

Does This Book Make Me Look Fat? The Effect of Protagonist Body Esteem and Body Weight  
in Novels on Female Readers' Body Esteem

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ABSTRACT

The effects of visual representations of the thin ideal in movies, magazines, and television have been widely explored, but strictly textual representations of the thin ideal in novels have received scant attention. The genre of chick literature has been criticized for depicting characters that constantly worry about their body weight and have poor body esteem. Excerpts from two popular chick lit novels were used to examine the effect of a protagonist's body weight and body esteem on participants' overall body esteem, sexual attractiveness, weight concern, and physical condition. In Study 1 ( $N = 159$ ), underweight protagonists made participants feel less sexually attractive. Furthermore, protagonists with low body esteem caused participants to report significantly low body esteem scores compared to protagonists with high body esteem. Study 2 ( $N = 251$ ) examined the role of transportation and identification with the protagonist. Identification with the protagonist with low body esteem was a significant predictor of participants' lower reported scores of body esteem, lower evaluations of appearance, and increased weight concern. The results suggest that textual representations of body size and body esteem in novels have an effect that is similar to the effect of visual images prevalent in movies, television, and magazines. Implications and future directions are discussed.

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## Introduction

In the last two decades, a new genre of romance novels has grown in popularity among younger women between the ages of 20-30 (Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006). Chick literature, or chick lit, emerged in the 1990s and focuses on women in their 20s and 30s who balance demanding careers while searching for love (Cabot, 2002). Recently, chick lit novels have been extremely successful. *The Devil Wears Prada* (Weisberger, 2003) was at the top of the *USA Today* best-selling book's list in 2003, with almost 4 million books sold (Barker, 2008). In May 2011, *Something Borrowed* (Giffin, 2005) was ranked fourth in the "Combined E-Book and Print" category of *The New York Times* 2011 Best Seller's List after the release of the film version in Feb. 2012 ("Best Sellers", 2011). Despite their popularity, one prevalent theme of a protagonist's preoccupation with her body image (Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006) has the potential to adversely affect young women, particularly with regard to their health. Close to 35 million women have engaged in anorexic or bulimic behaviors (Park, 2005), which are caused by unrealistic perceptions of one's own body image and an excessive preoccupation with body image.

A woman's preoccupation with her body, including her weight and appearance, is a prominent theme in chick lit (Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006; Umminger, 2006). The female protagonist is often obsessed with the desire to have the perfect body, and she constantly seeks to achieve or maintain the perfect shape. For example, *Jemima J* (Green, 2002) is cited in scholarly literature as the most extreme case of a woman obsessed with her weight (Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006; Umminger, 2006). In the beginning of the novel, Jemima wears a size 14 and is unhappy with her life. Jemima joins a gym and begins an unhealthy routine of extreme exercise and starvation dieting. She turns her life around through dramatic weight loss, earns a glamorous promotion at work, and attracts a handsome boyfriend. The message *Jemima J* sends is that a woman's happiness is directly related to her body weight (Umminger, 2006).

Communication scholars have examined the damaging impact of visual portrayals of thin, beautiful models in magazines and television on women's body image (e.g., Bissell & Zhou, 2004; Jefferson & Stake, 2009), but little is known about how textual representations depicting the thin ideal in novels might affect women. While visual media provide observers with rich, vivid detail, novels allow readers to create their own mental images of the characters (Green, Brock, & Kaufmann, 2004). The reader may incorporate the description of a novel's protagonist,



or she may create her own protagonist, possibly a close representation of herself. Therefore, the protagonist's body weight is up to the reader's discretion, unlike the visually specified depiction of a protagonist on television.

This thesis describes two experiments conducted to explore the effects of protagonist body weight and body esteem on female participants' reported body esteem. Although visual representations of body image have been extensively studied with magazines and television, the current studies extended body image research by exploring textual representations of body weight and body esteem, and incorporating transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2000), to explain textual representations' effects on female readers' body esteem, appearance, weight concern, sexual attractiveness, and physical condition. Transportation theory posits that individuals who become transported or "immersed" in a novel will report story-consistent beliefs after reading a narrative (Green & Brock, 2000). Participants in both studies read an excerpt from a chick lit novel and completed body esteem questionnaires to determine how the description of a protagonist's body weight and body esteem affected the readers' own body esteem. The first study presented here examined the effects of textual representations of body weight and body esteem on participants' body esteem. A review of body image research regarding visual depictions of the thin ideal and chick lit research is explored to inform the first study. The second study examined how transportation and identification might moderate the effect of protagonist body weight and body esteem on participant body esteem. Both studies were necessary at this time because novels were becoming more popular among young women, but it is unknown what effect, if any, textual representations of body weight and body esteem might have on the readers' body image

The results of the studies provided a preliminary understanding of how a woman's body esteem is affected by a protagonist's body weight and body esteem. Furthermore, results regarding transportation into a narrative added to a growing body of knowledge on transportation theory and belief change and contribute to the fields of narrative persuasion and body image research.

## **Visual Representations of the Thin Ideal and Body Image**

### **Media Portrayals and Body Esteem**

Previous research has examined how the media affect women's body esteem (Bessenoff, 2006; Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 1997; Jones & Buckingham, 2005; Krmar, Giles, &

Helme, 2008). Self-esteem may serve as a moderator of the effects of social comparisons of female attractiveness on women's body esteem (Jones & Buckingham, 2005). In one study, participants with low self-esteem reported lower body esteem scores and lower self-worth compared to participants with high self-esteem (Jones & Buckingham, 2005). However, self-esteem moderated the effects of attractiveness comparisons on body esteem. Low self-esteem participants in the downward comparison condition reported significantly higher body esteem scores compared to low self-esteem participants in the upward comparison condition. Individuals with low self-esteem may feel better about themselves through downward comparisons. Conversely, high self-esteem and self-worth were associated with higher body esteem scores. Participants with high self-esteem in the upward comparison condition reported higher body esteem scores compared to high self-esteem participants in the downward comparison condition. These results suggest that upward comparison has a greater impact on body esteem than downward comparison.

Although an individual's self-esteem determined how the media affected body esteem, parental and peer opinions may also play a role in how the media affect an individual's body esteem. Social comparison may serve as a mediator between parental and peer norms regarding body weight and body esteem (Krcmar et al., 2008). A specific study observed that when young women perceived that their parents and peers believed thinness was the norm, the young women's body esteem decreased (Krcmar et al., 2008). On the other hand, interpersonal norms from parents and peers can also mediate the relationship between the media and young women's body esteem. When parents and peers were supportive, women had higher body esteem scores. A woman's level of her social comparison mechanism also mediated the relationship between the media and body esteem, except for fitness magazines where there was a direct relationship between the two variables.

Self-discrepancy, or the psychological discomfort individuals feel when their representations of their actual self do not match representations of their ideal self (Higgins, 1987), may serve as a moderator in explaining how the media affect individuals' feelings regarding their bodies. Research has found that participants' exposure to advertisements featuring thin models affected weight concern, mood, self-esteem, and depression (Bessenoff, 2006). Women with higher levels of self-discrepancy experienced more depressed feelings regarding their body esteem and lowered self-esteem. Women with low self-discrepancy did not experience these

negative effects. Moreover, women high in self-discrepancy used social comparison to compare themselves with others more often than women low in self-discrepancy. Given that representations of thin women in the media negatively affect women's body esteem, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H<sub>1</sub>: Participants who read a narrative featuring an underweight protagonist will report significantly lower overall body esteem scores.

H<sub>2</sub>: Participants who read a narrative featuring an underweight protagonist will report significantly lower evaluations of their own appearance in general.

### **Media Portrayals and Weight Concern**

In numerous studies, individuals reported more dissatisfaction with their weight after viewing idealized images in the media (Bissell & Zhou, 2004; Dittmar, Halliwell, & Sterling, 2009; Jefferson & Stake, 2009; Krahe & Krouse, 2011; Schooler, Ward, Merriweather, & Caruthers, 2004). For example, women who frequently watched popular television shows (e. g., *Will & Grace*, *Friends*, and *Dawson's Creek*) and frequently read fashion magazines were more prone to report disordered eating characteristics and dissatisfaction with their bodies (Bissell & Zhou, 2004).

Internalization of the thin ideal from the media, or the importance of sociocultural pressures to be thin, is one factor that might affect how women view their own bodies (Dittmar et al., 2009). In an experimental setting, women who had internalized the thin ideal and were exposed to ads featuring ultra-thin models were more likely to have a higher body-focused negative affect, indicating they felt more nervous or anxious regarding different aspects of themselves, compared to non-internalizers (Dittmar et al., 2009). After exposure to the thin model, women who had internalized the thin ideal reported higher weight-related self-discrepancies, compared to non-internalizers. Therefore, exposure to thin models in an advertisement at least temporarily activated negative thoughts about body size and weight, causing women to feel anxious.

Furthermore, representations of thin models in the media can affect women's behavior, including snacking (Krahe & Krause, 2011). In a previous study, participants' habitual tendency toward restrained eating behavior was measured, and women shown images of thin models were

more likely to choose the diet snack regardless of whether they tended to engage in restrained eating. Viewing images of thin models affected women's short-term eating behaviors. Given that exposure to idealized images heightens women's concerns regarding their weight, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H<sub>3</sub>: Participants who read a narrative featuring an underweight protagonist will report more concern with their weight.

### **Media Portrayals and Sexual Attractiveness**

Idealized images in the media have the power to affect women's perceptions of their own sexual attractiveness (Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 1997; Schooler et al., 2004). Viewing primetime sitcoms and dramas may affect an individual's sexual attractiveness, according to self-reports of African-American and White college women (Schooler et al., 2004). In a survey, both African-American and White women reported watching about 18-19 hours of television programming with white characters, but African-Americans reported watching 5 more hours of television programming with primarily African-American casts. African-American college women had significantly higher sexual attractiveness scores compared to White women. African-American television shows seemed to have a protective effect on body image for African-American women who viewed these shows, possibly because the shows portrayed women with a variety of body shapes. Idealized images of thin, white women in mainstream culture were most damaging to white women. Although ethnicity played a role in how the media affected sexual attractiveness, other individual characteristics, such as self-monitoring, may serve as a moderator.

In a study, when participants overheard a judgmental conversation in which two confederates were speaking about a friend that had gained weight and was now less attractive, individuals' levels of self-monitoring determined how this conversation affected them (Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 1997). Participants were either placed in the judgmental conversation condition or the neutral conversation condition, and then they viewed a series of 30 advertisements that were either neutral or depicted thin women. Self-monitoring, or concern with self-representation, moderated perceived sexual attractiveness. High self-monitors who heard the judgmental conversation had significantly lower evaluations of their own sexual

attractiveness compared to high self-monitors in the neutral conversation condition. On the other hand, low self-monitors in the judgmental conversation condition reported more positive feelings of sexual attractiveness compared to low self-monitors in the neutral conversation condition. Only a marginally significant relationship was found between type of images viewed and conversation condition. Participants who viewed the ideal advertisements felt marginally less positive about their sexual attractiveness when they heard the judgmental conversation compared to the neutral conversation. Sexual attractiveness scores were not significantly different in the judgmental conversation- neutral advertisements condition. Further, thinner women in the ideal image condition felt significantly more positive about their sexual attractiveness compared to heavier women in the same condition. Given that idealized representations affect women's sexual attractiveness, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H<sub>4</sub>: Participants who read a narrative featuring an underweight protagonist will report significantly less positive feelings about their own sexual attractiveness.

### **Media Portrayals and Physical Condition**

Physical condition is another variable affected by representations of the thin ideal in the media (Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 1997; Schooler et al., 2004). Viewing primetime sitcoms and dramas may affect an individual's perceptions of her own physical condition, according to self-reports of African-American and White college women (Schooler et al., 2004). White women had significantly lower physical condition scores compared to African-American women. Based on this data, it seems as though white college women might be more negatively affected by primetime television programming.

In one study, physical condition was affected when participants were exposed to a judgmental or neutral conversation and neutral or idealized advertisements (Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 1997). As previously mentioned, the judgmental conversation involved two confederates commenting on how much weight their friend had gained, thus diminishing her attractiveness. After hearing the judgmental conversation, low self-monitors felt less concerned about their physical condition, but high self-monitors expressed greater concern regarding their physical condition compared to participants in the neutral conversation condition. Interestingly, low self-monitors reported less positive feelings about their physical condition after viewing the

ideal images, and high self-monitors reported more positive feelings in the ideal advertisement condition. High self-monitors in the ideal advertisement condition may have experienced an increase in positive feelings about physical condition, because viewing these idealized advertisements emphasized that part of looking attractive is being in good physical condition. The differences between high and low self-monitors may have arisen because high self-monitors are concerned with meeting society's standards, whereas low-self monitors are concerned with meeting internal standards (Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 1997). Given that idealized images in the media negatively affect some women's feelings regarding their physical condition, the following hypothesis is posited:

H<sub>5</sub>: Participants who read a narrative featuring an underweight protagonist will report significantly less positive feelings about their own physical condition.

Media representations of thin women have detrimental effects on women's body esteem, weight concern, sexual attractiveness, and physical condition. Based on the studies reviewed in this section, it is clear that visual representations of thin women in the media affect women differently depending on ethnicity, thin ideal media internalization, levels of self-discrepancy, and peer and parental opinions. White women were more adversely affected than African-Americans. Many studies have examined the effect of visual representations of thin women, but scholars do not know how textual representations of body weight and body image might affect women. This investigation will examine this issue using materials from the chick lit genre, which has been criticized for depicting protagonists who constantly worry about their body weight and have poor body esteem (Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006; Umminger, 2006).

### **Chick Literature: Textual Representations of Body Weight and Body Esteem**

Chick lit novels can be identified readily by their pastel covers and illustrations of women with high heels, designer purses, and fashionable clothing (Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006). Chick lit is defined as a subgenre of romance focusing on women in their 20s and 30s balancing independence, a career, and searching for love (Cabot, 2002). The genre differs from traditional romance novels because of its focus on realism (Ferriss & Young, 2006), highlighting women's imperfect lives and struggles with their weight, dating or relationships, and stressful careers. The

novels are often written in first-person narrative, similar to a journal entry, so that readers enter the mind of the protagonist (Ferriss & Young, 2006), which might promote a greater sense of identification with the protagonist. The genre has spun off several varieties of chick lit including junior-chick lit, matron lit, mommy lit, “Ethnick” lit, and Christian chick lit (Ferris & Young, 2006). Adaptations of this genre can be found in many countries.

The increasing popularity of chick lit globally has warranted much scholarly attention. Some scholars have cast a positive light on chick literature because the females are empowered (Chen, 2009; Harzewski, 2006; Smith, 2005), it gives voice to different races (Guerrero, 2006), and promotes identification through shared experiences (Hewett, 2006).

Despite the positive aspects highlighted in these articles, the chick lit genre has also received negative attention. Literary and feminist critiques of chick lit have been published to scrutinize the genre for its focus on white, middle-class women, the creation of a stereotypical female protagonist whose primary goal is marriage, an obsession with consumerism, and neglect of cultural, political, and social concerns (Butler & Desai, 2008; Ferriss & Young, 2006; Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006; Hale, 2006; Mazza, 2006; Van Slooten, 2006). The female protagonist’s obsession with self-appearance has additionally been addressed by literary scholars (Umminger, 2006; Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006).

Beginning with Bridget from *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996) until the present, the primary battle for protagonists within chick lit novels is with their weight, while the search for a man becomes secondary (Umminger, 2006). In many chick lit novels, the female protagonists must be thin to date and marry the perfect man, receive the job promotion, or be noticed in the world. Umminger (2006) provided examples of chick lit novels to support her observations of the female protagonists’ obsession with their appearance and weight, including *Jemima J.* (Green, 2000), *Waking Beauty* (Friedman, 2004), and *Good in Bed* (Weiner, 2005). Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006) systematically analyzed the theme of women and their body images across a sample of twenty chick lit novels. A female protagonist’s identity was almost solely constructed based on the desire to have the perfect body, and the novels focused on how she constantly sought to achieve or maintain the perfect shape. Within this narrow sample of twenty novels, two different types of protagonists were identified. The first type of female protagonist was once “ugly” but transformed into a beautiful woman. For example, in the novel, *Jemima J.*, the protagonist lost a great amount of weight to become a beautiful, successful woman.

Moreover, the female protagonist's obsession with weight carried over throughout all of the novels examined where the protagonists were constantly preoccupied with the shape and size of their bodies. The second type of female protagonist identified was either less physically attractive or not preoccupied with her appearance. The lack of concern regarding personal image disappeared, however, as soon as a man entered into the protagonist's life, whereupon she became preoccupied with her appearance.

Although scholars critique chick lit for its obsession with a woman's weight and appearance, the novels have not yet been examined for the potentiality of their effects on women. How might the textual representations of body weight and body esteem affect the reader's own body esteem? Based on the research of visual representations of idealized images and the research on chick literature novels, the following research questions are posed for the present study:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: Do representations of a protagonist's body esteem in novels affect participants' overall body esteem?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: Do representations of a protagonist's body esteem in novels affect participants' perceptions of their overall appearance?

RQ<sub>3</sub>: Do representations of a protagonist's body esteem in novels affect participants' weight concern regarding their own bodies?

RQ<sub>4</sub>: Do representations of a protagonist's body esteem in novels affect participants' perceptions of their own sexual attractiveness?

RQ<sub>5</sub>: Do representations of a protagonist's body esteem in novels affect participants' perceptions of their own physical condition?

### **Effects Mechanisms of Visual vs. Print Media**

The different effects mechanisms of visual and print media have been widely theorized, but there is little empirical research to support the differences among individuals (Green et al., 2008). Some theorists believe that visual media allow for more transportation, or immersion into



the narrative (Prentice & Gerrig, 1996), whereas others believe that print media are more likely to transport individuals (Green et al., 2008). Visual and print entertainment media are characterized by two main differences: their sensory richness and the effort required of the individual to become transported (Green et al., 2008).

### **Visual Media**

The sensory richness of visual media is greater than print, and the strong visual imagery of films may allow individuals to become transported more easily (Green et al., 2008). The audio and visual imagery of film and television provides individuals with all the necessary information regarding the characters and settings of the narrative. The lack of effort on the part of the individual may cause her to be more easily transported into the narrative world. However, films may require individuals to use effort to understand the underlying thoughts and motivations of the protagonist. Furthermore, the formal properties of film may allow individuals to become more transported and forget that they are merely observers of the action. Cameras have the ability to make specific objects salient to the viewers by spanning and zooming to force viewers to focus on certain aspects of a scene (Gerrig & Prentice, 1996; Tan, 1996). Gerrig and Prentice (1996) argued that films' properties make it more likely for viewers to participate in the scene by speaking to the protagonist to let them know of upcoming dangers or unexpected events. As in a conversation, viewers fall into the role of the "side-participant" that allows them to listen to the conversation and interject at any time.

### **Print Media**

Print media may require more individual effort to become transported into the narrative (Green et al., 2008). Reading may require more the readers to use more imagination and visualization because images are absent. Causing the reader to use her imagination is not necessarily bad, because she has the ability to create her own mental imagery including her idiosyncratic descriptions of the protagonists. The effort necessary to read narratives may be more likely to encourage transportation. Narratives provide more of the thoughts and motives of the protagonist, which allows the reader to understand the inner workings of the protagonist more readily. Reading also allows individuals to move at their own pace and reread passages that were confusing (Green et al., 2008).

## Study 1

### Design

This experiment was a 3 x 3 factorial design to test the effects of the main protagonist's body weight (underweight, healthy weight, or absent) and body esteem (low, high, or absent) on participants' attitudes regarding their own body esteem. Body esteem included participants' sexual attractiveness, weight concern, and physical condition.

### Participants

Female participants ( $N = 159$ ) were recruited from the Department of Communication research pool and received course credit in exchange for participation. Participants' age ranged from 17 to 28 ( $M = 19.85$ ), but 98.74% of participants ( $n = 157$ ) fell between the ages of 18 and 22. Eighty-seven percent of participants were White, 3% were Black, 3% were Asian, 3% were Latino, and 3% marked the "Other" category. One individual reported she was Middle Eastern.

### Stimulus Materials

The factors were manipulated via two narratives in which both factors were crossed. Two narratives were employed to minimize the possibility that idiosyncratic characteristics of one narrative might influence the study's results. Both narratives were approximately 3,200 words in length. Adapted from the chick lit novel, *Something Borrowed* (Giffin, 2004), the first experimental narrative was a first-person account of Katie preparing for and enjoying a beach vacation with friends. Katie is a healthy weight for her size but has body esteem issues. Her obsession with her weight and looks is obvious throughout the narrative. Before the beach trip, Katie and her best friend, Diane, go shopping for bathing suits, a dreadful task, according to Katie. She is ashamed of her figure when trying on bathing suits in front of her best friend. Later, Diane sets Katie up on a blind date with her friend, Michael, who will be going on vacation with them. Although she does not understand why such an attractive man would be interested in her, Michael and Kate begin dating. At the beach, Katie's insecurities are apparent when she would not play Frisbee with Michael because her stomach might show and is ashamed when a woman wearing the same dress as her at a party is thinner and tanner. Katie's obsession with her body image limits the fun she can have with Michael on their vacation.

The second experimental narrative was adapted from *Dreaming in Black and White* (Walker, 2005). Katie, a woman with a healthy weight and low body esteem, is very career-oriented and trying to find a boyfriend. In this story, Katie is a struggling journalist waiting to

hear whether she received a promotion to film critic. Throughout the story, Katie struggles with trying to lose weight. A disastrous blind date leaves Katie thinking she will never find the right man, but she finds hope in a new man, Michael whom she met at her church's singles group game night. Katie is surprised when she sees Michael at her office the next day while she is waiting to hear if she earned the promotion. It turns out Katie does not receive the promotion, because Michael's family has bought the newspaper and is cutting employees. Katie's dreams of a new job and a new boyfriend are crushed when she is one of the first employees to be released.

### **Measures**

**Thought-listing.** Participants completed a thought-listing exercise, adapted from Cacioppo, von Hippel, and Ernst (1997), in which they recorded up to 14 positive, negative, and neutral thoughts regarding the description of the protagonist they created while reading the narrative. Thoughts were coded for positive and negative comments about the protagonist's personality and her body esteem.

**Body esteem scale.** The Body Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984) measured how participants felt about the size of certain body parts and other non-weight related aspects of their appearance. The 35-item scale asked participants to indicate how they felt about certain body parts and their functions on a 7-point scale from 1 (*having strong negative feelings*) to 7 (*having strong positive feelings*). Feelings regarding lips, nose, eyes, physical coordination, and physical stamina were measured. The scale comprised three subscales: Sexual Attractiveness, Weight Concern, and Physical Condition. Scores for the subscales were calculated by summing the responses for each item, and a higher score indicated relatively positive feelings. The scale produced a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .95.

**Sexual attractiveness subscale.** The Sexual Attractiveness subscale comprised 11 items, including parts or functions of the body associated with sexual attractiveness and can only be altered through cosmetics, and not exercise. Participants were asked to express the positive or negative valence of their feelings regarding certain body parts or functions, including their face, eyes, breasts, and sex drive on a 7-point scale. The subscale yielded a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .85.

**Weight concern subscale.** The Weight Concern subscale was made up of 10 items, including body parts and functions that can be physically changed by exercising or dieting. For example, participants were asked to report how negatively or positively they felt regarding their

waist, thighs, appearance of their stomach, and appetite on a 7-point scale. The subscale yielded a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .93.

**Physical condition subscale.** The Physical Condition subscale included 7 items measuring women's feelings toward their physical strength, stamina, and agility. Participants rated their feelings toward certain aspects of their bodies including reflexes, physical stamina, and energy level on a 7-point scale. The subscale yielded a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .88.

**Appearance subscale.** The Appearance subscale, from the Body Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (Mendelson, Mendelson, & White, 2001), comprised 10 items measuring general feelings regarding an individual's appearance on a 7-point scale. An example item is *I like what I look like in pictures*. The scale yielded a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .90.

Participants were asked to report their height and weight to calculate Body Mass Index (BMI), which has been shown to be positively related to body image dissatisfaction (Jefferson & Stake, 2009). BMI is calculated by dividing weight by height then multiplying by 703. The final number represents whether the person is underweight, a healthy weight, or overweight, according to the BMI categories. Participants also reported basic demographics data (i. e., age, ethnicity, and major).

The chick lit genre was defined for participants, and they were asked to indicate how many chick lit novels they read in a year. Furthermore, they were asked if they had ever read the experimental narratives or watched the movie, *Something Borrowed*. To check the effectiveness of the manipulations, participants were asked to identify the body weight and body esteem of the protagonist in the narrative they read.

## **Procedure**

Upon arriving at the study location, participants were given a consent form to read and sign. Participants were allowed to ask any questions they had and were free to withdraw from the study at any time. After consent forms were collected, participants were given one of two experimental narratives to read and a questionnaire packet. As described above, the factors were manipulated via the narratives the participants read. The narrative took approximately ten to fifteen minutes for participants to read. Once the participants read the narrative, they filled out a questionnaire packet containing the following measures in order: a thought-listing exercise, the manipulation check, the Body Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984), the Body Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (Mendelson et al., 2001), the demographic information, and

measures of their exposure to the genre. After participants completed the questionnaire packet, they were debriefed, thanked for their participation, and dismissed.

## Results

**Manipulation check.** To check if participants recognized the body weight and body esteem of the protagonist within the experimental narratives, separate chi-square analyses were conducted for each experimental narrative. Participants tended to report protagonist body weight estimates that were consistent with the manipulation in *Something Borrowed* across all conditions,  $\chi^2(6, 81) = 60.35, p < .001, w = .86$ . In the underweight condition ( $n = 27$ ), 67% of participants accurately identified the protagonist's body weight. Eighty-one percent of participants in the healthy weight condition ( $n = 27$ ) correctly identified the protagonist's body weight. In the condition where the protagonist's body weight was not mentioned ( $n = 27$ ), 26% of participants accurately identified there was no specification of body weight, 70% perceived her as a healthy weight, and 4% perceived her as underweight. The variation in perceived body weight in the control condition suggested that no clear body weight was apparent to readers in the control condition.

Similarly, participants tended to report protagonist body weight estimates that were consistent with the manipulation in *Dreaming in Black and White*,  $\chi^2(6, 76) = 57.17, p < .001, w = .87$ . In the underweight condition ( $n = 24$ ), 62% of participants correctly identified the protagonist's body weight. Sixty-three percent of participants accurately perceived the protagonist as healthy in the healthy weight condition ( $n = 27$ ). In the condition where the protagonist's body weight was not specified ( $n = 25$ ), 36% of participants accurately identified the lack of body weight, 24% identified her as overweight, 32% identified her as a healthy weight, and 8% identified her as underweight. The variation in perceived body weight in the control condition suggested that no clear body weight was apparent to readers within this condition.

Participants tended to report estimates of the protagonist's body esteem that were consistent with the manipulation in *Something Borrowed* across the conditions,  $\chi^2(4, 81) = 79.29, p < .001, w = .99$ . Within the low body esteem condition ( $n = 27$ ), 96% of participants correctly identified the protagonist as having low body esteem. In the high body esteem condition ( $n = 27$ ), 88% of participants accurately perceived the protagonist as having high body esteem. Finally, in the condition where the narrative did not mention any body esteem, participants ( $n =$

27) reported a variety of answers, which suggested that no clear body esteem was apparent to participants in the control condition. Forty-one percent reported that the narrative did not specify the protagonist's body esteem, 44% reported that she had high body esteem, and 15% reported that she had low body esteem.

Likewise, participants tended to report estimates of the protagonist's body esteem that were consistent with the manipulation in *Dreaming in Black and White* across all conditions,  $\chi^2(4, 76) = 46.53, p < .001, w = .78$ . In the low body esteem condition ( $n = 26$ ), 92% of participants correctly identified the protagonist's body esteem. Sixty percent of participants accurately perceived the protagonist's body esteem in the high body esteem condition ( $n = 25$ ). In the condition where body esteem was not mentioned ( $n = 25$ ), 48% of participants accurately identified that there was no mention of body esteem, 32% reported that the protagonist had high body esteem, and 20% reported that she had low body esteem. The variety of answers suggested that no clear body esteem was apparent to readers in the control condition.

Participants' perceptions of the protagonist's body weight between the two experimental narratives were significantly different,  $\chi^2(2, 157) = 10.02, p = .02, w = .26$ . Therefore, the stories had dissimilarities in depicting the body weight of the protagonist. Twenty percent of the participants who read the *Dreaming in Black and White* narrative ( $n = 76$ ) reported the protagonist as overweight, compared to 5% of participants who indicated the protagonist was overweight in the *Something Borrowed* narrative ( $n = 81$ ). Participants may have been more likely to report the protagonist as overweight within the *Dreaming in Black and White* experimental narrative, because she frequently ate junk food when she was stressed. An analysis of participants' thoughts indicated that they thought the protagonist had no self-control and frequently resorted to binge eating within this experimental narrative. Nevertheless, because two narratives were used to operationalize protagonist body weight, and, as described in the results, protagonist body weight seemed to have an effect on participants, the manipulation seemed to have been effective.

The protagonist's body esteem reported by participants across both narratives did not differ significantly,  $\chi^2(2, 157) = 2.76, p = .25, w = .13$ .

**Body esteem.** A model of the protagonist's body esteem and body weight was a significant predictor of the participants' body esteem as reported on the Body Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984),  $F(8, 149) = 2.38, p = 0.02, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .07$ .  $H_1$  predicted that the

participants who read the narrative with the underweight protagonist would report significantly lower body esteem scores. However, protagonist body weight did not seem to affect the participants' overall body esteem,  $F(2, 149) = 2.98, p = 0.13$ . Pairwise tests using Student's  $t$  indicated that none of the means was significantly different from another.  $H_1$  was not supported.  $RQ_1$  asked if representations of protagonist body esteem affected participants' overall body esteem. Protagonist body esteem significantly predicted participants' body esteem scores,  $F(2) = 4.45, p = .05$ . As shown in Figure 1, participants who read the narrative in which the protagonist had low body esteem reported significantly lower overall body esteem scores ( $M = 4.51, SE = .12$ ) compared to the condition in which the protagonist's body esteem was absent ( $M = 4.9, SE = .12$ ).

The test of the interaction between protagonist body weight and protagonist body esteem was inconclusive,  $F(4, 149) = 2.13, p = .08$ . A post hoc comparison of the means using Tukey's HSD indicated that none of the means was significantly different from another. However, pairwise tests using Student's  $t$  revealed that participants in the body weight and body esteem control conditions had significantly higher body esteem scores ( $M = 5.15, SE = .20$ ) compared to participants in the healthy weight, low body esteem condition ( $M = 4.54, SE = .20$ ) and the condition in which body weight was not mentioned and body esteem was low ( $M = 4.30, SE = .20$ ), as shown in Figure 2. Furthermore, participants in the condition in which the protagonist was a healthy weight and had high body esteem ( $M = 5.03, SE = .20$ ) and the condition with an unspecified body weight with high body esteem ( $M = 4.98, SE = .20$ ) had significantly higher body esteem scores compared to participants in the underweight, high body esteem condition ( $M = 4.33, SE = .20$ ).

**Appearance.** A model of the protagonist's body esteem and body weight did not significantly predict participants' perceptions of their appearance,  $F(8, 149) = 1.20, p = .30, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .01$ .  $H_2$  predicted that participants who read a narrative featuring an underweight protagonist would report significantly lower evaluations of their own appearance in general.  $RQ_2$  asked if protagonist body esteem would affect participants' evaluations of their appearance. Protagonist body weight was a not significant predictors of participants' perceptions regarding their appearance,  $F(2, 149) = 1.61, p = .20$ . Pairwise tests using Student's  $t$  indicated that none of the means was significantly different from another.  $H_2$  was not supported. Body esteem was not a significant predictor of participants' reported evaluations of their appearance,  $F(2, 149) =$

2.09,  $p = .13$ . Furthermore, a test of the interaction between character body weight and character body esteem was nonsignificant,  $F(4, 149) = .52, p = .72$ .

**Weight concern.** A model of the protagonist's body esteem and body weight significantly predicted participants' weight concern,  $F(8, 149) = 2.13, p = .04, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .06$ .  $H_3$  predicted that participants would report more concern with their weight in the condition where the protagonist was underweight. Protagonist body weight did not significantly affect participants' weight concern,  $F(2, 149) = 1.39, p = .25$ . Thus  $H_3$  was not supported.  $RQ_3$  asked if representations of a protagonist's body esteem affected participants' weight concern regarding their own bodies. Protagonist body esteem predicted participants' weight concern,  $F(2, 149) = 4.23, p = .02$ . As shown in Figure 3, participants in the low body esteem condition were significantly more concerned about their weight ( $M = 3.74, SE = .18$ ) compared to participants in the condition where body esteem was absent, ( $M = 4.48, SE = .18$ ). A test of the interaction between protagonist body weight and body esteem on participants' weight concern was nonsignificant,  $F(4, 149) = 1.39, p = .24$ .

**Sexual attractiveness.** A model of the protagonist's body esteem and body weight was a significant predictor of participants' reported sexual attractiveness,  $F(8, 149) = 2.17, p = .03, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .06$ .  $H_4$  predicted that participants would report significantly less positive feelings regarding their sexual attractiveness after reading the narrative where the protagonist was underweight. Protagonist body weight significantly affected participants' reported sexual attractiveness scores,  $F(2) = 3.77, p = .02$ . Participants in the underweight condition had significantly lower sexual attractiveness scores ( $M = 4.92, SE = .11$ ) compared to participants in the condition where the protagonist was a healthy body weight ( $M = 5.31, SE = .11$ ), as shown in Figure 4.  $H_4$  was supported.

$RQ_4$  asked if representations of protagonists' body esteem affected participants' overall perceptions of their sexual attractiveness. Protagonist body esteem did not significantly affect participants' reported sexual attractiveness,  $F(2, 149) = 1.71, p = .18$ . Similarly, a test of the interaction of protagonist body weight and body esteem on participants' sexual attractiveness was nonsignificant,  $F(4, 149) = 1.56, p = .18$ .

**Physical condition.** A model of the protagonist's body esteem and body weight did not significantly predict participants' perceptions of their physical condition,  $F(8, 149) = 1.59, p = .13, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .03$ .  $H_5$  predicted that participants who read a narrative featuring an underweight



protagonist would report significantly less positive feelings about their own physical condition. RQ<sub>5</sub> asked if protagonist body esteem would affect participants' physical condition scores. Protagonist body weight,  $F(2, 149) = .44, p = .65$ , and protagonist body esteem,  $F(2, 149) = 1.57, p = .21$ , did not significantly affect participants' physical condition. H<sub>5</sub> was not supported. Interestingly, a test of the interaction between protagonist body weight and body esteem was inconclusive,  $F(4, 149) = 2.11, p = .08$ , and a post hoc comparison of the means using Tukey's HSD indicated that none of the means was significantly different from another. However, pairwise tests using Student's *t* revealed that participants in the healthy weight, high body esteem condition had significantly more positive feelings regarding their physical condition ( $M = 5.24, SE = .24$ ) compared to participants in the healthy weight, low body esteem condition ( $M = 4.38, SE = .24$ ) and the absent body weight, low body esteem condition ( $M = 4.45, SE = .24$ ), as shown in Figure 5. Furthermore, participants in the healthy weight, high body esteem condition had significantly higher physical condition scores compared to participants in the underweight, high body esteem condition ( $M = 4.56, SE = .24$ ) and the underweight, no body esteem condition ( $M = 4.54, SE = .24$ ).

## Discussion

Study 1 investigated the effect of protagonist body weight and body esteem from excerpts of two chick lit novels on participant's body esteem, appearance, weight concern, sexual attractiveness, and physical condition. Prior to this study, it was unknown what effects, if any, textual representations of body weight and body esteem had on young women. The results of this study coincide with the assumptions of transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2000). After reading an experimental narrative, participants endorsed story-consistent beliefs regarding body esteem. Participants that read the experimental narrative in which the protagonist had low body esteem reported significantly lower body esteem scores compared to the conditions that did not mention body esteem. Furthermore, participants that read the low body-esteem narrative depicting a protagonist unhappy with her body weight were more concerned about their own weight. Based on the results from Study 1, the body esteem of the protagonist predicted the overall body-esteem scores and weight concern scores of the participants. However, the effects of protagonist body weight produced some unanticipated results.

Hypotheses regarding body weight were posited based on previous research of visual representations of the thin ideal. Previous research indicated that underweight or extremely thin

individuals in the media caused women to report significantly lower body esteem scores (Bessenoff, 2006; Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 1997), increased weight concern (Bissell & Zhou, 2004; Dittmer et al., 2009; Schooler et al., 2004), and lower physical condition scores (Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 1997; Schooler et al., 2004). However, Study 1 found no support for the hypotheses predicting that textual representations of an underweight protagonist would affect negatively affect participants in a similar manner. Females may need to see the visual representations of body weight and size for it to have a negative effect on their body esteem, weight concern, and physical condition. It may be a case where visual media have more of an effect than print media when representing the thin ideal. On the other hand, textual representations of body esteem may have worked well, because novels allow for participants to enter the minds of the protagonist and read their innermost thoughts (Green et al., 2008).

Sexual attractiveness was the only dependent variable in which body weight had an effect. The underweight protagonist predicted significantly lower sexual attractiveness scores reported by participants compared to the healthy weight protagonist. Therefore, visual representations (Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 1997; Schooler et al., 2004) and textual representations of an underweight protagonist have the potential to negatively affect participants' reported sexual attractiveness.

Although several of the hypotheses regarding body weight were not supported, protagonist body weight and body esteem together had an effect on participants' body esteem and the individual variables that comprise body esteem. Some interactions between body esteem and body weight almost reached significance in affecting participants' reported body esteem and physical condition. Participants in the control condition reported higher body esteem scores compared to participants in the healthy weight, low body esteem condition and the absent weight, low body esteem condition. Furthermore, participants in the control condition reported significantly higher body esteem scores than those participants in the underweight body esteem conditions. With regard to physical condition, participants in the high body esteem, healthy weight condition reported higher satisfaction with their physical condition compared to participants in the healthy, low body esteem condition and the absent weight, low body esteem condition. Participants in the high body esteem, healthy body weight condition also reported higher physical condition scores compared to those in the underweight, high body esteem condition and the absent body weight, high body esteem condition.

Overall, protagonists with low body esteem in the experimental narratives predicted participants' lower body esteem scores and increased weight concern. Furthermore, underweight protagonists predicted participants to report lower scores in sexual attractiveness. The negative effects produced from the current study underscore the concern of previous scholars (e.g., Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006; Umminger, 2006) as to the effect of the protagonists' obsession with weight and appearance within chick lit. The results of this study suggested that novels depicting low body esteem or underweight protagonists have the potential to negatively affect participants' body esteem, weight concern, appearance, sexual attractiveness, and physical condition. Study 2 examined how transportation and identification moderate the effects of protagonist body weight and body esteem on participants, and the *Dreaming in Black and White* narrative was altered across all conditions for the Study 2 to make the protagonist seem less food-obsessed.

### **Narrative Persuasion**

The narrative paradigm asserts that individuals understand the world and make decisions through evaluating narratives (Fisher, 1987). Although the narrative paradigm focused on rhetorical examinations, social scientists have empirically explored how narratives influence individuals' attitudes and behaviors. In this section, background regarding the narrative paradigm and narrative persuasion scholarship is explored. More specifically, transportation theory is explained as the theoretical perspective that will be used in Study 2. Prior research grounded in transportation theory will be explored and hypotheses are posited. Finally, identification as a persuasive element in narratives is examined.

### **The Narrative Paradigm**

Fisher (1987) proposed the narrative paradigm to explain the manner in which humans understand and interpret all forms of communication. Posited as an alternative to the rational paradigm that assumed humans were logical and made decisions through evaluating evidence and arguments, narrative was presented as a competing explanation for the way communicators evaluate and understand the world. Several postulates comprise the narrative paradigm: humans are storytellers; humans make decisions based on value-laden warrants or "good reasons" within a story and these differ with context; "good reasons" depend on the individual, culture, and other variables; the world is made up of stories we must choose from; and rationality is determined by a person's awareness of narrative probability and narrative fidelity (Fisher, 1987, p. 64). Fisher (1985) asserted that people understand what is happening in the world through narratives by

applying narrative rationality. Narrative rationality is how people decide what to believe or reject in a story, based on the principles of probability and fidelity.

Narrative probability is the elements of the story that create a “coherent” story, and narrative fidelity is whether the story “rings true” with other experiences in people’s lives (Fisher, 1989, p. 64). Fisher (1985) asserted that the narrative paradigm provides “logic” for evaluating stories, and it acknowledges the importance of the values a person views as important when determining whether to accept a story as a basis for decision-making and action. Therefore, stories in the fictional and real world have the power to influence the decisions and behaviors of audiences. While Fisher established the foundation for studying the influence of narratives rhetorically, recently social scientists in the fields of communication and psychology have empirically explored the persuasiveness of narratives on individuals’ beliefs (Gerrig, 1993; Gerrig & Prentice, 1991; Green & Brock, 2000).

### **Narrative Persuasion**

Narratives have the power to influence beliefs, although scholars have different explanations regarding the cognitive processes that occur while reading a narrative. Gerrig (1993) utilized the metaphor of “transportation” to understand the experience of reading a narrative, because words cannot accurately describe what occurs when an individual becomes absorbed into a narrative. A traveler is taken to a different world by some mode of transportation (e. g., novels, movies, anecdotes) and performs within the narrative. Similar to an actor in a film, the traveler must incorporate facts and emotions from the real world to experience the text and give life to the characters. Furthermore, the traveler moves away from her world so that aspects of the real world are inaccessible and then leaves the narrative world somewhat changed by the journey. Gerrig (1993) asserted that transportation into a fictional world was a special mental process. The model proposed by Gerrig utilized the willing suspension of disbelief, where individuals experience disbelief at first when entering a narrative world, but they engage in special mental processes that allow them to overcome the initial disbelief.

Several years later, though, Prentice and Gerrig (1999) revoked Gerrig’s (1993) statement that transportation required a special mental process. Rather, they argued that no unique mental processes are engaged when reading a narrative, and a dual-process model can better explain the persuasiveness of fictional experiences. First, systematic, or central, processing occurs when individuals utilize logic and carefully evaluate relevant information before persuasion occurs

(Petty, Cacioppo, Strathman, & Priester, 2005; Prentice & Gerrig, 1999). On the other hand, peripheral processing involves less careful thought, and an individual uses a low-effort decision strategy, such as source attractiveness or message length (Petty et al., 2005). When using a dual-process model, fiction is persuasive only when it is processed peripherally and the strength of the argument is not critically analyzed (Prentice & Gerrig, 1999). Motivation and ability are key factors when reading fiction to process the information systematically, thereby reducing the influence of narratives. For example, familiarity with the story setting is one factor where motivation and ability are important in determining how influential a story is on an individual's beliefs (Prentice, Gerrig, & Bailis, 1997). In a study, Yale students who read a narrative set in Princeton were more persuaded by the narrative, agreeing with both true and false assertions. On the other hand, Yale students who read the Yale narrative evaluated the claims in the story and experienced no belief change because of their relationship to the setting of text. The experiment was replicated at Princeton, where similar results were found. This study provided evidence that readers have the ability to process information systematically from a narrative and distinguish between true and false assertions. Therefore, they were not transported into the story and did not lose the capability of accessing relevant real-world information.

However, another group of scholars replicated this same study but discovered conflicting results when utilizing the same experimental design and manipulating the setting of the narratives participants read (Wheeler, Green, & Brock, 1999). The narratives did affect belief change, but no moderating effect of familiarity with setting was found. Participants in this study were influenced by story assertions across all three conditions. Even in a supplementary study where only false assertions were placed in the text, participants accepted the false assertions and experienced belief change. Therefore, the setting of the story failed to moderate the effect, as students were persuaded whether the setting of the story was at their own school or at another school.

Green and Brock (2000) asserted that a dual-process model did not explain the persuasiveness of narratives based on their restudy. They believed transportation was a distinct mental process, integrating attention, imagery, and feelings (Green & Brock, 2000; Green & Brock, 2005). Adapting the definition of transportation from Gerrig (1993), Green & Brock (2000) proposed their own transportation theory that was a convergent process in which all mental systems were focused on the fictional world. A convergent process is different from a

dual-process model, because rational arguments and mental schemas from the real world cannot be accessed when one is completely immersed in a fictional world (Green & Brock, 2005). This claim was tested by measuring individuals' need for cognition on the Need for Cognition Scale (Cacioppo, Petty, Kao, 1984) and the transportation scale (Green & Brock, 2000) to compare how individuals enjoy critical thinking and their likelihood of elaborating on information spontaneously. There was only a small, positive association between the need for cognition and transportation. Therefore, cognitive elaboration is critical thinking, whereas transportation is uncritical absorption into a narrative.

For this study, transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2000) will be utilized to explain the effects of the persuasiveness of narratives, because it has been used frequently in research studies examining narrative persuasion. First, a brief exploration of the basics of transportation theory will be covered, and then a review of the research utilizing transportation theory is provided.

### **Transportation Theory**

Transportation theory explains the persuasiveness of fictional or nonfictional narratives in written, verbal, or audio format (Green & Brock, 2000). If individuals are absorbed or transported into a story, the story may affect their real-world beliefs. Through transportation, individuals become completely enthralled within the story, integrating attention, imagery, and feelings. Defined as a convergent process, all cognitive systems are devoted to exploring the narrative world, and readers lose track of what is occurring around them in the real world. This full absorption causes readers to lose access to real-world facts, believing in the narrative world the author has created on both physical and psychological levels. Transported readers may also experience strong emotions and motivations (Gerrig, 1993) and leave the narrative world feeling differently than when they had first entered it (Green & Brock, 2000). As a result, narratives have the power to influence attitudes and beliefs.

### **Transportation Theory and Belief Change**

Numerous studies have examined belief and attitude change resulting from transportation into a narrative (Appel & Richter, 2007; Appel & Richter, 2010; Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Diekmann et al., 2000; Green, 2004; Escalas, 2006; Green & Brock, 2000; Green, Kass, Carrey, Herzig, Feeny, & Sabini, 2008; Sestir & Green, 2010). In previous research, a public narrative entitled *Murder at the Mall*, describing a young adult witnessing her younger sister being stabbed by a psychiatric patient out on furlough at the mall, was used to demonstrate the

persuasiveness of a story on real-world beliefs (Green & Brock, 2000). Participants read the narrative and were told the story was either fact or fiction to determine whether type of story had an effect. Belief in a just world was measured after reading the story to determine if the story influenced participants' real world beliefs about the injustice of a young girl being killed by a psychiatric patient. Highly transported individuals reported beliefs consistent with those represented in the narrative, thinking that psychiatric patients' freedoms should be restricted. Furthermore, participants were equally transported whether they believed the narrative was fact or fiction. A second study replicated these results utilizing the same narrative, but participants were given instructions to encourage or discourage transportation (Green & Brock, 2000). Some participants were assigned to highlight words that might be difficult for people who read at a fourth-grade level, thus discouraging transportation. Interestingly, the participants in this condition found it difficult to look for complicated words, because they became wrapped up in the story. However, there was no statistically significant difference affecting transportation across conditions. Once again, highly transported individuals were more likely to support story consistent beliefs, especially the belief that "crime doesn't pay." Participants were allowed to circle any parts of the story they thought were false, and highly transported individuals circled fewer "false notes," indicating that they were less likely to offer counter arguments.

Furthermore, personal experience with the subject of a particular narrative caused individuals to be more transported into a story (Green, 2004). In a study, individuals who were highly transported into a story perceived the story as being very real, accepting the events and actions of the characters. Therefore, personal experience and perceived realism have an impact on transportation, and the more individuals are transported based on these factors, the more they represent beliefs consistent with the story.

Transportation not only affects belief change related to true fictional assertions, but another study (Appel & Richter, 2007) discovered that false fictional assertions may also be integrated into real world knowledge. Participants read a fictional story with either true or false assertions about the real world. Agreement extremity and agreement certainty to fact-related assertions within the story were the two dependent variables measured. To test whether persuasive effects of narratives increased over time, participants were split into two groups. The first group answered the agreement extremity and certainty assessments immediately after reading the narrative, and the second group's responses to the dependent variables were assessed

two weeks later. In the first group, belief certainty was weak in the first session from the false assertions but returned to the baseline level two weeks later. The second group, assessed two weeks later, integrated both the true and false assertions into their real world knowledge. These results indicated that beliefs integrated from fiction are incorporated into real world beliefs, and both true and false assertions were more persuasive two weeks later, resulting in a sleeper effect. Transportation into a novel not only causes individuals to support story consistent beliefs, but also affects individuals' intended actions.

In a study that lasted three weeks, participants met once a week to read an excerpt from several novels, including one romance novel (Diekman et al., 2000). In the last session, participants answered condom use attitude and behavioral measures. Participants were divided into the safe sex condition and the traditional romance condition. In the safe sex condition, novel excerpts included sex scenes where the male lover asked the female if they should use a condom, and the female agrees. In the traditional romance condition, no condoms were mentioned in the excerpt. Participants in the safe sex condition reported more favorable attitudes toward condom use than participants in the traditional romance condition. However, participants in the safe sex condition indicated only a slightly increased intention to use condoms.

The articles reviewed in this section explore how narratives have the power to influence belief change. Highly transported individuals reported greater consistency with story-related beliefs (Green & Brock, 2000), and personal experience increased the likelihood of transportation into a story (Green, 2004). Furthermore, individuals integrated both true and false assertions and were more likely to believe false assertions over time after they have forgotten where they heard the information (Appel & Richter, 2007). While Study 2 Examined Hypotheses 1 – 5 and Research Questions 1 – 5 again, additional hypotheses and research questions were also proposed based on previous transportation studies.

H<sub>6</sub>: Transportation will negatively predict reader body esteem in the low body esteem condition.

H<sub>7</sub>: Transportation will positively predict reader body esteem in the high body esteem condition.



H<sub>8</sub>: Transportation will not predict reader body esteem in the control condition.

H<sub>9</sub>: Transportation will positively predict reader weight concern in the low body esteem condition.

H<sub>10</sub>: Transportation will negatively predict reader's reported scores of sexual attractiveness in the underweight condition.

H<sub>11</sub>: Transportation will positively predict readers' reported scores of sexual attractiveness in the healthy weight.

H<sub>12</sub>: Transportation will not predict readers' reported scores of sexual attractiveness in the control condition.

RQ<sub>6</sub>: Does transportation moderate the joint effects of protagonist body weight and body esteem on readers' reported body esteem levels?

RQ<sub>7</sub>: Does transportation moderate the joint effects of protagonist body weight and body esteem on readers' reported appearance scores?

RQ<sub>8</sub>: Does transportation moderate the joint effects of protagonist body weight and body esteem on readers' reported sexual attractiveness?

RQ<sub>9</sub>: Does transportation moderate the joint effects of protagonist body weight and body esteem on readers' reported weight concern?

RQ<sub>10</sub>: Does transportation moderate the joint effects of protagonist body weight and body esteem on readers' reported physical condition scores?

### **Transportation and Identification**

Burke (1969) was one of the early scholars to discuss the role of identification in persuading an audience. Burke explained identification with a scenario, stating that a person is

not identical to his colleague, but if their interests are similar, he identifies with his colleague (1969). If their interests are not similar, he may still identify with his colleague because he is persuaded to believe they are similar. An individual persuades only when he speaks the audience's language, attitudes, and ideas. Social scientists have attempted to operationalize identification to measure its effects in experiments (Cohen, 2001; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). For the purpose of this study, identification is defined as an "imaginative process" that occurs when the audience develops a relationship with a character, placing themselves into the fictional world and taking on the identity of the character (Cohen, 2001, p. 250). Through identification, people lose track of time in the real world and experience an increased emotional and psychological relationship with the character (Cohen, 2001).

It is important to note that transportation and identification are two distinct theoretical concepts (Green & Brock, 2000; Igartua, 2010; Sestir & Green, 2010; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010), and this assertion has been empirically validated (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). In this study, identification was affected by the emotional connection with characters in a film, and participants strongly identified with characters that were portrayed positively as honest individuals (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). Participants did not identify with characters portrayed negatively (e.g., the characters were lying and cheating on a spouse). Transportation was affected by suspense, and participants were more transported when they received information about the future rather than about the character's past (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). Therefore, transportation involves an overall immersion into the story, whereas identification occurs with one character. Transportation and identification can occur independently without each other, but often the two occur together and usually identification is less likely to occur without transportation (Sestir & Green, 2010).

Scholars can agree that identification with characters is believed to be an important determinant in the persuasiveness of a narrative (Cohen, 2001; Green & Brock, 2000; Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004; Igartua, 2010; Sestir & Green, 2010). In one study, when readers are highly involved with characters in the narrative world, transportation may lead to greater liking for sympathetic characters but not necessarily identification (Green & Brock, 2000). Highly transported participants ( $N = 97$ ) who read *Murder at the Mall* reported greater positivity toward Katie, the child who had been killed. The older sister, Joan, who witnessed the tragic event received positive ratings, but the difference was not statistically significant. In the second study,

when participants were placed into three conditions to encourage or discourage transportation, positive evaluations for both Katie and Joan were significantly different when individuals were highly transported. Therefore, characters within a narrative may have a persuasive impact on highly transported individuals' beliefs and attitudes. While this study cannot directly link identification with characters to belief change (Green & Brock, 2000), more recently several experiments have measured the degree of belief change relative to identification with characters (Igartua, 2010; Sestir & Green, 2010).

Identification with characters in a film was expected to have a greater impact than characters in print, because of a greater “merging” with them, leading to increased enjoyment and affective impact (Igartua, 2010). Furthermore, it was predicted that identification with characters in a movie would lead to greater narrative persuasion. In the first study, participants were surveyed after leaving the movie theater to express their identification with characters and enjoyment of the films they had watched. Identification with characters was an important factor in determining enjoyment of the film. These results were replicated with an experiment that also explored how identification impacted attitudes and beliefs (Igartua, 2010). Participants watched *A Day without a Mexican*, a film intended to influence more positive views on immigration. After the film, they reported more positive attitudes toward immigration. Moreover, individuals who identified with the characters in the film agreed more with story-related beliefs and felt more positive emotions toward immigrants.

Another study revealed that transportation into a narrative and identification with a protagonist caused some people to display traits similar to the protagonist within a narrative, even if it was only for a short period of time (Sestir & Green, 2010). Participants in the study completed a personality trait task to determine which characteristics they believe they possessed. Then, participants were given instructions designed to induce identification and transportation. Identification instructions directed participants to observe the film clip as though they were the protagonist of the clip (high identification) or to observe it as though they were an independent observer of the film (low identification). Transportation instructions asked participants to focus on the events of the film as though they were in it (high transportation) or to focus on the color scheme of the clip (low transportation). Participants watched the film and then completed a timed personality trait task regarding the characteristics they believed the protagonist of the film portrayed. Identification and transportation should have caused

participants to agree more quickly that the protagonist portrayed a trait that was also self-descriptive relative to those traits the protagonist or they themselves did not possess. A final questionnaire assessed transportation into the film and identification with the protagonist. Results indicated that high identification with the protagonist caused participants to display, at least temporarily, traits from the protagonist within the participants' self-concepts. Transportation effects did not play as significant of a role in the adoption of the protagonist's traits within participants. This may have occurred because transportation may not have directly influenced protagonist trait activation. Identification and transportation together, however, have the potential to temporarily change people's self-concepts. For the present study, it is possible that transportation may affect belief change regarding body esteem and identification may affect self-concept, and working together, this might produce more potent results.

This experiment will examine how identification with the protagonist impacts beliefs related to body image and body esteem. Although Igartua (2010) hypothesized that identification with characters should be greater in films than in print, few studies have examined identification with characters in a print version (Green & Brock, 2000). The current study will explore identification with a protagonist in print.

RQ<sub>10</sub>: Does identification with a protagonist affect participants' body image perceptions?

The relationship between transportation and identification remains unclear regarding novels. This study examined how transportation and identification interacted as participants read the novel.

### **Assimilation and Contrast Effects**

In communication, presenting an individual with a reference point may produce two opposing effects (Sherif, Taub, & Hovland, 1958). Acceptance of a reference point may push an individual closer to a new position, resulting in an assimilation effect. On the other hand, an individual may reject an opposing reference point, resulting in stronger support of her original position, thus creating a contrast or "boomerang" effect. Assimilation and contrast effects have been frequently observed when individuals are presented with new information, including stances on controversial social issues (Hovland, Taub, & Sherif; 1957); judgments of weights (Sherif et al., 1958); judgments of ambiguous stimuli (Herr, Sherman, & Fazio, 1983); formation

of attitudes (Schwarz & Bless, 1992), and social comparisons (Brewer & Weber, 1994; Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992; Kuhnen & Hannover, 2000; Mussweiler, Ruter, & Epstude, 2004).

Assimilation and contrast effects occur when individuals make social comparisons with others. Assimilation occurs when individuals engage in a process of similarity testing by focusing on the ways in which they were similar to a specific standard (Mussweiler et al., 2004). Contrast occurs when individuals engage in dissimilarity testing by focusing on the ways in which they differ from the standard. In a study, when female participants viewed a physically unattractive photo of a woman, a contrast effect occurred where the participants evaluated themselves as more attractive compared to participants that viewed an attractive woman (Brown et al., 1992). However, when participants experienced psychological closeness with the unattractive or attractive woman, both assimilation and contrast effects occurred. Psychological closeness was created when the participants were informed that the woman in the photo shared similar beliefs and values with the participant. Assimilation effects occurred when participants were more psychologically close with the attractive woman, and self-evaluations of the participants' attractiveness increased. On the other hand, a contrast effect was produced when participants believed the unattractive woman possessed opposing values, and the participants' self-evaluations were even higher than when they only viewed the unattractive photo. When psychological closeness was manipulated by telling participants they shared the same birthday as the attractive woman in the photo, assimilation effects occurred with participants low in self-esteem.

For the present study, identification with the protagonist may create an emotional connection and psychological closeness between the participant and protagonist, producing assimilation effects. If the participant identifies with the protagonist, an assimilation effect may occur where the participant reports either higher or lower body esteem depending on the protagonist's body esteem. Furthermore, if a participant feels no psychological closeness or identification with the protagonist, contrast effects may occur as well. For example, a contrast effect may occur when participants with high body esteem prior to the study read about a protagonist with low body esteem. The participant may report even higher body esteem scores. The underweight protagonist with low body esteem may produce the largest contrast effect for some participants if they consider this protagonist to be unrealistic, causing the participants to

report even higher body esteem scores, similar to combining an unattractive photo and contrasting values and beliefs (Brown et al., 1992).

## Study 2

### Design

This experiment was a 3 x 3 factorial design to test the effects of the protagonist's body weight (underweight, healthy weight, or absent) and body esteem (low, high, or absent), along with transportation and identification as measured independent variables, on participants' attitudes regarding their body esteem. Body esteem included participants' evaluations of their appearance, weight concern, sexual attractiveness, and physical condition.

### Participants

Female undergraduates ( $N = 251$ ) were recruited from the Communication Department research participant pool to participate in exchange for credit in a communication course. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 33 ( $M = 19.78$ ), but 99.5% fell between the ages of 18 and 23. Eighty-eight percent of participants were White, 3% were Asian, 3% were Latina, 2% were Black, 2% were Middle Eastern, and 1% marked the Other category. Fifty-eight percent ( $n = 149$ ) of participants read between 1 to 5 ( $M = 2.07$ ) chick lit novels a year. Five percent of participants ( $n = 13$ ) read between 6 to 10 novels a year. Finally, 2% of participants ( $n = 4$ ) reported they read 12 to 20 chick lit novels a year.

### Measures

All the measures from Study 1 were used in Study 2.

**Body esteem scale.** The Body Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984) yielded a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .93 in Study 2.

**Appearance subscale.** The Appearance Subscale from the Body Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (Mendelson et al., 2001) yielded a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .90 for Study 2.

**Weight concern subscale.** The Weight Concern Subscale from the Body Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984) produced a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .91 in Study 2.

**Sexual attractiveness subscale.** The Sexual Attractiveness Subscale from the Body Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984) produced a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .85 for Study 2.

**Physical condition subscale.** The Physical Condition Subscale of the Body Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984) produced a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .87 for Study 2.

**Transportation scale.** The transportation scale comprised 15 items that measured how absorbed a reader becomes in a narrative (Green & Brock, 2000). Cognitive engagement, emotional involvement, and vivid imagery are measured within the scale. Participants answered each item on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). The mean of the individual items represents the scale score. An example item from the scale is *While I was reading the narrative, I could easily picture the events in it taking place*. The Transportation Scale produced a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .73.

**Identification with characters scale.** The identification with characters scale (Igartua & Páez, 1998) included 14 items that examined whether participants related to the characters in a narrative on a 7-point intensity scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). The scale asked participants to indicate if they thought the characters were similar to them, if they understood the characters' way of acting, thinking, and feeling, and whether they were emotionally involved with the characters. An example item is *I thought that I would like to be like or act like the characters*. The total identification score is calculated by taking the simple sum of the scores from each of the items of the scale. The identification scale produced a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .91.

### **Procedure**

In this between-subjects experiment, all data was collected using paper and pencil measures. Upon arriving at the study location, participants were given a consent form to read and sign. Participants were allowed to ask any questions they had regarding the consent form, and they were free to withdraw from the study at any time during the session. After consent forms were collected, participants were given an experimental narrative to read and a questionnaire packet to complete. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the nine conditions. After reading the narrative, participants filled out a questionnaire packet containing the following measures, in order: thought-listing exercise, manipulation check, the Transportation Scale (Green & Brock, 2000), the Identification with Characters Scale (Igartua, & Pa'ez, 1998), the Body Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984), the Body Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (Mendelson et al., 2001), demographic information, and questions about their consumption of chick literature. When participants were finished completing the questionnaire packet, they were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

## Results

**Manipulation Check.** Separate chi-square analyses were conducted to determine if participants recognized the body weight and body esteem of the protagonist in the experimental narratives. Participants tended to report protagonist body weight estimates that were consistent with the manipulation in *Something Borrowed* across all conditions,  $\chi^2(6, 127) = 52.07, p < .001, w = .64$ . In the condition in which body weight was not specified ( $n = 41$ ), participants reported a variety of answers, which suggested that no clear body weight was apparent to participants in this condition. Seventy-one percent reported the protagonist was a healthy weight, 5% reported she was overweight, and 24% reported that the body weight of the protagonist was not specified. In the healthy weight condition ( $n = 42$ ), 77% of participants reported that the protagonist was a healthy weight. Finally, in the underweight condition ( $n = 44$ ), only 43% of participants reported that the protagonist was underweight, whereas 41% reported she was a healthy weight.

Likewise, participants tended to report protagonist body weight estimates that were consistent with the manipulation in *Dreaming in Black and White* across all conditions,  $\chi^2(6, 122) = 72.10, p < .001, w = .78$ . In the condition in which body weight was not specified ( $n = 41$ ), participants reported a variety of answers, suggesting that no body weight manipulation was present. Thirty-two percent reported that the protagonist was a healthy weight, 20% reported she was overweight, and 49% reported that the body weight of the protagonist was not specified. In the healthy weight condition ( $n = 42$ ), 55% accurately identified the protagonist as being a healthy weight. In the underweight condition ( $n = 39$ ), 49% reported that the protagonist was underweight.

Participants tended to report protagonist body esteem estimates that were consistent with the manipulation in *Something Borrowed* across all conditions,  $\chi^2(4, 127) = 138.54, p < .001, w = 1.04$ . In the condition where body esteem was not mentioned ( $n = 43$ ), participants reported a variety of answers, which suggested that no clear body esteem was apparent to participants in the control condition. Forty-four percent reported that the narrative did not specify the protagonist's body esteem, 37% reported that she had high body esteem, and 19% reported that she had low body esteem. In the low body esteem condition ( $n = 42$ ), 90% of participants accurately perceived the protagonist as having low body esteem. In the high body esteem condition ( $n = 42$ ), 100% of participants correctly identified the protagonist as having high body esteem.



Similarly, participants tended to report protagonist body esteem estimates that were consistent with the manipulation in *Dreaming in Black and White* across all conditions,  $\chi^2(4, 122) = 110.44, p < .001, w = .95$ . In the condition where body esteem is not mentioned ( $n = 41$ ), participants reported a variety of answers, which suggested that no clear body esteem manipulation was apparent to participants. Thirty-nine percent of participants correctly identified that the protagonist's body esteem was not specified, 20% reported that the protagonist had high body esteem, and 41% reported she had low body esteem. In the low body esteem condition ( $n = 40$ ), 100% of participants accurately perceived the protagonist as having low body esteem. In the high body esteem condition ( $n = 41$ ), 83% of participants reported the protagonist as having high body esteem.

Participants' perceptions of the protagonist's body weight between the two experimental narratives were significantly different,  $\chi^2(2, 249) = 10.58, p = .01, w = .21$ . Therefore, the stories had dissimilarities in depicting the body weight of the protagonist. Likewise, participants' perceptions of the protagonist's body esteem between the two experimental narratives were significantly different, unlike in Study 1,  $\chi^2(2, 249) = 6.54, p = .04, w = .16$ .

**Body esteem.** Table 1 compares the results of Study 1 and Study 2 for the main effect and interaction effects of protagonist body weight and body esteem on participants' body esteem, appearance, weight concern, sexual attractiveness, and physical condition. A model of the protagonist's body esteem and body weight was not a significant predictor of the participants' overall body esteem,  $F(8, 242) = .51, p = 0.85, \text{Adj. } R^2 = < .001$ .  $H_1$  predicted that participants who read the narrative with an underweight protagonist would report lower body esteem scores. Protagonist body weight did not seem to affect participants' overall body esteem scores,  $F(2, 242) = .86, p = .42$ . Thus,  $H_1$  was not supported.  $RQ_1$  asked if protagonist body esteem would affect participants' reported body esteem. Unlike in Study 1, protagonist body esteem did not significantly affect participants' body esteem scores,  $F(2, 242) = .16, p = .85$ . Furthermore, a test of the interaction did not produce significant results,  $F(4, 242) = .50, p = .74$ .

**Appearance.** A model of the protagonist's body esteem and body weight was not a significant predictor of participants' reported appearance evaluations,  $F(8, 241) = 1.15, p = .32, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .005$ .  $H_2$  predicted that the participants who read the narrative featuring an underweight protagonist would report lower evaluations of their appearance in general. Protagonist body weight significantly affected participants' evaluations of their own appearance,

$F(2, 241) = 3.94, p = .02$ . Participants in the healthy weight condition ( $M = 4.74, SE = .11$ ) reported significantly higher scores compared to participants in the underweight condition ( $M = 4.38, SE = .12$ ) and the condition in which body weight was not specified ( $M = 4.32, SE = .11$ ). RQ<sub>2</sub> asked if protagonist body esteem would affect participants' evaluations of their appearance in general. Protagonist body esteem did not significantly predict participants' evaluations of their appearance,  $F(2, 241) = .45, p = .64$ . A test of the interaction between protagonist body weight and body esteem did not produce significant results,  $F(4, 241) = .11, p = .98$ .

**Weight concern.** A model of the protagonist's body esteem and body weight was not a significant predictor of participants' reported weight concern,  $F(8, 242) = .88, p = .53, \text{Adj. } R^2 < .001$ . H<sub>3</sub> predicted that participants who read a narrative featuring an underweight protagonist would report more concern with their weight. Protagonist body weight did not significantly predict participants' weight concern scores,  $F(2, 242) = 1.29, p = .28$ . H<sub>3</sub> was not supported. RQ<sub>3</sub> asked if protagonist body esteem affected participants' weight concern, and unlike Study 1, protagonist body esteem did not significantly affect participants' weight concern,  $F(2, 242) = .17, p = .83$ . A test of the interaction between protagonist body weight and body esteem did not produce significant results,  $F(4, 242) = 1.02, p = .40$ .

**Sexual attractiveness.** A model of the protagonist's body esteem and body weight was not a significant predictor of participants' reported sexual attractiveness,  $F(8, 242) = .50, p = .85, \text{Adj. } R^2 < .001$ . H<sub>4</sub> predicted that participants who read a narrative featuring an underweight protagonist would report significantly lower sexual attractiveness scores. Unlike Study 1, H<sub>4</sub> was not supported, because protagonist body weight did not significantly predict participants' reported sexual attractiveness scores,  $F(2, 242) = .72, p = .49$ . RQ<sub>4</sub> asked if protagonist body esteem would affect participants' reported sexual attractiveness, but results were nonsignificant,  $F(2, 242) = .25, p = .78$ . Finally, a test of the interaction between protagonist body weight and body esteem did not produce significant results,  $F(4, 242) = .52, p = .72$ .

**Physical condition.** A model of the protagonist's body esteem and body weight was not a significant predictor of participants' reported physical condition scores,  $F(8, 242) = .24, p = .98, \text{Adj. } R^2 < .001$ . H<sub>5</sub> predicted that participants that read a narrative featuring an underweight protagonist would report less positive feelings regarding their own physical condition. Participant body weight did not predict participant's reported physical condition scores,  $F(2, 242) = .28, p = .76$ . Thus, H<sub>5</sub> was not supported. RQ<sub>5</sub> asked if protagonist body

esteem affected participants' reported physical condition scores. However, protagonist body esteem did not predict participant's reported physical condition,  $F(2, 242) = .25, p = .78$ . A test of the interaction between protagonist body weight and body esteem did not produce significant results,  $F(4, 242) = .21, p = .94$ .

**Transportation and body esteem.**  $H_6$  predicted that transportation would negatively predict reader body esteem in the low body esteem condition. However, the simple-simple slope of transportation did not predict reader body esteem in the low body esteem condition,  $B = .04, \beta = .03, p = .77$ . Thus,  $H_6$  was not supported.

$H_7$  predicted that transportation would positively predict reader body esteem in the high body esteem condition. The simple-simple slope of transportation in the high body esteem condition was significant,  $B = .26, \beta = .24, p = .03$ . More highly transported readers reported significantly higher body esteem scores in the high body esteem condition, providing support for  $H_7$ .

$H_8$  predicted that transportation would not predict reader body esteem scores in the control condition. The simple-simple slope of transportation in the control body esteem condition was significant,  $B = .34, \beta = .28, p = .009$ . More transported readers reported significantly higher body esteem scores, thus  $H_8$  was not supported. Taken together, the results suggest that the more transported readers reported higher levels of body esteem, unless the protagonist's body esteem was low.

**Transportation and weight concern.**  $H_9$  predicted that transportation would positively predict reader weight concern in the low body esteem condition. The simple-simple slope of transportation in the low body esteem condition was nonsignificant,  $B = -.15, \beta = -.09, p = .42$ .  $H_9$  was not supported.

**Transportation and sexual attractiveness.**  $H_{10}$  predicted that transportation would negatively predict readers' reported sexual attractiveness scores in the underweight condition. The simple-simple slope of transportation in the underweight condition was nonsignificant,  $B = .14, \beta = .13, p = .24$ . Interestingly, though, the more transported participants were, the higher their reported sexual attractiveness scores in the underweight condition, which was in the opposite direction predicted.  $H_{10}$  was not supported.

$H_{11}$  predicted that transportation would positively predict readers' reported sexual attractiveness scores in the healthy weight condition. The simple-simple slope of transportation

in the healthy weight condition was marginally significant,  $B = .13$   $\beta = .18$ ,  $p = .09$ , but the positive slope suggested that increased transportation was associated with higher scores of reported sexual attractiveness.

$H_{12}$  predicted that transportation would not predict readers' reported sexual attractiveness scores in the control condition. The simple-simple slope of transportation in the control condition was significant,  $B = .33$   $\beta = .29$ ,  $p = .007$ . As transportation increased, participants' reported sexual attractiveness increased.  $H_{12}$  was not supported. As in the tests of transportation and reader body esteem, greater levels of transportation predicted an increase in readers' reported sexual attractiveness in the healthy and control conditions, but not in the underweight condition.

**Transportation as a moderator.**  $RQ_6$  asked if transportation would moderate the joint effects of protagonist body weight and body esteem on participants' reported body esteem. A model of protagonist body weight, body esteem, and participants' transportation was not a significant predictor of participants' body esteem,  $F(17, 233) = .92$ ,  $p = .55$ ,  $Adj. R^2 = < .001$ . Furthermore, there was no three-way interaction among the three variables,  $F(4, 233) = .03$ ,  $p = .99$ .

$RQ_7$  asked if transportation moderated the joint effects of protagonist body weight and body esteem on participants' reported appearance scores, but the model was nonsignificant,  $F(17, 232) = .80$ ,  $p = .88$ ,  $Adj. R^2 = < .001$ . The three-way interaction of protagonist body weight, body esteem, and transportation was nonsignificant,  $F(4, 232) = 1.22$ ,  $p = .30$ .

$RQ_8$  asked if transportation moderated the joint effects of protagonist body weight and body esteem on participants' reported weight concern. The model of protagonist body weight, body esteem, and transportation did not produce significant results,  $F(17, 233) = .85$ ,  $p = .63$ ,  $Adj. R^2 = < .001$ . The three-way interaction among the three variables was nonsignificant,  $F(4) = .66$ ,  $p = .63$ .

$RQ_9$  asked if transportation moderated the joint effects of protagonist body weight and body esteem on participants' reported sexual attractiveness scores. The model of protagonist body weight, body esteem, and transportation was nonsignificant,  $F(17, 233) = .99$ ,  $p = .47$ ,  $Adj. R^2 = < .001$ , and the three way interaction among the three variables was nonsignificant,  $F(4) = .07$ ,  $p = .99$ .

$RQ_{10}$  asked if transportation moderated the joint effects of protagonist body weight and protagonist body esteem on participants' reported physical condition scores. The model of

protagonist body weight, body esteem, and transportation was nonsignificant,  $F(17, 233) = .87, p = .61, \text{Adj. } R^2 = < .001$ . The three-way interaction was nonsignificant,  $F(4) = .25, p = .91$ .

**Identification and body esteem.** RQ<sub>11</sub> asked if identification with a protagonist affects participants' body image perceptions. A model testing the effects of protagonist body weight, body esteem, and identification on participants' body esteem scores was nonsignificant,  $F(17, 233) = .71, p = .80, \text{Adj. } R^2 = < .001$ . However, a two-way interaction between identification and protagonist body esteem on participants' reported body esteem was marginally significant,  $F(2, 233) = 2.93, p = .06$ . A post-hoc test revealed that the simple-simple-simple slope of identification was significant in the low body esteem-underweight condition,  $B = -.30, \beta = -.37, p = .05$ , but nonsignificant in the other conditions, (all  $ps > .20$ ). The more readers identified with an underweight protagonist with low body esteem, the lower their reported body esteem.

A model testing the effects of protagonist body weight, body esteem, and identification on participants' reported appearance evaluations was nonsignificant,  $F(17, 232) = 1.48, p = .10, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .03$ . Identification with the protagonist was a significant predictor of participants' reported appearance scores,  $F(1, 232) = 5.02, p = .03$ . A two-way interaction between protagonist body esteem and identification on participants' evaluations of their appearance was significant,  $F(2, 232) = 3.18, p = .04$ . Identification was a negative predictor of participants' appearance evaluations in the low body esteem condition,  $B = -.31, \beta = -.32, p = .003$ , but the simple-simple slopes in the healthy and control conditions were nonsignificant ( all  $ps > .20$ ). In the low body esteem condition, the more participants' identified with the protagonist in the low body esteem condition, the lower their evaluations of their appearance.

A model testing the effects of protagonist body weight, body esteem, and identification on participants' reported weight concern was nonsignificant,  $F(17, 233) = 1.11, p = .34, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .008$ . However, a two-way interaction between protagonist body esteem and identification was significant,  $F(2, 233) = 4.13, p = .02$ . A post-hoc test revealed that identification with the protagonist was a significant predictor in the low body esteem condition,  $B = -.23, \beta = -.22, p = .05$  and was a marginally significant predictor in the high body esteem condition,  $B = .21, \beta = .19, p = .08$ . The simple-simple slope of identification was nonsignificant in the control condition, ( $p > .20$ ). Identification with a protagonist who had low body esteem predicted increased weight concern, but identification with a protagonist who had high body esteem seemed to be associated with decreased weight concern.

A model testing the effects of protagonist body weight, body esteem, and identification on participants' reported physical condition was nonsignificant,  $F(17, 233) = .64, p = .84$ , Adj.  $R^2 = -.03$ . All of the effects and interaction terms were nonsignificant (all  $ps > .20$ ).

## **Discussion**

Study 2 explored how transportation into the narrative and identification with the protagonist moderated the effects of protagonist body weight and body esteem on participants' body esteem, appearance evaluations, weight concern, reported sexual attractiveness, and reported physical condition. The two experimental narratives were not equivalent in terms of how the independent variables were operationalized. Participant responses to the dependent variables of body esteem, weight concern, and sexual attractiveness depended on the narrative they read. However, because of multiple stimulus sampling, alternative explanations to participants' responses can be ruled out. Furthermore, all chick lit novels are not the same in their representations of protagonist body weight and body esteem.

The main effects of body weight on participants' sexual attractiveness and the main effects of body esteem on participants' body esteem and weight concern were not significant in Study 2. The only hypothesis that was supported was that participants in the underweight condition reported lower evaluations of their appearance compared to participants in the healthy weight and control condition. Adding the transportation and identification scales into the experimental design before participants completed the body esteem questionnaires seemed to have an effect on their reported body esteem evaluations, and this effect will be discussed in more detail in the General Discussion.

The hypotheses regarding transportation also produced some unexpected results. According to transportation theory, highly transported individuals should report beliefs consistent with those represented in the narrative (Green & Brock, 2000). However, participants in the low body esteem condition did not endorse story consistent beliefs by reporting lower body esteem scores like they did in Study 1. Highly transported individuals actually reported higher body esteem scores in the low body esteem condition. Similarly, transportation should have negatively predicted weight concern in the low body esteem condition, but this hypothesis was not supported either. In Study 1, participants in the underweight condition reported significantly lower sexual attractiveness scores. Based on this finding, transportation should negatively predict participants' reported sexual attractiveness in the underweight condition in

Study 2. The opposite occurred where highly transported readers reported higher sexual attractiveness scores in the underweight condition. Transportation in the control condition predicted participants' body esteem scores. Highly transported participants also reported higher body esteem scores, which is interesting since there was no mention of body esteem in the control condition. Study 2's inconsistency with transportation theory will be further examined in the General Discussion.

Only one transportation hypothesis was supported and another was marginally supported. First, highly participants in the high body esteem condition did seem to endorse story consistent beliefs by reporting higher body esteem scores compared to less transported participants. Highly transported individuals in the high body esteem condition tended to report higher scores of sexual attractiveness. Although transportation into the narrative produced some disparate results, identification with the protagonist produced more expected results. There were no three-way interactions among identification with the protagonist, protagonist body weight, and protagonist body esteem on participants' body esteem, appearance, weight concern, sexual attractiveness, and physical condition. However, there were some two-way interactions that were significant. A two-way interaction between identification and protagonist body esteem on participants' body esteem was significant in the low body esteem, underweight protagonist condition. The more participants identified with the underweight protagonist in the low body esteem condition, the lower participants' reported body esteem scores. Another two-way interaction between protagonist body esteem and identification occurred in the low body esteem condition. Participants who reported higher identification scores with the protagonist in the low body esteem condition, reported lower evaluations of their own appearance. In other words, identifying with the protagonist with low body esteem caused participants to feel less satisfied with their own looks. Finally, a two-way interaction between identification and body esteem was significant in two conditions. Participants who identified strongly with the protagonist with low body esteem reported an increased concern with their weight. On the other hand, participants who strongly identified with the protagonist with high body esteem reported less concern with their weight. There were no significant interactions with physical condition.

The identification results in Study 2 are consistent with the results of other preliminary identification studies (e. g., Igartua, 2010; Sestir & Green, 2010). Within the two studies, identification with characters in the narrative resulted in participants displaying story consistent

beliefs. Similarly, in Study 2, participants who identified with the protagonist reported story consistent beliefs. Participants who identified with the protagonist in the low body esteem condition reported lower body esteem scores and increased weight concern. Whereas participants who identified with the protagonist in the high body esteem condition reported significantly higher body esteem scores. Assimilation effects may have occurred with participants who strongly identified with the protagonists in the low and high body esteem conditions. When individuals feel psychologically close with another attractive female, they subsequently rate themselves as more attractive (Brown et al., 1992). This phenomenon may have occurred for participants in the high body esteem condition where they reported even higher body esteem scores. Similarly, the opposite effect may have occurred in the low body esteem condition where participants rated their body esteem scores even lower.

### **General Discussion**

The difference in results between Study 1 and Study 2 requires further explanation. In Study 1, underweight protagonists predicted participants' lower reported scores of sexual attractiveness and the protagonist with low body esteem predicted participants' lower reported scores of body esteem and weight concern. The significant results from Study 1 were not replicated in Study 2, and the only difference between the two studies was the addition of the Transportation and Identification Scales before the body esteem questionnaires in the experimental materials. There are several possible explanations why the expected relationships were not significant in Study 2.

Having the participants fill out the Transportation and Identification Scales before the body esteem scales in Study 2 may have cued or primed the participants about the purpose of the study. Asking the participants how much they identified with the protagonist may have made the body esteem and body weight of the protagonist especially salient for when they subsequently filled out the body esteem questionnaires. When participants realized that the protagonists' body weight or body esteem made them feel worse about themselves, they worked to restore their body esteem to the level it was before reading the experimental narrative. Several studies in mood enhancement (Bless, Bohner, Schwarz, & Strack, 1999; Schwarz & Clore, 1983; Schwarz & Clore, 2003) provide support for the hypothesis that cueing participants with the Transportation and Identification scales may have had an effect.



Previous research has investigated mood misattribution where individuals do not realize that external factors such as the weather are influencing their evaluations of their overall happiness or well-being (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). In one study, when participants were asked only about their life satisfaction, those who were asked on a sunny day reported significantly higher life satisfaction compared to those who were asked on a rainy day (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). Thus, participants unknowingly misattributed their unhappiness from the bad weather onto evaluations of their satisfaction with life. However, when participants were first asked how the weather was or were clued in to the fact that the researchers were examining how the weather affects mood, there was no misattribution of mood from the bad weather. Participants realized that their bad mood was a result of the rainy day and reported higher satisfaction with their lives. The present may have observed similar effects. In Study 1, participants filling out the body esteem questionnaires may not have realized the effects of the protagonist's low body esteem or underweight figure on the participants' own evaluations of her body. However, in Study 2, the Transportation and Identification scales may have served the same role as asking them how the weather was or that we were studying the effect of weather on people's moods. Therefore, participants realized the effect the narrative had on their body esteem and reported higher evaluations.

Furthermore, mood affects whether individuals process persuasive information systematically or peripherally (Bless et al., 1990). In one study, participants in happy moods were equally persuaded by both weak and strong arguments, seeming to rely on peripheral processing. On the other hand, participants in bad moods seemed to engage in systematic processing and were more critical of the persuasive messages. In the second experiment of the present study, reading the narratives in the low body esteem or underweight conditions may have put participants in a bad mood, causing them to be more critical when filling out the Transportation and Identification scales and understanding the purpose of the study. Participants in the high body esteem and healthy weight conditions may have been in better moods and reported higher evaluations of their own bodies.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The significant results from Study 1, specifically with regard to a protagonist's low body esteem having a negative effect on participants' reported body esteem and increased weight concern, follow the assumptions of transportation theory. After reading the narrative,

participants reported story-consistent beliefs of low body esteem and increased weight concern. Therefore, this study extended the uses of transportation theory to body image research.

However, the difference in results from Study 1 and Study 2 may bring the assumptions of transportation theory into question. Transportation theory asserts that immersion into a narrative is a convergent process where all mental capabilities are engaged in experiencing the narrative world (Green & Brock, 2000). Highly transported individuals do not have the ability to develop counterarguments to information in the story and leave the narrative endorsing story-consistent beliefs. Other scholars (e. g., Prentice & Gerrig, 1999) have argued, however, that immersion into a narrative can be explained with a dual-path model. Motivation and ability are key factors in processing fiction. In Study 1, participants may have peripherally processed the narrative and not evaluated the information regarding body esteem in the narrative. Peripheral processing could have resulted in more story-consistent beliefs regarding body esteem. In Study 2, completing the Transportation and Identification scales before the other independent variable measures may have triggered systematic processing wherein participants evaluated the narrative and perhaps guessed the purpose of the study. When participants understood that the narrative made them feel bad about their own bodies, they compensated by rating their satisfaction with their bodies higher. However, this paper can only speculate upon the reasons why Study 2 did not replicate Study 1's results; the reasons cannot be empirically evidenced in the current study.

This study also contributed to research with identification and its role in narrative persuasion. Identification with the protagonist with low body esteem may have caused participants to report significantly lower body esteem scores and increased weight concern. A replication of this study might determine if identification with the protagonist amplifies story-consistent beliefs.

### **Practical Implications**

Based on the results of Study 1, a suggestion to chick lit authors would be to create protagonists with high body esteem and an average weight or no mention of body esteem or body weight. From this study, female readers may not have liked the protagonist with low body esteem, which may have negative implications for book sales.

An interesting implication arises from Study 2 that may assist female readers in combating the negative body image effects chick lit novels can produce. Having participants complete the transportation and identification scales before the body esteem scales seemed to

have curbed the negative effects found in Study 1. Although speculative, interventions that prime notions related to identification and transportation may be effective in limiting the harmful influence of low body esteem messages in novels. Possibly health teachers or librarians in high schools could relay the message that reading novels about protagonists with low body esteem may cause individuals to have lower body esteem, especially if they enjoyed the book or felt psychologically close with the protagonist.

Finally, health professionals could create chick lit narratives designed to function as an effective intervention tool to combat poor body esteem in adolescent and teenage females. As a popular genre for females, portraying protagonists with low body esteem who seek support from family members and outside sources to improve their body esteem may send a positive message to females. If females identified with protagonists in these novels, it may help improve their body esteem or seek support from family members.

### **Limitations**

Given the number of hypotheses tested, one must be concerned with the possibility of alpha inflation. The pattern of significant results could have been due, in part, to alpha inflation, particularly in the case of Study 2, where some of the findings seemed to be conditional (e. g., a correlations between two dependent variables in only on independent variable condition).

One strength of the study was the sample's homogeneity of race, given that white young adult females are the primary audience for chick lit. However, previous research regarding body image found that African-American women were less affected by depictions of the mainstream thin ideal, possibly because of a strong ethnic identity and that African-American television shows depict women with a wider variety of body shapes (Gentles & Harrison, 2006; Schooler et al., 2004). With a homogenous sample, therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized to all younger women, only to the race dominantly represented in the sample. Although not explicitly stated within the experimental narratives, participants probably assumed that the protagonist was white. Participants of other races may not have been able to strongly identify with her. Future research is necessary to take into account different races of the protagonist and the participants. It is possible that African-American protagonists within novels may be depicted as larger since African-American women tend to be depicted in the same manner in television, having less of a negative impact on girls (Schooler et al., 2004). However, homogeneity of race may also be a strength, given that African-American females are not as negatively affected by

the media and that chick literature protagonists are typically middle-class white women (Butler & Desai, 2008).

Another limitation was the order of the dependent variables in the questionnaire packet in the second study. If the body esteem questionnaires had been placed before the Transportation and Identification scales, Study 1's results may have been replicated. Furthermore, the moderating effects of transportation and identification might have also been significant. The relationships between transportation, identification, and protagonist body weight and body esteem on readers' body esteem may have been stronger and more fully explained. A final limitation may have been the short section of the novel the participants read. It might have been difficult for them to be fully transported in a short narrative, because the story did not have a strong ending, but it seemed long enough for transportation effects to occur. Identification with the protagonist may not have been as strong as when participants read a whole novel. Furthermore, the effects of reading whole novels of characters with poor body esteem may be more detrimental than can be discovered by participants reading a short excerpt from a novel. A final limitation involved the two experimental narratives utilized in the experiments, because they were dissimilar in their representations of body weight and body esteem. The limitations of the present study provide multiple avenues for future research.

### **Future Research**

A follow-up study should modify the two experimental narratives so there are not differences in their representations of body weight and body esteem and examine how order of the Transportation and Identification scales affects participants' responses to the body esteem questionnaires. Half of the participants would fill out questionnaire packets with the transportation and identification scales placed before the body esteem questionnaires, and the other half would fill out the transportation and identification scales after they have completed the body esteem questionnaires. Varying the order of the scales may provide support for why Study 2 did not replicate the results of Study 1. It may be that filling out the transportation and identification scales before the body esteem questionnaires clued participants in to the purpose of the experimental narrative and they responded to the body esteem questions accordingly. Suggestions about the ordering of transportation and identification scales in questionnaire packets could be formulated based on the results of a follow-up study.

Although Study 2 produced some unexpected results with the transportation and identification scales, there is more work to be done in examining the effects of textual and visual representations of body image on young women. One area of the narrative persuasion literature that requires closer attention is the effects mechanisms that work while using visual or print media (Green et al., 2008). Since there is limited research in this area, Study 1 had little empirical research to explain why visual depictions of an underweight woman affected participants more than textual descriptions of an underweight protagonist. Most media effects research has only focused on the effects of media content (Eveland, 2003), which may be why there has been no research on the effects mechanisms of different media for transportation. Future research in this area could use a “mix of attributes approach” to defining media effects based on media’s multidimensional attributes. Eveland (2003) describes the mix of attributes approach and the various attributes of media that can be examined.

A future study could explore the effects of a fashion magazine, a television show, and a novel representing the thin ideal. The three media differ in the six attributes Eveland (2003) defined. All three media are rather low in interactivity, because they do not respond to prior choices made by individuals. The organization for a novel and television show both represent a narrative structure, whereas a magazine may be linearly organized similar to a newspaper. A novel and a magazine are relatively high in control, because individuals can reread sections or skim sections. Television shows are low in user control, because additional technology is necessary to alter the pace. The channels differ for all three media. The novel is textual and requires imagination, the magazine is visual, and the television is audio and visual. The novel is the most text-based, followed by the magazine, and the television show will have little to no textuality. Finally, the content of the three media will differ. The television show and novel will be most similar in narrating a story. The fashion magazine may tell a story, but the focus will be on clothing.

All of these factors must be considered when designing an experiment about body image to understand the attributes that combine with content to produce the effects. Will the visual aspects of the magazine and television show produce more powerful effects than the textual representations in a novel? Does the amount of control make a difference, because individuals can reread sections of the novel or magazine? Understanding how the attributes interact

contributes to how effects mechanisms work within visual and print media portraying body weight and body esteem and the effects on young women.

Finally, the chick literature genre is worthy of further examination of its effects on young women because of the popularity of the genre. Another future area for investigation is whether women readers enjoy novels more if the protagonist's body weight and low body esteem are not mentioned. If readers enjoy the novels less when there is no mention of protagonist body weight and body esteem, recommendations could be made to authors. Chick lit has also been criticized for the extreme consumerism it portrays (Butler & Desai, 2008), and future studies could explore the role of identification with a protagonist and her extreme consumerism have in influencing young women's self-esteem and satisfaction with their own lives.

### **Conclusion**

This study extended narrative persuasion and body image research. Most studies have focused on visual depictions of the thin ideal (e. g., television, movies, magazines, and advertisements). Novels are an underexplored medium within body image research, and the current experiments provided evidence that text-based representations of the thin ideal and low body esteem in novels have a negative impact on women's overall body esteem, weight concern, sexual attractiveness, and evaluations of their appearance. Participants' identification with protagonists in the low body esteem condition predicted lower body esteem scores, increased weight concern, and lower evaluations of their appearance. Based on the study, recommendations to chick lit authors would be to avoid creating protagonists with low body esteem or extremely thin protagonists. Furthermore, scholars and health officials should be concerned about the effect novels have on women's body image, especially since these issues could lead to disordered eating.

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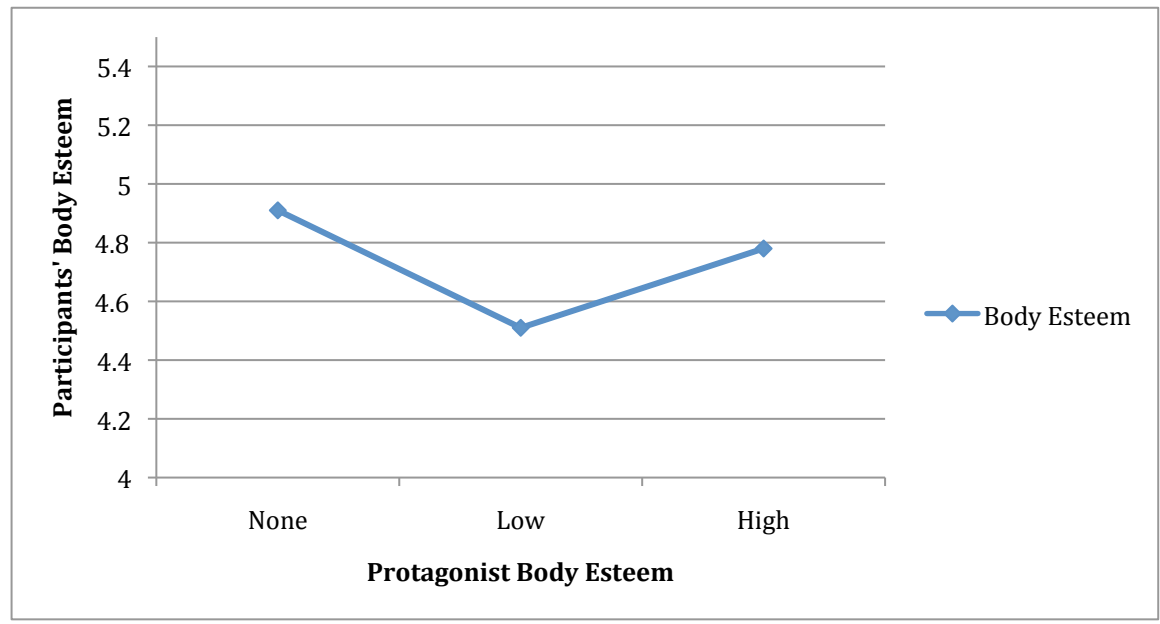
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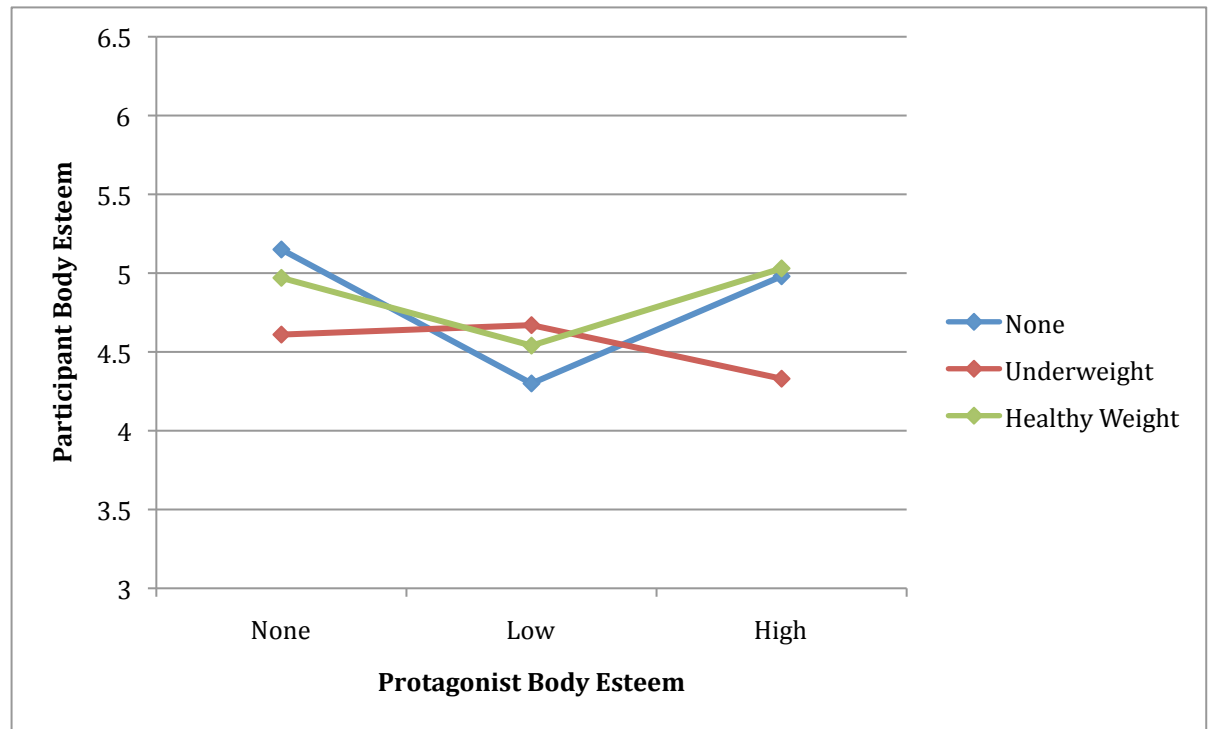
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### Appendix A: Figures

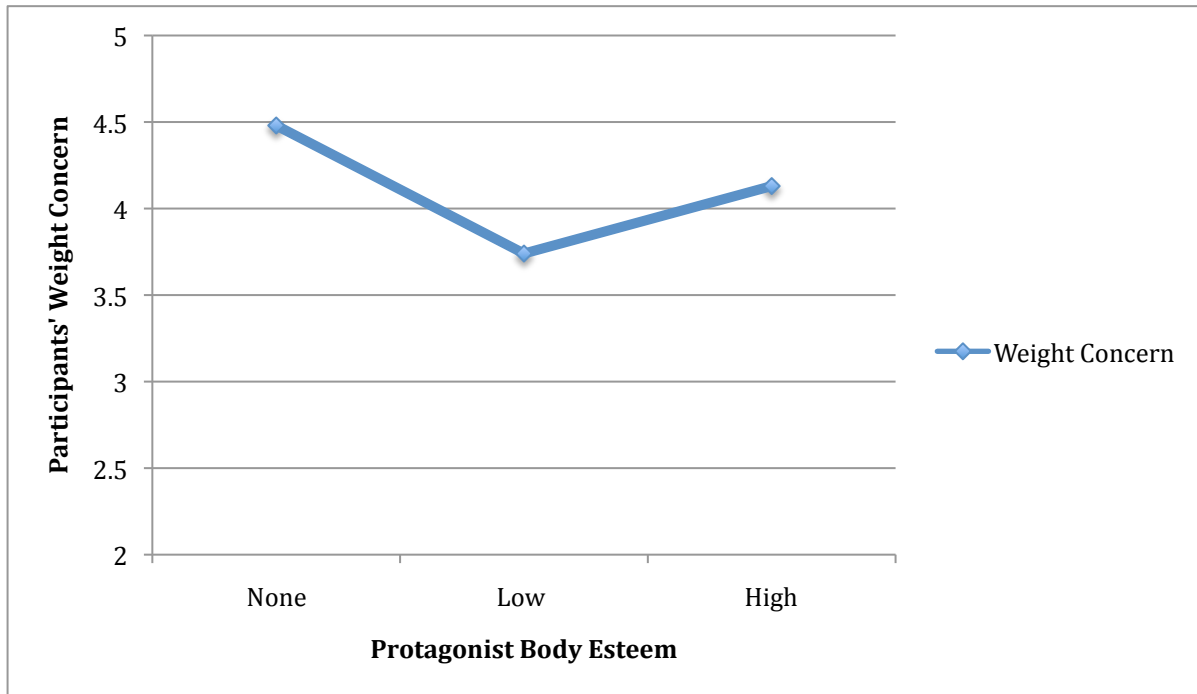
**Figure 1. Main effect of protagonist body esteem on participant body esteem.**



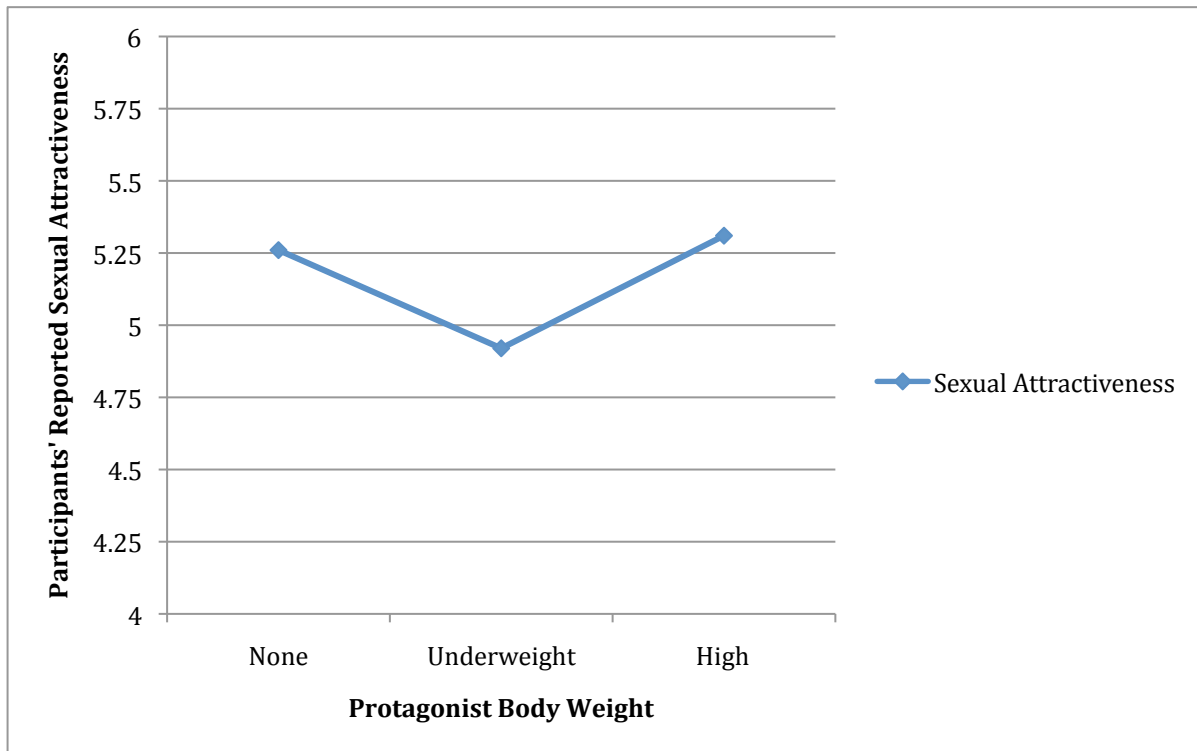
**Figure 2. Interaction of protagonist body weight and body esteem on participant body esteem.**



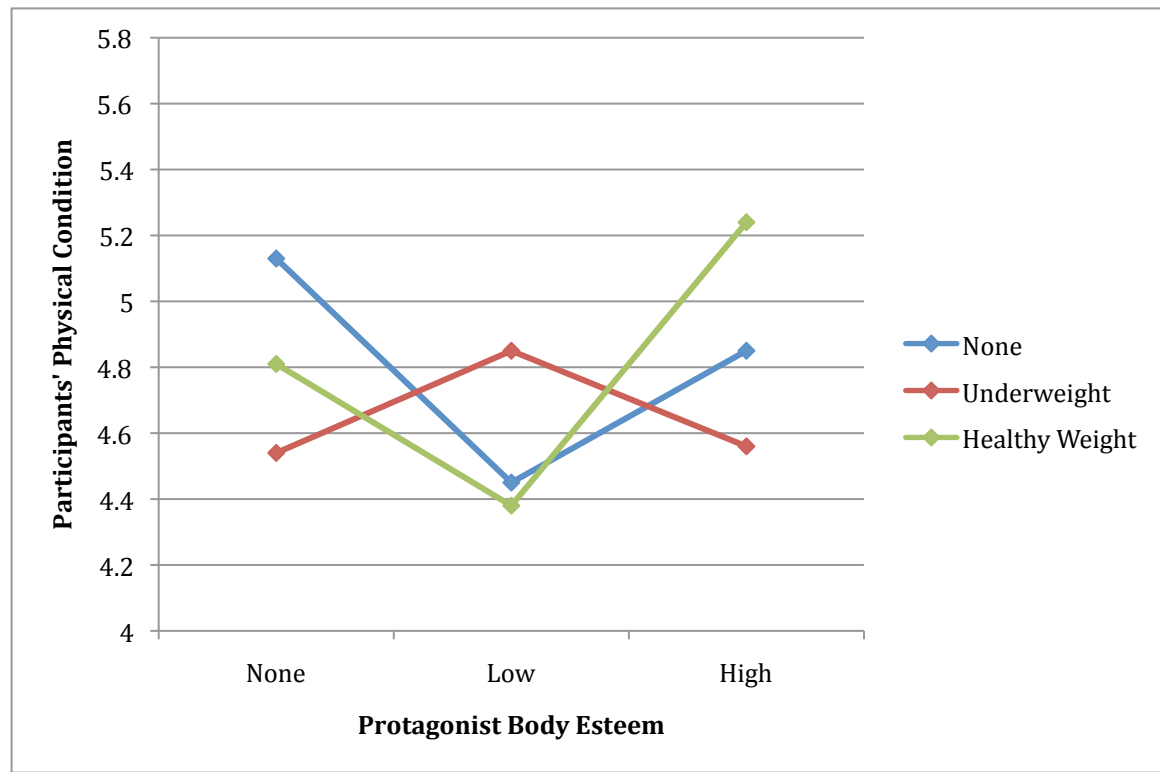
**Figure 3. Main effect of protagonist body esteem on participants' weight concern.**



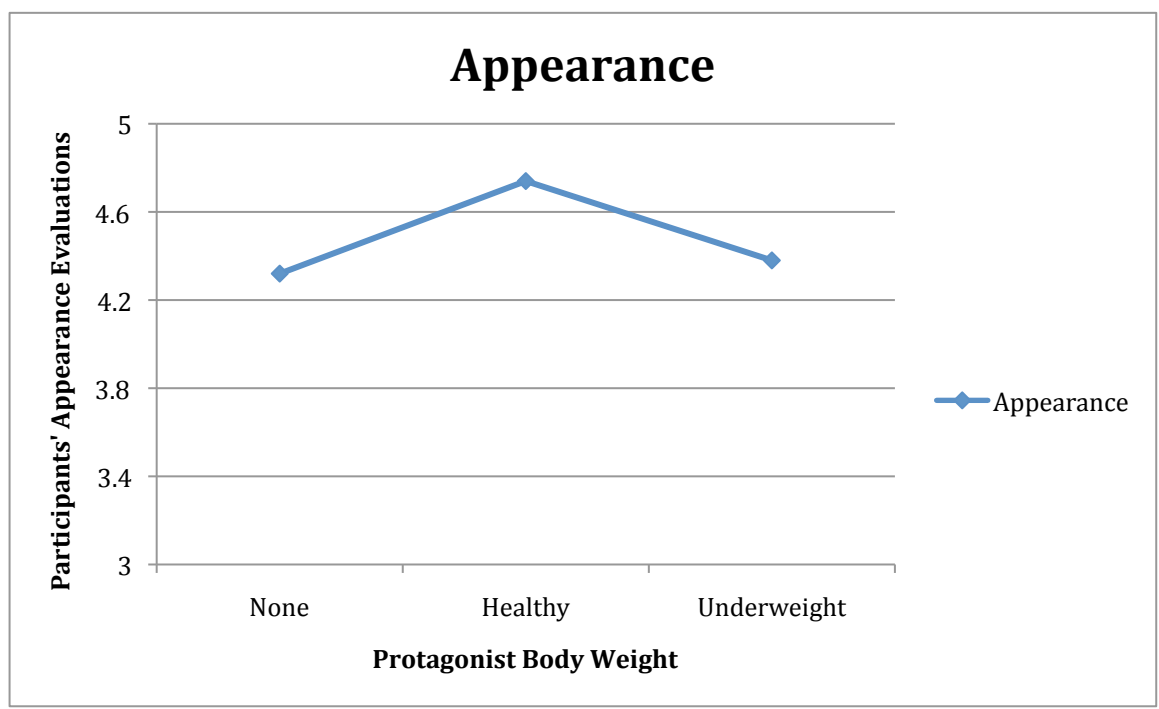
**Figure 4. Main effect of protagonist body weight on participants' sexual attractiveness.**



**Figure 5. Interaction of protagonist body weight and body esteem on participants' physical condition.**



**Figure 6. Main effect of protagonist body weight on participants' appearance.**





## Appendix B: Tables

**Table 1: Supported hypotheses and research questions in Study 1 and Study 2**

Hypotheses and Research Questions	Study 1	Study 2
H <sub>1</sub> : Underweight protagonist will predict participants' lower body esteem scores.		
H <sub>2</sub> : Underweight protagonist will predict participants' lower appearance scores.		X
H <sub>3</sub> : Underweight protagonist will predict participants' increased weight concern.		
H <sub>4</sub> : Underweight protagonist will predict participants' lower sexual attractiveness scores.	X	
H <sub>5</sub> : Underweight protagonist will predict participants' lower physical condition scores.		
RQ <sub>1</sub> : Did protagonist body esteem affect participants' body esteem scores?	X	
RQ <sub>2</sub> : Did protagonist body esteem affect participants' appearance scores?		
RQ <sub>3</sub> : Did protagonist body esteem affect participants' weight concern?	X	
RQ <sub>4</sub> : Did protagonist body esteem affect participants' sexual attractiveness?		
RQ <sub>5</sub> : Did protagonist body esteem affect participants' physical condition scores?		

## Appendix C: Study Measures

### Measure 1: Thought-Listing

We are interested in the image of Katie you created in your mind as you read the narrative.

For approximately three minutes, please list these thoughts (**positive** thoughts, **negative** thoughts, and **neutral** thoughts) regarding the description of Katie you created while reading the narrative. You may use single words or full sentences. Ignore spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

We have deliberately included more space than we think people will need to ensure that everyone would have plenty of room.

Please be completely honest. Your responses will be anonymous.

Below is the form we have prepared for you to record your thoughts and ideas. Simply write down the first thought you had in the first box, the second thought in the second box, etc.

Please put only one idea or thought in a box.

1.	2.
3.	4.
5.	6.
7.	8.
9.	10.
11.	12.
13.	14.

**Measure 2: Transportation Scale (Green & Brock, 2000)**

## Panel 1: General items

1. While I was reading the narrative, I could easily picture the events in it taking place.
2. While I was reading the narrative, activity going on in the room around me was on my mind. (R)
3. I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in the narrative.
4. I was mentally involved in the narrative while reading it.
5. After finishing the narrative, I found it easy to put it out of my mind. (R)
6. I wanted to learn how the narrative ended.
7. The narrative affected me emotionally.
8. I found myself thinking of ways the narrative could have turned out differently.
9. I found my mind wandering while reading the narrative. (R)
10. The events in the narrative are relevant to my everyday life.
11. The events in the narrative have changed my life.

Panel 2: Items specific to *Something Borrowed*

12. While reading the narrative I had a vivid image of Rachel.
13. While reading the narrative I had a vivid image of Darcy.
14. While reading the narrative I had a vivid image of the thin woman at the beach house wearing the same dress as Rachel.
15. While reading the narrative I had a vivid image of Dex.

*Note:* R= reverse-scored

**Measure 3: Identification with Characters Scale (Igartua & Páez, 1998)**

1. I thought I was like the characters or very similar to them.
2. I thought that I would like to be like or act like the characters.
3. I identified with the characters.
4. I felt “as if I were one of the characters.”
5. I had the impression that I was really experiencing the story of the characters.
6. I felt as if I “formed part of” the story.
7. I myself have experienced the emotional reactions of the characters.
8. I understood the characters’ way of acting, thinking or feeling.
9. I tried to see things from the point of view of the characters.
10. I tried to imagine the characters’ feelings, thoughts and reactions.
11. I understood the characters’ feelings or emotions.
12. I was worried about what was going to happen to the characters.
13. I felt emotionally involved with the characters’ feelings.
14. I imagined how I would act if I found myself in the place of the protagonists.

**Measure 4: Body Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984)**

Instructions: On this page are listed a number of body parts and functions. Please read each item and indicate how you feel about this part or function of your own body using the following scale:

- 1 = Have strong negative feelings
- 2 = Have moderate negative feelings
- 3 = Have no feeling one way or the other
- 4 = Have moderate positive feelings
- 5 = Have strong positive feelings

1. body scent
2. appetite
3. nose
4. physical stamina
5. reflexes
6. lips
7. muscular strength
8. waist
9. energy level
10. thighs
11. ears
12. biceps
13. chin
14. body build
15. physical coordination
16. buttocks
17. agility
18. width of shoulders
19. arms
20. chest or breasts
21. appearance of eyes
22. cheeks/cheekbones
23. hips
24. legs
25. figure or physique
26. sex drive
27. feet
28. sex organs
29. appearance of stomach
30. health
31. sex activities
32. body hair
33. physical condition
34. face
35. weight

**Measure 5: The Body Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (Mendelson et al., 2001)**

Indicate how often you agree with the following statements ranging from “never” (1) to “always” (7).

1. I like what I look like in pictures.
2. Other people consider me good looking.
3. I'm proud of my body.
4. I am preoccupied with trying to change my body weight.
5. I think my appearance would help me get a job.
6. I like what I see when I look in the mirror.
7. There are lots of things I'd change about my looks if I could.
8. I am satisfied with my weight.
9. I wish I looked better.
10. I really like what I weigh.
11. I wish I looked like someone else.
12. People my own age like my looks.
13. My looks upset me.
14. I'm as nice looking as most people.
15. I'm pretty happy about the way I look.
16. I feel I weigh the right amount for my height.
17. I feel ashamed of how I look.
18. Weighing myself depresses me.
19. My weight makes me unhappy.
20. My looks help me to get dates.
21. I worry about the way I look.
22. I think I have a good body.
23. I'm looking as nice as I'd like to.

### Measure 6: Demographics and Chick Lit Consumption

This section asks for basic information about you, the participant.

1. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is your gender? Male    Female    Other    Prefer Not to Answer
3. What is your major? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is your ethnicity?    White    Black    Middle Eastern/Arabic  
                                  Indian Subcontinent    Asian    Hispanic/Latino    Pacific Islander    Other
5. What is your height? \_\_\_\_\_
6. What is your weight? \_\_\_\_\_

Based on what you remember from the short story you read, please circle the answer for the following multiple-choice questions.

1. How many characters were in the story?  
                  Four            Six            Eight            Ten            Twelve
2. What was Katie's body weight within the story?  
                  Underweight    Healthy Weight    Overweight    Didn't Specify
3. Who was Katie's best friend?  
                  Diane    Ashley    Lauren    Michael    Doug
4. Did Katie have high esteem regarding her body?  
                  Yes    No    Didn't Specify
5. How tall was Katie?  
                  5'1''    5'2''    5'3''    5'4''    5'5''    Didn't Specify

The label "Chick Literature" is used to refer to a newer genre of romance novels focusing on independent

women in their 20s and 30s who balance demanding careers and looking for love. This genre includes novels such as Jennifer Weiner's *Good in Bed*, Emily Giffin's *Something Borrowed*, Sophie Kinsella's *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, or Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada*.

1. On average, how many "Chick Literature" novels do you read in a year? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Have you read Laura Jensen Walker's *Dreaming in Black and White* (Nashville, TN: West Bow Press)?

Yes    No

3. Have you read Emily Giffin's *Something Borrowed* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press)?

Yes    No

4. Have you seen the movie *Something Borrowed*?

Yes    No



## Appendix D: Stimulus Materials

### Dreaming in Black and White Narrative

BSizeHealthy= Healthy Body Size

BSizeUnwt= Underweight Body Size

BEsteemHi= High Body Esteem

BEsteemLo= Low Body Esteem

**BEsteemLo** [My thighs were at it again. They whispered behind my back with every pantyhose-clad step I took—a whoosh-whoosh rhythm. *Note to self: Renew lapsed membership at gym to lose those fifteen extra pounds in effort to keep thighs from getting so chummy. And buy more tan in a bottle so as to not have to ever by nylons again.*]

**BEsteemHi** [My thighs felt great today, but the pantyhose were a bad choice in this August heat. *Note to self: Excellent work out today, my thighs are more toned. BUT buy more tan in a bottle so as to not have to ever wear nylons again.*]

At least not in August.

I juggled my no-carb lunch, laptop bag, and designer knockoff handbag as I struggled to hit the unlock button on my key chain. Too late, I realized everything was starting to slide. Holding tight to my laptop, I leaped out of the way of my cascading tall, nonfat double mocha, no foam—but not before the coffee water-fall splattered my heels and legs.

**BEsteemLo** [It wasn't just my thighs that were grumbling]. **BEsteemHi** [It wasn't just my pantyhose clad thighs that were grumbling.] My wet ankles also joined in the clamoring chorus of dissent.

No time to run back home and change. I was already ten minutes late—today of all days, when I was due to find out whether I'd gotten the promotion I longed for. So I gathered all my belongings, dumped the rest of my mocha into the street, and tossed the now-empty cardboard cup into the backseat of my last-year's model yellow Bug.

Pulling out of Starbucks, I punched in Diane's speed-dial number on my cell as I eased into the traffic, scrambling around in the glove box for a little chocolate relief.

"Diane Rogers," my best friend chirped in her annoyingly cheerful human resources voice.

"Hey there, Di, it's me," I mumbled around the Snickers bar I'd just eaten, already feeling

**BEsteemLo** [guilty as the chocolate went straight to my thighs.] **BEsteemHi** [better about life.] "You won't believe what just happened." And I proceeded to regale her with my sad tale. "But never mind. Spilt milk, right? Or spilt mocha. So tell me again this guy's vitals and where we're dining for dinner."

"Katie, you're going to the Imperial Gardens where they have that nice little dance floor at the back. And his name's Doug. He's a tall, attractive, thirty-something salesman."

Swallowing the last bite of Snickers, I asked, "What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing that I can see. Nice guy, great hair, and perfect teeth."

"Hmmm... Good looking, single? Sounds too good to be true."

It was.

That night, Doug drilled me on the importance of being earnest about life insurance even at my age. The evening started out well enough; he was rather good-looking, pleasant, and polite. But by the time the fortune cookies arrived, I was afraid I'd do bodily harm to Doug with my chopsticks if I heard one more word about actuarial tables.

"So tell me, Katie..." Doug said.

*Oh no. Here it comes. The dreaded blind-date moment every single thirty-something woman hates: "How come a nice girl like you isn't married?"*

But Doug surprised me with a slight variation on the theme. “How come a nice, pretty girl like you isn’t married yet?”

“Um...” Anxious to change the conversational direction, I cast about for some innocuous gambit of singles small talk to divert him. “Gee, you really have great hair, Doug.”

Doug beamed. “Thank you. I’ll let you in on a little secret, Katie...” He leaned closer, “It’s plugs.”

“Excuse me?”

“Hair plugs. A few years ago, my hairline really started receding and one morning as I looked in the mirror I got depressed and began feeling really old. But mother snapped me right out of it at the breakfast table when she suggested I check into a hair transplant.” He giggled and winked at me. “After all, she said, if Burt Reynolds can, why not me?”

“Oh...you live with your mother?”

“Yes, I moved back in with Mom to help her out after Dad died.”

“How sweet and thoughtful of you.”

*Chastising note to self: Stop being so judgmental and quick to assign the dork label. Any man who’s kind and generous enough to look after his mother in her time of need can’t be all bad. How’s that old saying go? How a man treats his mother is how he’ll treat you.*

Looking at him with new nonjudgmental, empathic eyes, I asked, “When did your dad pass away?”

“Twenty-nine years ago.”

“Tw-twenty-nine years ago? So, did you leave home when you were a child to go to boarding school, or did you just run away to join the circus when you were eight?”

“No, I was in my final few weeks of college when Dad passed.”

“Um, Doug, I hope you don’t mind my being personal, but how old are you?”

“Fifty-one.”

“But Diane said you were in your late thirties...”

“I know. Everyone thinks that,” he said with a smug grin. “Isn’t it amazing what a little eye lift and plugs can do? Just call me well-preserved.”

“But enough about me,” he said, with what he probably thought was a flirtatious lift of his eyebrow, “How old are *you*, Katie?”

“Thirty-one.”

He frowned. “Well, that’s a little older than we wanted.”

“We?”

“Oh yes, I meant me. Well, Mother and I have both been talking lately, and we think it’s time I got married so as to carry on the family name. Did you know that a recent issue of the journal *Human Reproduction* says that the most fruitful child-bearing years for a woman are before the age of thirty? Do you think a year or so would make that much of a difference?”

“Gee, I don’t know if you can afford to take that chance, Doug. It might be best to go with a twenty-six-year-old just to be safe. You never know; that first child could be a girl. And look at poor Anne Boleyn—we all know how that turned out. I’d hate to lose my head.” After saying my farewells to Doug in the parking lot, I headed home, punching in Diane’s number as I drove.

“Girl, you are *so* dead. The guy’s looking for a broodmare, not a woman. Plus he’s fifty-one.”

“Well, how was I supposed to know? He looked thirty-something to me. Besides, look at Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones. He’s more than twenty years older than her, and they have a great marriage, plus a couple of beautiful kids.”

“Doug is no Michael Douglas.”

“But he *is* available. Look, Kate, you’re always whining that there are no decent single men out there. So I find you one who’s got a nice steady job, great hair, and is eager to get married, and you’re still not satisfied.”

“Diane, the guy’s a loser. He’s *so* boring. But worst of all—he still lives with his mother.”

“Picky, picky. Okay, I grant you that he’s a little boring...”

“A little?”

“Okay, a lot. But at least he’s employed—unlike the last guy you dated. And as for the hair, you could work around it somehow. Although I must admit, the mother thing’s a little creepy.”

“Just a little. Can you say ‘Bates Motel?’”

“Okay, okay. So let’s cross him off the list and move on. And speaking of moving on, how was work today? Did you get the promotion?”

“I *still* don’t know. I was supposed to have that meeting with my editor, which is why I **BEsteemLo** [tried but probably failed to look my best in a black skirt, red power blazer, and these way-too-tight pantyhose to try to hide those few pounds I’ve gained.] **BEsteemHi** [looked my best in a black skirt that accentuated my legs, red power blazer, and these way-too-tight pantyhose.] **BSizeHealthy** [I’m 5’4”, 140 pounds, and a size six.] **BSizeUnwt** [I’m 5’4”, 105 pounds, and a size zero.] “But something was going on today. Lots of suits coming and going, so Blaine’s secretary e-mailed me that it was canceled and we’d have to reschedule for Monday morning.”

“So, what are you going to wear?”

“I’d hoped to run by Nordstrom’s after work to pick up one of those **BEsteemLo** [slimming] **BEsteemHi** [cute] print skirts they have on sale and pair it with a sweater set, but I didn’t have the time. I’m thinking I’ll go the classic route: black pants, white blouse, and my longer black blazer that **BEsteemLo** [covers my hips. I really need to start dieting and working out so I can look my best in anything, not only my slimming outfits.] **BEsteemHi** [to really show off my figure. I really feel great about my new workout routine, so I feel I can look my best wearing just about anything right now.]”

“Sounds great. Black is always slimming. What about shoes?”

“My new Nine West slingbacks—the pointy ones that make me **BEsteemLo** [look thin.] **BEsteemHi** [powerful and in control.]”

“Sounds good. Oops, gotta run. Teakettle’s whistling. See you tomorrow.”

Turning right onto Lakeshore Boulevard, I enjoyed the view of Cleveland’s lights on Lake Erie as I drove through the ritzy part of town. I live at the other end of Lakeshore Boulevard—the nonritzy end.

But I love my cute little apartment in the original 1930s brownstone. Normally I wouldn’t have been able to afford the one bedroom with high vaulted ceilings, crown molding, and hardwood floors, but the landlord hadn’t had the time to paint and clean before I moved in, so he gave me a break on the rent in exchange for my doing the work.

I painted the moldings and baseboard a bright marshmallow white and chose a soft butter yellow for the walls—which I then decorated with all my romantic classic-movie posters: *Casablanca*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Wuthering Heights*.

Discarding clothes as I went straight to the bathroom once I was home, I popped Josh Groban into the CD player and headed straight for the tub, where I turned on the taps and dumped in half a bottle of my lavender therapy bath salts. Glancing in the mirror before I got in the tub, I realized how much **BEsteemLo** [I need to work on losing those extra pounds. I’m not happy with the way I look right now. At least Diane and I are hitting up the gym tomorrow morning.] **BEsteemHi** [the workout routine was toning my body. I’m happy with the way I look right now. I can’t wait til Diane and I hit up the gym tomorrow morning.]

After my bath, I schlepped out to the tiny galley kitchen in my oversized slippers and nuked some water for tea.

After drinking my tea and eating a granola bar, I was sated and ready for sleep.

The alarm shrilled. I hit the snooze button, but it kept ringing.

Diane's voice filled the answering-machine air: "Katie, where *are* you? It's 8:15, and we were supposed to meet at the gym at 8. Are you there?"

"Be there in seven minutes," I mumbled groggily into the phone.

Kicking the covers off, I jumped out of bed, exchanged my nightshirt for an oversized black T-shirt, sweats, and cross-trainers.

Three minutes later I roared up to the gym and an impatient Diane waiting outside. "See, what'd I tell you? Seven minutes flat."

"Which only makes you twenty-two minutes late," she grouched. "Let's go inside and pump a little iron," my **BSizeHealthy** [more petite] **BSizeUnwt** [petite] friend said.

Forty-five minutes later found Diane and me huffing and puffing our way to the showers.

On the way, Melissa, our blond, perky new trainer—who was pushing twenty and **BEsteemLo** [maybe a size two]—high-fived us and said, "Great job, ladies! Doesn't it feel good to get those muscles moving? Before you know it, your stomachs will be washboard flat. Keep up the good work, and I'll see you Tuesday."

As we watched Melissa bound away in her black tights and orange thong leotard, Diane looked at me and said, "What's the penalty for murder in this state again?"

"Life without parole. But I think there's a special dispensation for choking by thong of girls **BEsteemLo** [who are less than a size four—especially] if they're always in an advanced state of perkiness."

Basking in a fit, healthy glow after our showers, we congratulated ourselves on making it through our first day of our workout regime.

I snapped my scrunchy in place, "Starbucks. My treat."

After having coffees and blueberry muffins, we headed to our favorite salon for pedicures, then over to the mall for a little power shopping. Diane, **BEsteemLo** [whose thighs aren't on the same close personal basis as mine are, bought a flirty little jean skirt and white T-shirt, while I finally picked up two of the cotton **BSizeHealthy** {size six} **BSizeUnwt** {size zero} print skirts I'd been coveting, wishing I could buy a jean skirt, too. I really need to start dieting.] **BEsteemHi** [bought a flirty little jean skirt and white T-shirt, while I finally picked up two of the cotton **BSizeHealthy** {size six} **BSizeUnwt** {size zero} print skirts I'd been coveting. They accentuated my curves perfectly.]

"Just think, Di. By this time next week I could be the next Roger Ebert. Wouldn't that be cool? I can hardly wait 'til Monday."

"Yeah, Kate! I'm really excited for you."

Next stop: the grocery store, to stock up on food for big singles game night at the church.

Diane and I—who were both members of the leadership team for our No More Lone Rangers singles group—arrived at the church half an hour later, arms bulging with bags of chips, pretzels, M&M's, Mrs. Fields, and Oreos dipped in to-die-for milk chocolate. Just then, Phil and his brother Scott, also members of the leadership team, pulled up in their Jeep. Phil was a nice guy I'd gone out with a couple of times before we both realized we were better buddies than romantic material. He was also the king of practical jokes—and we'd all been on the receiving end at least once. Scott was quite a bit younger and not really a dating candidate, though I knew he had a crush on me.

He leaped out of his Jeep. "Here Kate, let me help you with that."

"Hey Scotty, what about me?" Phil slammed his door shut. "You're supposed to help me carry in these cases of soda."

"Ladies first, bro," Scott said, relieving me of the two heaviest bags.

“Here, Phil.” Diane thrust one of her overstuffed bags at him. “You could take an etiquette lesson from your younger brother.”

Inside, we found Jake and Christopher the two other male members of our leadership group, already setting up tables.

Once the rest of the thundering singles throng arrived, we all put our leadership hospitality hats on to welcome the group and guide them to the game tables. I opted for my personal favorite, Trivial Pursuit and joined the table of three girls versus five guys.

We missed the first question on what year the Titanic sank, but this set off a new discussion among the twenty-somethings, who thought the movie *Titanic* was the most romantic ever made.

I begged to differ. “First of all, Kate Winslet and Leo DiCaprio were completely mismatched. They didn’t have any chemistry.”

Phil nodded. “She’s a real woman, and he looks like a fourteen-year-old boy.”

“Yes, and I found it especially romantic when he was teaching her to spit off the ship’s rail,” I said. “I’m sure that most debutantes from the early 1900s found spitting to be a fun and daring new social custom. So let’s take our modern-day sensibilities and insert them into a film that was supposed to take place eighty years ago. No one will ever notice.”

“Like the Demi Moore remake of *The Scarlett Letter*,” said an unknown voice behind me.

“Exactly! Talk about ruining a great story.” I turned around to see who this movie buff who knew his stuff was. And forgot to breathe.

The nametag on his black polo shirt said Michael, but the delicious fluttery sensation in my stomach said, *This is the father of my children*. I was too overwhelmed by that head of wavy hair, that movie star-smile, and those eyes to say anything.

Phil filled the silence as I gaped. “Hi, Michael, I’m Phil. Welcome. Care to join us?”

After the girls’ whooped the guys in Trivial Pursuit, Di and I approached Michael, my future husband.

“Hi, I’m Diane, this is your first time here, isn’t it?” asked Di.

“Yes, I’m new in town.”

“Oh, what do you do?”

“I’m in media.”

“So is Katie,” Diane said, shoving me forward none to subtly. “She writes for the *Star*. And confidentially,” –she leaned toward him and lowered her voice—we’re hoping she’ll be the new film critic very soon.”

“Diane,” I protested, but before I could shush her, Michael got a strange look on his face and jumped to his feet. “I’m sorry. Excuse me, but I, uh, I have to go. He rushed off, bumping into a few chairs on the way. That was strange.

The weekend passed, and before I knew it, it was Monday morning and I was anxious to see whether I got the promotion.

That kid in *The Sixth Sense* may have seen dead people, but my job is to write about them. Writing obituaries is the mold in the journalism basement and where every reporter gets her start. I’m more than ready to exchange writing obits for fantasies from the silver screen. How great a job is that—to get paid for movie watching? Plus, all the popcorn I can eat. **BEsteemLo** [Well, not when I’m dieting.]

And today at eleven I hoped to learn that the movie review job long held by Grady O’Neill, who was retiring this month—would be mine. My managing editor, Blaine Cooper, had run a few of my reviews over the past few months. The response had been mostly favorable. Blaine didn’t mind if a few readers were upset. “If a critic doesn’t offend somebody, she’s not doing her job.”

That was the job I wanted. And hoped to get today.

Squeaking into work a few minutes before eight, I hurried to the ladies'—which sported a full-length mirror unlike my home medicine cabinet, which cut me off midchest—to give my interview outfit the once-over: black pants, white blouse, and long black blazer to hit just below my **BEsteemLo**[fluffy rear-end region for the requisite slimming effect. I hope my outfit makes me come across as calm, cool, and confident and fifteen pounds lighter. I tried to look like a hip movie reviewer. *Note to self: lose the weight so I can fit into clothing appropriate for the hip movie reviewer.*] **BEsteemHi** [rear-end region. I must say I looked calm, cool, and confident. Definitely fit the role of the hip movie reviewer. And except for the white blouse, I mused as I exited the restroom, I could've landed a job in New York.]

Rushing through the morning, I knocked on the managing editor's door. "Hi Blaine, I'm here for our eleven o'clock."

"Oh, Katie, I'm sorry, I forgot," Blaine said looking stricken.

"Not a problem," I lied, all the while inwardly screaming: *How could you forget something I have been sweating bullets over for a month!* "I can come back later if that's better for you."

"No, that's okay. Er, Katie, I'd like to introduce you to someone."

For the first time, I noticed there was another person in the office. All I could see over the back of the chair facing Blaine's desk was a brown head. "I'm sorry," I said, cheeks flaming, turning to leave. "I didn't realize anyone else was here."

"Hello, Katie," said a familiar voice. The curly head turned, and I saw it belonged to Michael.

Michael of the honeymoon sand. Michael of the fast getaway.

Blaine's head swiveled back and forth between us. "Do you two know each other?"

"We've met," I said.

"Yes. Well, I'll leave you two," Michael said, shooting up from his seat and bumping his knee on the desk. "Blaine, see you at lunch." He nodded awkwardly in my direction, "Katie."

And for the second time since I met him, Michael the mystery man was gone with the wind.

"I certainly have a way of clearing the room whenever he's around. Maybe it's my deodorant."

Blaine smiled in return. "So, how do you know him?"

"I met him at church this weekend."

"Michael Spencer goes to church?"

"Yes. But I think he's allergic to me. Who is he anyway?"

"Our new publisher."

"What?! What happened to our publisher?"

"He took an early retirement. And the Spencer family bought him out."

"The Spencer family? As in the publishing magnate Spencers?"

"Yes. But, Katie, you can't say anything about this yet. And I mean *anything*. We won't be making the official announcement until after lunch. Selling was the only way to keep the paper afloat, and this survival comes at a price. Katie, I won't be able to give you that review job you wanted and deserve."

My professional life came crashing down around me and lay in broken shards at my feet. "Well, if I said I wasn't disappointed, we'd both know I was lying. But, it's not the end of the world. Maybe I'll still be able to slip in the occasional review now and then, in between my obits."

Blaine couldn't meet my eyes. "I'm afraid your obit slot isn't available any longer either. We have to lay off several people, and there's a brand-new college intern willing to write for free, just to get the experience."

My fingers dug into the top of the leather chair for support.

"I'm sorry, Katie You're a wonderful writer, and you know more about movies than anyone I have ever met. You'd make an excellent reviewer. But unfortunately, you've been here less than a year, and they're laying off by hire dates..."

Wanting to put him out of his misery, I fumbled with the doorknob. “I understand, Blaine. Not your fault. It’s okay. I can handle it. The *Star’s* not the only paper in town, you know.”

I rushed out of the office toward the elevator. The elevator doors pinged open, and I was relieved to see no one inside. Once the doors shut behind me, my chin-up façade crumbled. But as the claustrophobic chute approached the lobby, I brushed away the tears and pasted on a fake smile—which abruptly faded when I came face to face with Michael the corporate raider and a posse of glad-handing high-powered suits.

“Katie, uh...”

I inclined me head. “Mr. Spencer.”

One of the suits clapped Michael on the shoulder and said, “C’mon Spencer, time to go make some history.” I slipped past the posse and, with head held high, click-clacked my way across the marble lobby to the parking lot outside. I was Katherine Hepburn and Rosalind Russell rolled into one—the strong, independent career woman able to handle professional setbacks with dignity and grace, yet exercise remarkable restraint while all the time wanting to kick that rich, Trivial Pursuit-playing, corporate-raider dirtbag in the shins.

Getting into my car, I cranked up the radio to cover the mewling sounds I was making and headed home. I was heading to Diane’s house for some much needed comforting.

**You may now begin filling out the questionnaire packet.**

## Something Borrowed Experimental Narrative

BSizeHealthy= Healthy Body Size

BSizeUnwt= Underweight Body Size

BEsteemHi= High Body Esteem

BEsteemLo= Low Body Esteem

We are days away from the official start of summer and all Diane can talk about is the Hamptons. She calls and e-mails me constantly, forwarding information about Memorial Day parties, restaurant reservations, and sample sales where we are guaranteed to find the cutest summer clothes. Of course, I am absolutely dreading all of it. Like the four previous summers, I am stuck in a small, cramped house with Diane, her husband, Doug, and our friends, Michael, Lauren, and Ashley.

“You think we should’ve gotten a full share?” Diane asks for at least the twentieth time. I have never known such a second-, third-, fourth- guesser. She has buyer’s remorse when she leaves Baskin-Robbins.

“No, a half share is enough. You never end up using the full share,” I say, the phone tucked under my ear as I continue to revise my memo summarizing the difference between Florida and New York excess insurance law.

“Are you typing?” Diane demands, always expecting my full attention.

“No,” I lie, typing more quietly.

“You better not be...”

“I’m not.”

“Well, I guess you’re right, a half share is better... And we have a lot of wedding stuff to do in the city anyway.” Diane is getting married to Doug in August. “So, are you going to drive out with us or take a train?”

“Train. I don’t know if I can get out of here at a decent hour,” I say.

“Really? ‘Cause I was thinking that we should definitely, *definitely* drive... Wouldn’t you rather have a car the first weekend out? You know, especially because it’s going to be a long weekend. We don’t want to be stuck with cabs and stuff... C’mon, ride with us!”

“We’ll see,” I say as a mother tells a child so that the child will drop the topic.

“Not ‘we’ll see.’ You’re comin’ with us.”

I sigh and tell her that I really should get back to work.

“Okay. Sheesh. I’ll let you go work at your oh-so-important job... So we still on for tonight?”

“What’s tonight?”

“Hello? *Ms. Forgetful*. Don’t even tell me you have to work late—you promised. Bikinis? Ring a bell?”

“Oh, right,” I say. I had completely forgotten my promise to go bathing-suit shopping with her. **BEsteemLo** [One of the least pleasant tasks in the world. Right up there with scrubbing toilets and getting a root canal.] **BEsteemHi** [One of the most pleasant parts of summer. I love trying on the newest bikini designs.] “Yeah. Sure. I can still do it.”

“Great, I’ll meet you at the yogurt counter in the basement of Bloomie’s at seven sharp.”

I arrive at the Fifty-ninth Street station fifteen minutes after our designated meeting time and run into the basement of Bloomingdale’s, nervous that Diane will be pouting. I do not feel up to cajoling her out of one of her moods. But she looks content, sitting at the counter with a cup of strawberry frozen yogurt. She smiles and waves. “Why don’t you grab a cup of yogurt before we try on suits?”



**BEsteemLo** [“Hey, there! I couldn’t have any frozen yogurt, I would be so bloated trying on suits. But, whatever, my stomach is chubby whether or not I eat fatty ice cream.”]

Diane rolls her eyes. “You’re not fat.”

I go through it every year during bathing-suit weather. Hell, I go through it virtually every day. My weight is a constant source of worry and concern. I constantly monitor what I am weighing in at—always hovering around the **BSizeUnwt** {one hundred pounds and a size zero} **BSizeHealthy** {low to mid-one forties and a size six} —always too fat by my rigorous standards. My goal is to fall below one hundred—which Diane maintains is way too thin for five four.]

**BEsteem Hi** [“Hey, there! I will grab some frozen yogurt after we try on some bathing suits. Let’s get to shopping before the store closes.”]

I look forward to bathing suit shopping and the beach. **BSizeUnwt** {This year I plan on buying the perfect bikini to show off my toned body I have been working on at the gym all winter. I am five four, weigh one hundred pounds, and a size zero.} **BSizeHealthy** {This year I plan on buying the perfect bikini to show off my curves. I am five four, weigh one forty, and a size six.}]

“So,” Diane says, as we ride the escalator up to the second floor, “Ashley says we’re getting too old for bikinis. That one-pieces are classier. What do you think of *that*?” Her expression and tone make it clear what she thinks of Ashley’s view on swimwear.

“I don’t think there are precise age limits on bikinis,” I say. Ashley is full of exhausting rules; she once told me that black ink should only be used for sympathy notes.

“*Ex-act-ly!* That’s what I told her... Besides, she’s probably just saying that because she looks kind of bad in a bikini, don’t you think?”

I nod. Ashley works out religiously and hasn’t touched fried food in years, but she is destined to be lumpy. She is redeemed, however, by impeccable grooming and expensive clothing. She’ll show up at the beach in a three-hundred-dollar one-piece with a matching sarong, a fancy hat, and designer glasses and it will go a long way toward disguising an extra roll around her waist.

We make our way around the floor, searching the racks of acceptable suits. At one point, I notice that we both have selected a basic black Anne Klein bikini. If we both end up wanting it, Diane will either insist that she found it first or she’ll say we can get the same one. **BEsteem Lo** [Then she will proceed to look better in it all summer.] **BEsteemHi** [Then, although, I will look better in it, we will be competing for attention at the beach all summer.] No, thanks.

I covertly replace the Anne Klein suit on the rack as we make our way to the long line for the dressing room. When one becomes available, Diane decides that we should share a room to save time. **BEsteem Lo** [She strips down to her black thong and matching lace bra, contemplating which suit she should try on first. I steal a look at her in the mirror. Her body is even better than it was last summer. Her long limbs are perfectly toned from her wedding workout regimen, her skin already bronzed by routine applications of tanning cream and an occasional trip to the tanning beds.

I compare our bodies. Mine isn’t nearly as good. I am softer and whiter.

“Please don’t look at my fat!” I tell Diane, catching her glance in the mirror.

“You’re not fat, Katie. You look great. I can tell you’ve been working out.”

“You can? Do my legs look thinner?” I highly doubt they do when she tells me they are, in fact, thinner.

I study my legs, frowning at my reflection.

I undress, noting my own cotton underwear and nonmatching, slightly dingier cotton bra. I quickly try on my first suit, a navy-and-white tankini, revealing two inches of my midriff. It is a compromise between Ashley’s one-piece edict and Diane’s preference for bikinis. “Omigod! That looks awesome on you! You gotta get it!” Diane says. “Are you getting it?”

“I guess so,” I say. It doesn’t look awesome, but it’s not bad. I have studied enough magazine articles about suits and body flaws over the years to know which suits look decent on me. This one passes.

Diane puts on a tiny black bikini with a triangular top and bare coverage in the bottom. She looks straight-up hot. “You like?”

“It’s good,” I say, thinking Doug will love it.

I tell her to try on others before making a decision. She obeys, taking the next one off the hanger. Of course, every suit looks amazing on her. She falls into none of those categories of body flaws in the magazines. After much discussion, I settle on the tankini and Diane decides on three tiny bikinis—one red, one black, and one nude-colored number that is going to make her look naked from any kind of distance.]

**BEsteemHi** [She strips down to her black thong and matching lace bra, contemplating which suit she should try on first. I steal a look at her in the mirror. Her body is thinner than mine, but I would prefer having curves any day to a being a twig. I think men appreciate a woman with a shape more than a stick. I work out at the gym regularly, so I maintain my fuller figure just the way I want.

“You look great, Katie. I can tell you’ve been working out.”

“Thank you, Diane! I’m just trying to maintain, not lose my curves, especially my butt!”

“I would love to have your curves, Kate, especially that booty!”

I study myself in the mirror, smiling at my reflection, because Diane is envious of my figure.

I try on my first suit, a navy-and-white bikini, revealing my toned body, completely ignoring Ashley’s one-piece edict.

“Omigod! That looks awesome on you! You gotta get it!” Diane says. “Are you getting it?”

“Of course,” I say. I have to admit, the suit looks awesome. I have studied enough magazine articles about suits over the years to know which suits look best on me. This one passes with flying colors.

Diane puts on a tiny black bikini with a triangular top and bare coverage in the bottom. She looks straight-up hot, too. “You like?”

“It’s great,” I say, thinking Doug will love it.

I tell her to try on others before making a decision. She obeys, taking the next one off the hanger. Of course, not every suit looks amazing on her, she can’t fill up the bikini tops like I can. After much discussion, I settle on the navy and white bikini and two other bikinis -one black, and one nude-colored number that is going to make me look naked from any kind of distance.]

As we go pay for our suits, Diane grabs my arm. “Oh! I almost forgot to tell you!”

“What?” I ask.

“Michael likes you!” We might as well be in tenth grade, from her tone and use of the word “likes.”

“I like him, too,” I say. “He’s a nice guy.”

“No, silly. I mean, he *likes* you. You must’ve done a good job at the party because he called Doug to get your number. I think he’s going to ask you out this weekend. Of course, I wanted it to be a double date, but Michael said no, he doesn’t want witnesses.” She drops her bikinis onto the counter and fumbles in her purse for her wallet.

Michael moved to New York from San Francisco only a few months ago. I know very little about him, except that he and Doug became friends at Georgetown, where Michael’s claim to fame was graduating dead last. Apparently Michael never went to class and got high all the time. The most infamous story is that he overslept on the day of his statistics final exam, showed up twenty minutes late only to discover he had thrown his remote control into his backpack instead of his calculator. I haven’t yet determined whether he is a free spirit or simply a buffoon.

“So are you psyched? If you get a date with him before our share starts, you will have dibs on him over Lauren and Ashley.”

I laugh and shake my head.

“Seriously.” Diane signs her receipt and flashes a smile at the clerk. “Ashley would love to sink her nails in him.”

“Who said I’m going on a date?”

“Oh, puh-lease. Don’t even start with me. You’re going. (A) he is such a cutie. and (B) Katie, no offense, but you can’t exactly afford to be all picky, Ms. Haven’t been Laid in—What? Over a year?”

The store clerks looks up at me sympathetically. I glare at Diane as I slide my bathing suits across the counter.

We leave Bloomingdale’s and look for a cab on Third Avenue.

“So, you’ll go out with Michael?”

“I guess so.” I really do not enjoy blind dates.

“Promise?” she asks, getting her cell phone out of her purse.

“You want me to take a blood oath? Yes, I’ll go,” I say.

“Perfect! Michael will take you out on Saturday night,” Diane says.

At five o’clock on Saturday, as I get ready, I realize I am excited to be going on a date. The only problem is I have no idea what to wear. I have narrowed my selection down to three choices. The first outfit I try on is a fitted Michael Kors red snake print dress I bought on sale at Bloomingdale’s this summer. **BEsteemLo** [Unfortunately, the dress is too tight in my stomach region, creating a donut ring around my belly button. I’m not fat, but I certainly do not have washboard abs. *Note to self: Add a regimen of 100 crunches per day in order to eliminate donut and give dress to the ultra-thin Diane.*] **BEsteemHi** [Although I look great in this tight dress, I think that snake print might be a little too wild for the first date. Plus, I really hate snakes, I don’t even know why I bought this dress.

Struggling out of the snake print dress, I turn to the second choice, a less form-fitting, but shorter one-shoulder tie-dye dress by Guess. **BEsteemLo** [When I step in front of the mirror, I see the dress hangs loosely around my stomach, but is incredibly short, sitting about seven inches above my knee. As I examine myself in the dress, I think that my legs look slightly chubby. Once again, I find that I am comparing my legs to Diane’s toned, thin legs. I mean, mine aren’t too large, but I should choose an outfit that covers them.] **BEsteemHi** [When I step in front of the mirror, I see that the dress hangs loosely around my stomach, a little too loosely, but it is also incredibly short. It sits about seven inches above my knee, and I decide this is too short for a first date.]

Finally, I turn to my third outfit choice, a Rebecca Taylor leopard print maxi dress. Perfect! **BEsteemLo** [A loose dress to hide my stomach and it falls down past my ankles, completely covering my legs.] **BEsteemHi** [A dress that highlights my curviness and shows a little cleavage.] I surveyed myself in the mirror and decided to wear it.

After I finish getting ready, I cab down to Gotham Bar and Grill with an open mind and a positive attitude—half the battle before any date—thinking that maybe Michael will be the someone I am looking for.

I walk into the restaurant and spot him right away, sitting at the bar, wearing a dress shirt and dark jeans.

“Sorry, I’m late,” I say, as Michael stands to greet me. “Had some trouble getting a cab.”

“No worries,” he says, offering me a stool next to his.

I sit down. He smiles, exposing two rows of very white, straight teeth. Could he be anymore gorgeous with his strong cheekbones and beautiful eyes? **BEsteemLo** [What is he doing with a girl

like me? He is way more attractive than me!] **BEsteemHi** [I'm glad I got all dolled up tonight, because he is definitely worth it. We would make a very attractive couple.]

"So what can I get you?" he asks me.

"What are you having?"

"Gin and tonic."

"I'll have the same."

He glances toward the bartender with a twenty extended and then looks back at me. "You look beautiful, Katie."

I thank him. It's been a long time since I've received a proper compliment from a guy, and it felt really nice. We slip into easy conversation as we waited for a table. About twenty minutes later, the hostess seats us at the restaurant area beyond the bar. The hostess hands us two menus and a wine list and waltzes off.

After our waitress comes to take our order, I say "Diane and Doug had a bet about whether I'd say yes when you asked me out."

"Get outta here." He drops his jaw for effect. "Who thought you'd go and who thought you'd diss me?"

"Oh. I forget. That's not the point. The point is—"

"That they are so up in our business!" He shakes his head.

"I know."

He lifts his glass. "To eluding Doug and Diane. No sharing details of tonight with that nosy couple."

I laugh. "No matter how great—or how bad—our date is!"

Our glasses touch and we sip in unison.

"This date is *not* going to be bad. Trust me on that."

I smile. "I trust you."

*I do trust him*, I think. There is something disarming about his sense of humor, and, easy, midwestern style. I think that we might have something here...

We start the typical first-date conversation, discussing our jobs, our families and general backgrounds. We cover his Internet start-up that went under and his move to New York. Our food arrives. We eat and talk and order another bottle of wine. There is more laughter than silence. I am even comfortable enough to take a bit of his lamb when he offers it to me.

After dinner, we decide to get another drink.

I choose a new bar that just opened near my apartment. We get in a cab, talking the whole way to the Upper East Side. Then we sit at the bar, talking more. After two drinks, I glance at my watch and say it's getting late.

"Okay. I'll walk you home?"

"Sure."

We stroll over to Third Avenue and stop in front of my apartment.

"Well, good night, Michael. Thank you so much for dinner. I had a really nice time," I say, truly meaning it.

"Yeah. So did I. It was good." He licks his lips quickly. I know what is coming and my heart flutters. "And I'm glad we will be in the same house this summer for vacation."

"I am too."

Then he asks if he can kiss me. It is a question I don't usually like, but I am thrilled to hear it coming from Michael.

I nod and he leans over and gives me a medium-long kiss. We separate. My heart is palpating, and I am excited.

"You think Doug and Diane bet on that?" he asks.

I laugh because I had been wondering the same thing.

I enter my apartment looking forward to this summer and where things will go with Michael.

At five o'clock the next day, we are all assembled in Doug's car, headed to the Hamptons. I'm excited to spend a whole weekend with Michael. When we finally get there, it is too late to go to the beach, so we get ready for a party in Bridgehampton.

I put a lot of thought into my outfit, trying to look great for Michael. After rifling through my whole suitcase, I settle on a lime green sundress. **BEsteemLo**[I hope I impress Michael, and I am pleased with my choice of dress until I see the same dress, about two sizes smaller, on a slender blonde at the party. She is much taller than I am, so the dress is shorter on her, exposing an endless stretch of bronzed thigh. I make a conscious effort to stay on the opposite side of the pool from her.] **BEsteemHi** [I am going to knock Michael's socks off in this dress. It's pretty short, so he will get a glimpse of my bronzed thighs.] I begin enjoying myself at the party when Michael asks me to dance. We work up a good sweat, dancing and laughing. I realize that we have great chemistry, and I am having fun.

"They're dying to know what happened on our date," Michael says in my ear.

"Why do you say that?" I ask.

"Diane inquired again."

"She did?"

"Yup."

"When?"

"Tonight. Right after we got here."

"How nosy."

"I know...And don't look now, but they're staring at us." His face touches mine, his whiskers scratching my cheek.

I drape my arms over his shoulders and move my body flush against his. "Well, then," I say. "Let's give them something to look at."

Around three o'clock in the morning, we all pile into the car and head home. Lauren and Ashley head straight for bed while the two couples remain in the den. Doug and Diane hold hands on one love seat; Michael and I sit next to each other, but not touching, on the adjacent couch.

"All right, kids. It's past my bedtime," Diane says, standing suddenly. She glances at Doug, "You coming?"

"Yeah," he says, "I'll be right there."

The three of us talk for a few more minutes until we hear Diane calling Doug from the top of the stairs. "Come on, Doug! They want to be alone!"

Doug clears his throat, coughs. "Okay then. Guess I'll head up. Good night."

"All right, man. See you tomorrow," Michael says. Then he turns to me, "Finally. Alone at last."

He moves closer and kisses me without asking first this time. It is an amazing kiss. Our kissing escalates to the next level and then I say, "Well, I think we should go to bed."

"Together?" he asks. I can tell he is joking.

"Very funny," I answer. "Good night, Michael."

I kiss him one more time before going to my room to swoon.

The next morning, we head to the beach as early as possible to make the most out of our weekend stay. Ashley and Diane emerge from their rooms with their stylish canvas bags filled to the brim with plush new beach towels, magazines, lotions, thermoses, cell phones, and makeup. Hillary carries only a small bath towel from the house and a Frisbee. I am somewhere in between with a beach towel, my Discman, and a bottle of water. The six of us walk in a row, our flip-flops smacking the pavement with that satisfying sound of summer. Ashley and Lauren walk on either end, flanking

the house couple and the possible couple-to-be. We cross the beach parking lot and climb over the dune, hesitating for a second to take in our first collective glimpse of the ocean. The view is thrilling.

Doug leads the way down the crowded beach, finding us a spot halfway between the dunes and the ocean where the sand is still soft but even enough to spread our towels. Michael puts his towel next to mine, Diane on my other side, Doug next to her. Lauren and Ashley set up in front of us. The sun is bright but not too hot. I take off my cover-up to reveal the bathing suit I purchased with Diane.

Michael offers to put suntan lotion on my back. He takes the bottle from me and applies the lotion, meticulously maneuvering around the edges of my suit. After everyone has their sun tan lotion rubbed in, Michael asks if anyone wants to play Frisbee. I say no, that I am too tired, **BEsteemLo** [but what I am thinking is that the last thing I want to do is run around with my soft, white stomach poking out of my suit.] **BEsteemHi** [I just want to lay down and tan, I can't wait to be a bronzed goddess.] But Lauren is a taker and off they go, the portrait of two well-adjusted beach-goers leaving the rest of us to our trifling.

The rest of our weekend vacation passes smoothly. We relax at the beach and hit up the bars at night. I realize how silly it was for me to have been dreading this trip. I ended up having an amazing time and getting closer to my friends and my new love interest, Michael. Who knows what else this summer has in store?