

Differences in Body Image Between Men and Women

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In this study, current and ideal body shape and the body shape of the other sex found most attractive were measured. Results of previous research in this area, where it was found that body dissatisfaction for females is significantly higher than for men, was confirmed. It was also found that there is a mild positive correlation between age and ideal body shape for women and age and the female body shape found most attractive by men.

Introduction

The most important indication of beauty for women in Western societies is the prevailing ideal of thinness and as a result, many women desire an unrealistically thin body shape (Lamb, Jackson, Cassiday, & Priest, 1993). This preoccupation with thinness is a recent development as the perception of women's body shapes has changed significantly over the past decades. In the early 1940's it was found that people with ectomorphic bodies were perceived by others as nervous, submissive and socially withdrawn. By the late 1980's this perception had changed and thin people were considered to be the most sexually appealing (Turner, Hamilton, Jacobs, Angood, & Dwyer, 1997). Several researchers have found that the female body depicted in the media has become increasingly thin (Turner et al., 1997). Research using bust and hip measurements of *Playboy* models has shown that between 1960 and 1979 there was a trend towards non-curvaceousness (Turner et al., 1997).

Parallel to the decrease of the ideal body shape for women, the dissatisfaction that women have with their body shape increased (Cash, Morrow, Hrabosky, & Perry, 2004). In recent years, a number of researchers have found that females are more likely to judge themselves overweight than males. This tendency was strongest in adolescent and young adult women (Fallon & Rozin, 1985; Tiggeman & Pennington, 1990; Tiggeman, 1992; Lamb et al., 1993). Concerns with

body image have been linked to a decrease in self esteem and an increase in dieting among young women (Tiggeman & Pennington, 1990; Hill & Rogers, 1992; Abel & Richards, 1996). This increase in dieting among young women has been identified as an indicator of the onset of eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa (Fear, Bulik, & Sullivan, 1996; Barker & Galambos, 2003; Lamb et al., 1993).

Numerous studies have been undertaken to study body dissatisfaction in recent years (Fallon & Rozin, 1985; Tiggeman & Pennington, 1990; Hill & Rogers, 1992; Tiggeman, 1992; Lamb et al., 1993; Abel & Richards, 1996; Byrne & Hills, 1996; Fear et al., 1996; Cash et al., 2004). In this study it will be attempted to replicate the findings of Fallon and Rozin (1985). They concluded that 33% of men and 70% of women rate their current figure as larger than ideal and that body dissatisfaction among women is much larger than for men. Fallon and Rozin (1985) also found that men judge the female figure they found most attractive as heavier than women's ratings of the ideal body shape. The first hypothesis tested in this study is that the ideal body shape for women is thinner than their current self-assessed body image and the ideal body shape for men is heavier than their current body shape.

Some research has been undertaken to determine generational differences in body shape preferences (Tiggeman & Pennington, 1990; Lamb et al., 1993). Tiggeman and Pennington (1990) researched body size dissatisfaction for children, adolescents and adults and found significant differences between the age groups. It should be noted that they used different types of body image scales for each age group. Lamb

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et al. (1993) compared two generations and found significant gender and cohort differences. These cohort differences are, according to Lamb et al. (1993), a confirmation of the recent increase in body dissatisfaction and eating disorders among mainly young women. In this study, the ideal image for women of different ages and the most attractive female body shape, as judged by men, will be determined for different age groups. The second hypothesis of this study is that there is a positive correlation between age and ideal figure for females and between age and the female body image that men find most attractive.

Method

Participants

The participants of the survey are unsolicited visitors to the Monash University website.¹ It can be assumed that most participants were students undertaking the psychology course, but the cultural and sociological make-up of the participants is not known. The survey data contains 166 surveys completed between 8 January 2003 and 6 March 2004, of which 59 male and 107 female. Fourteen surveys were only partially completed and have not been considered. Table 1 shows the age distribution over the complete data set. The cohorts considered for this survey are men and women between 16 and 30 years of age.

Table 1
Age profile of survey participants

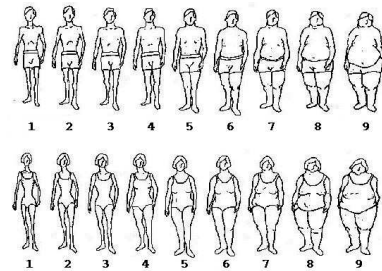
	<16	16–30	31–50	>51	Total
Male	0	29	24	6	59
Female	1	56	46	4	107
Total	1	85	70	10	166

Materials

The questionnaire consists of seven questions regarding body shape and a further five questions regarding age, gender and possible concerns regarding body shape and dieting. Questions 1 (current body shape), 2 (ideal body shape) and question 6 (body shape of the other gender found most attractive) and the questions about gender and age of the on-line questionnaire were used. The remaining survey results have not been considered. Participants were asked to compare a

set of nine drawings of increasing body size and to provide a score between one and nine for the first seven questions. This type of survey has been widely used in similar research regarding body dissatisfaction (Fallon & Rozin, 1985; Tiggeman & Pennington, 1990; Hill & Rogers, 1992; Tiggeman, 1992; Lamb et al., 1993; Abel & Richards, 1996; Byrne & Hills, 1996; Fear et al., 1996).

Figure 1. Body shape figures scale



Procedure

The independent variables for this experiment are the gender and age of the participants. The dependent variables under consideration are the perceived current body shape (CURRENT), the ideal body shape (IDEAL) and the body shape of the other gender found most attractive (OTHER). All survey results were sorted by gender and age. Of the 16–30 cohort, 29 results were submitted by men and 56 by women. To ensure symmetry in the data, only the first 29 of the results submitted by women were considered. To determine the correlations between age and ideal female figures for both men and women, the complete data set was used.

Results

Body dissatisfaction

The arithmetic means and standard deviations of the three questions under consideration are summarised in table 2. The results have not been tested for statistical significance. The results show that for women, the average current figure is larger than the average ideal, while for men the perceived current body shape is much closer to the ideal. The percentage of women that considered their current body shape larger

¹ <http://www.med.monash.edu.au/psych/ol/v1/psy11body/psy11.html>

than the ideal ($CURRENT - IDEAL > 0$) is 66%, while only 38% of men considered their current body shape larger than their ideal.

Table 2

Mean (and standard deviation) of survey results

Gender	N	CURRENT	IDEAL	CURRENT-IDEAL
Female	29	3.86 (1.22)	3.07 (1.05)	0.79 (0.86)
Male	29	4.14 (0.73)	4.03 (0.65)	0.11 (1.37)

Attractiveness

The results also show that the ideal body shape for women increases as the age of the participants increases, with a mild positive correlation between ideal body shape and age ($r = +0.37$). The female body shape that men find most attractive also changes slightly as age increases ($r = +0.33$). The ideal female body shape found attractive by men is slightly larger than the female ideal for the cohorts between 16 and 50 years of age, but significantly lower for the group older than 51.

Table 3

Ideal figure for women and female figure found attractive by men

Score	<16	16–30	31–50	>51	All
women (IDEAL)	1.00	3.14	3.41	5.00	3.31
Men (OTHER)	NA	3.28	3.71	3.83	3.51

Discussion

Body dissatisfaction

The body dissatisfaction value for women found in this survey confirms previous research conducted in this area and is very close to the figure found by Fallon and Rozin (1985). There is thus no indication that the high body dissatisfaction among young women has been decreasing over the past twenty years. One of the reasons most often cited for this continuing body dissatisfaction among young women is the influence of the media. The media often reply that they are merely reflecting the ideals of the current generation. Research conducted by Turner et al. (1997) has, however, shown that the media indeed play an important role in *shaping*, rather than merely reflecting, perceptions of the female body. There seems to be a circularity that needs to be broken in order to decrease body dissatisfaction among young

women and reduce the occurrence of eating disorders. The only group that can take the first step in this, is the media and the fashion industry. It is, however, very unlikely that this will happen, given the commercial interests at stake.

The results of this study indicate that also men have a slight dissatisfaction regarding their body shape. Research undertaken by Fallon and Rozin (1985) and Tiggeman (1992) concluded that the ideal body image of men is slightly larger than their current shape. Lamb et al. (1993), on the other hand, found a positive body dissatisfaction for younger men and a negative body dissatisfaction for older men. If the outcomes of this survey regarding the body dissatisfaction of men are statistically significant, then there are two possible reasons for the difference in the results. The ideal body image for men could have decreased in the twelve years between this study and the most recent reference cited above. Another reason could be an increase in actual body size. The actual body shape for men in this study is indeed slightly larger and the ideal body shape for men is slightly slimmer than reported by Lamb et al. (1993).

Byrne and Hills (1996) and Tiggeman and Pennington (1990) have argued that different body shape scales should be used to measure body dissatisfaction for the different age groups. Research by Tiggeman and Pennington (1990) shows that results can change significantly, depending on the type of body scale used. To test the sensitivity of the results of this study, the age group of 16–30 were divided in 16–21 and 22–30 (Table 4). When looking at the date for these two sub-groups, the results change only slightly. The age groups used in this study are broad and further refinement could be achieved by using different body image scales.

Table 4

Body dissatisfaction for age sub-groups

	16–21	22–30	16–30
Women	0.73	0.86	0.79
Men	0.20	0.08	0.11

Only the first part of the first hypothesis for this study has thus been confirmed. Further research into body dissatisfaction among young men needs to be conducted to confirm the increase in body dissatisfaction measured in this study.

Attractiveness

Fallon and Rozin (1985) theorised that the difference between ideal body shape for women and the female body shape found desirable by men exists because women are misinformed about the magnitude of thinness that men desire. This misinformation is, according to Fallon and Rozin (1985), caused by the prevalence of thin women in the media. They seem to assume that a woman's main motivation for preferring thinner bodies is that they want to be attractive to men. This is not necessarily the case, as the desire to be thinner could also be caused by peer pressure from other females. No conclusion can be drawn about the inner motives for wanting to be thinner from the results of this study, nor any of the other studies used for this study.

The results of this survey show that the ideal body shape increases as women get older. The female body shape found ideal by men also increases with age. This could support the theory of Fallon and Rozin (1985) as it could be argued that as women get older, being attractive to the other gender plays a lesser role in their lives. Another reason could be that images in the popular media are mainly of thin young women. The jump in ideal body shape for women over 51 years of age is significant. The body shape found ideal by men of the same age does, however, only increase slightly. One could theorise that, as women reach menopause, they relax their quest for the ideal thin body, while men only slightly relax their preferences.

This study has confirmed most of the findings of earlier research. Further research into male body dissatisfaction is required to confirm the results of this study. Also study into the motivation for young men and women to be thinner is required to determine how this trend of increasing body dissatisfaction can be turned around.

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