Commentary on: "Rap Music Videos and African American Women's Body Image: The Moderating Role of Ethnic Identity" (Yuanyuan Zhang, Travis L. Dixon, & Kate Conrad)

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It is always a pleasure to read a scholarly piece that reinvigorates a long-standing area of research. In the relatively short life-span of the communication field, the role of media in shaping body image, and the role of media in social comparison more generally, is a intensely researched topic. Although new information on the complexity of these interactions is coming to light every year, this study yields a critical "a ha" – that group identity, and ethnic identity in particular, is an important moderating factor when it comes to the effects of thin-ideal images on an audience member's body image.

This study is incredibly thorough, with the authors taking into consideration a wide range of potential interacting factors when it comes to body image and media representation. To add to this conversation, however, I have several questions for future investigation.

First of all, this study makes me question what other moderating factors have we yet to uncover that could help us as we try to inoculate young women (and men) from the negative effects of thin-ideal or other physically unhealthy images? For example, using the moderating factor of group identity investigated in this research, I wonder how we might be able to better support our children by creating stronger, positive group identities (obviously without having to face the social devaluation that comes with the ethnic identity "attributional ambiguity" that the authors reference). If group identity can help to moderate media effects, then that is an area at which we need to take a harder look.

In addition, I wonder how (and if) these findings would be affected if we consider non-Black audiences as well. That may seem counterintuitive, but if we think about the implications of this research in the real world, we realize that Rap and Hip-Hop are no longer music genres solely of and for the Black population. Although for these other ethnic audiences the issue of ethnic identity may relevant in varying degrees, issues of social comparison and stereotyping are certainly germane. Then again, how are the changing racial dynamics of the population affecting ethnic identity, and in turn social comparison based on ethnic identity, particularly for younger generations? Racial and ethnic identity is not going away as an important factor in personal or media life, but in younger audiences we are beginning to see less attention paid to the race of a character on screen in some circumstances. What impact does that have on how ethnic identity will shape body image in the (very) long term?

Moreover, what is the role that non-television media plays in all of this? Certainly, television (and music videos played on that medium) is still a critical force for providing images for socially comparison. On the other hand, these images are also readily available outside of television. Take the Internet, for example. Some of the most popular sites on the Web, including MTV.com and MySpace.com, have comparable or higher music video viewing than the traditional TV channels. Moreover, the ability to purchase and download music videos onto one's iPod or other mp4 player via iTunes or other media download service, means that these images can be viewed not only in one's home, but practically anywhere they might be? What does it mean to have an even more constant and captive audience for these images?

And finally, as a recent former employee of Viacom, the parent company for all of the channels from which the music videos were taken, I find this piece of research to be one of those critical examples of scholarly work that desperately needs to get into the hands of the industry. If this research has implications for the mental and physical health of the audience, then the people developing and programming this content need to be aware of it. Constructive industry-academic conversation about these topics is the most effective way to produce change; so I challenge the authors to start that conversation.