, there will be an increased effect.

METHODS

- Participants were 117 self-identified African American/Black women recruited from the Washington DC area, age 18-25 (M=21, SD=2.25)
- Annual family income while growing up: 32% had an income of \$50K or below, 30% \$50K to \$100k, 15% \$100K and up (23% unknown)
- Cross-sectional, laboratory-based

Measures:

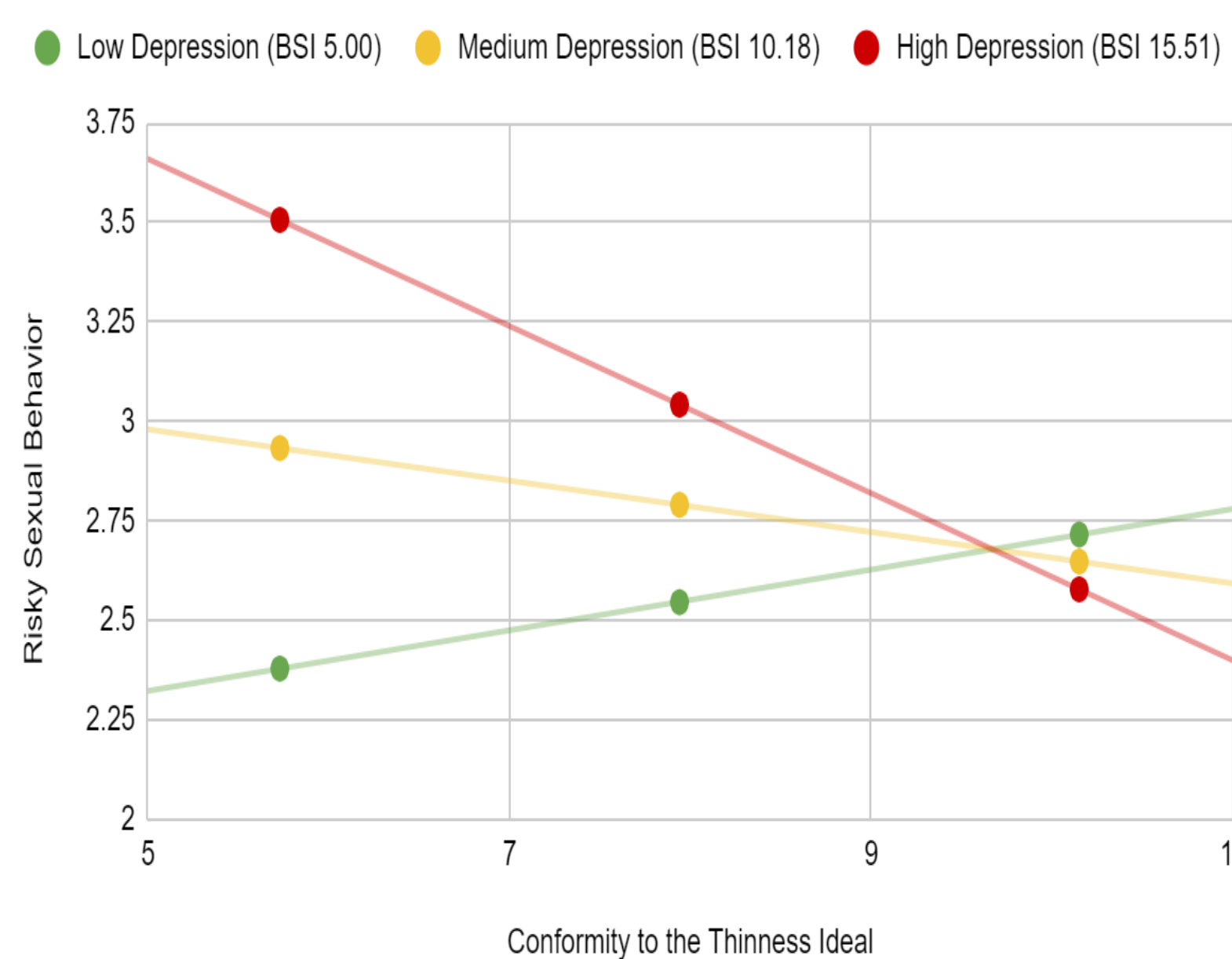
Conformity to the Thinness Ideal. *Thinness Ideal subscale of the Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory* (CFNI; Mahalik et al., 2005).

Depressive Symptoms. *The Depression subscale of the Brief Symptom Inventory* (BSI-18; Derogatis, 2001)

Risky Sexual Behavior. *The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System* (YRBS; 2015). Single item: Self-reported past year condom use

Figure 1.

Moderation Effect of Depression on the Relationship Between Conformity to the Thinness Ideal and Risky Sexual Behavior, N=83



RESULTS

- The moderation analysis was run using an SPSS macro, PROCESS model 1. N for the analysis was 83 due to missing data.
- Depressive symptoms moderated the effect of thinness ideal on risky sexual behavior ($b = -.039$, $p = .039$), but only for women who were relatively high on depressive symptoms. Moreover, this effect was in the negative direction, contrary to our hypothesis.
- For women at the mean level of depressive symptoms as well as those below the mean level, there was no effect of thinness ideal on risky sexual behavior.
- Overall, the model predicted 5% of the variance in risky sexual behavior, $F(3,79)=3.19$, $p = .028$.

DISCUSSION

- Women who are nonconforming to feminine norms (e.g., thinness ideal) may externalize depressive symptoms in ways associated with traditional masculinity (e.g., risky sexual behavior).
- Further research is needed to more fully examine if the thinness ideal adequately applies to African American young adult women.

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 PI/Faculty Mentor: Dr. Cristina Risco

Figure 2.

Conceptual Model of Moderation.

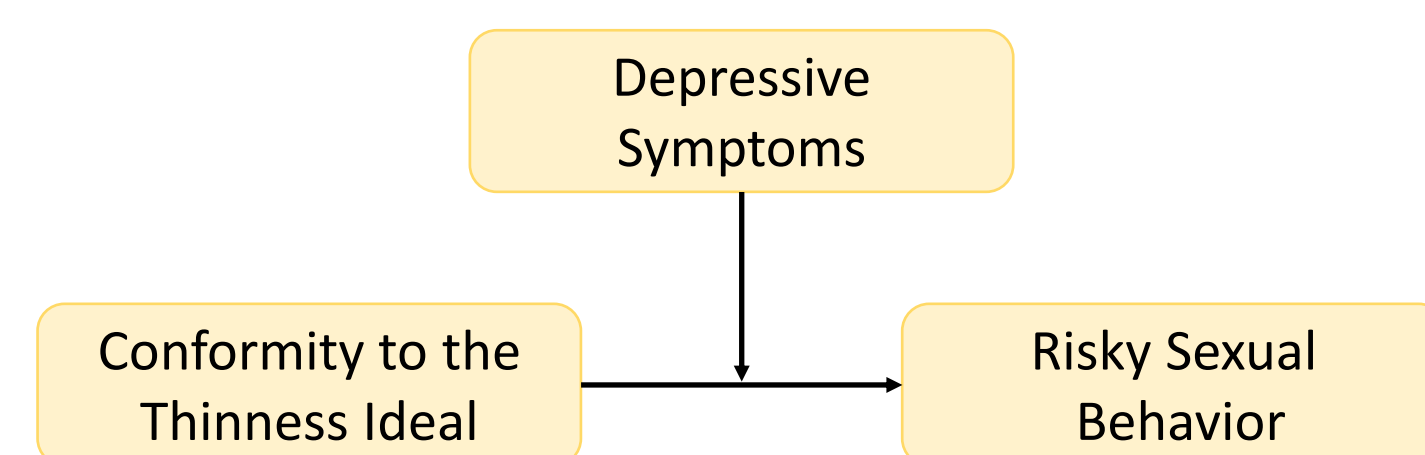


Table 1.

Moderation Effect of Depression on the Relationship Between Conformity to the Thinness Ideal and Risky Sexual Behavior, N=83

Predictor	b	95% CI for b	
		Lower	Upper
Conformity to the Thinness Ideal	.21	-.14	.57
Depressive Symptoms	.26	.04	.49
Conformity to the Thinness Ideal x Depressive Symptoms	-.03	-.05	-.001

Note. $R^2 = .05$, $F(3,79)=3.19$, $p = .028$

Table 2.

Summary Statistics and Intercorrelations Among Conformity to the Thinness Ideal, Depressive Symptoms, and Risky Sexual Behavior

Variables	1	2	3
1. Conformity to the Thinness Ideal	1		
2. Depressive Symptoms	.06	1	
3. Risky Sexual Behavior	-.06	.12	1
Mean	7.96	10.13	2.81
SD	2.19	5.42	1.67
Range	3 to 12	5 to 25	1 to 6

Note. Correlations were not significant at the .05 level.

Limitations:

- Stigma associated with risky sexual behavior may have led to underreporting.
- Small sample size + missing data, limited generalizability
- We did not account for alternative forms of protection in our analysis.