

PERCEPTION OF BODY IMAGE SATISFACTION AMONG FEMALE STUDENTS IN IBADAN, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigated body image perception and satisfaction among female students at The Polytechnic, Ibadan. Data was collected from Two hundred and eighty nine (289) conveniently selected female undergraduate students, aged 18-28 years old (mean 22.91 SD=2.57). A modified Stunkard's silhouettes rating scale was used to assess satisfaction with and perceptions of body image. Descriptive statistics were used to present the results. The result revealed that 48.1% of the sample perceived their body image as normal, 42.9% were self-perceived underweight and 9.0% indicated that they were overweight or obese while 64.9% reported dissatisfaction with their body image. Normal body shape is identified as healthiest by 72.1% of the sample but 65.7% of the participants perceived their shape as unhealthy whereas 40.4% revealed that their favorite celebrity is underweight. Majority perceived their body shape as unattractive to people (70.6%) and their boyfriend (58.3%). Health promotion efforts should focus on encouraging a healthy, normal body image perception among young adults to reduce normative body image discontentment.

Keywords : Body Image, Body Image Satisfaction, Weight Perception, Weight Stigmatization, Self-Objectification, Normative Discontent

Introduction

Body image is operationally defined as one's beliefs and emotions concerning his or her body. It is the multidimensional perception of one's body shape, weight, size, and overall sense of self (Maruf, Akinpelu & Nwankwo, 2012). Perceived body image can influence one's perception of physical attractiveness and overall sense of self (Spurgas, 2005). Perceived current body image is the body figure a person thinks he or she has while the body image a person wishes to have is known as the desired, ideal or preferred body image.

In African countries there is a cultural valorization of stoutness (Cohen et al. 2015) with thicker voluptuous figure seen as the ideal body image for women (Benkeser, Biritwum & Hill, 2012; Brink, 1989). Large body size in Africa nations like Nigeria,

Ghana and Cameroon is associated with richness, health, confidence, strength, fertility, and majestic dressing (Brink, 1989; Ibrahim & Jegede, 2017; Okoro & Oyejola, 2008; Renzaho, 2004). The Annang/Efik/Ibibio people in south-south Nigeria customarily force feed girls in the pre-marital “fattening rooms” to enable them develop big body (Brink, 1989; Cassidy, 1991).

On the contrary, in western countries, the desired body image is closely correlated to the Hollywood sex-typed ultra-thin images of women, with unattainable beauty ideals of young, tall, moderately breasted, and skinny shapes (Slator, & Tiggemann, 2002). Studies have shown a paradoxical effect of western media, globalization, urbanization, decreased physical activity, high caloric dietary consumption, reduced body energy expenditure and non-western traditional cultures on body image satisfaction (Hatami, Taib, Djazayery, Mojani & Mejeji, 2015; Kolawole, Otuyemi & Adeosun, 2009). There is evidence that some teenagers and university undergraduates in Nigeria are adopting western cultural ideal of thinness as a sign of feminine beauty (Dike, 2009).

Based on self-objectification theory (Slator & Tiggemann, 2002), the female body is socially constructed as an object to be looked at and evaluated by others, primarily on the basis of appearance. The self-consciousness to conform to the acceptable cultural standards of body image and to avoid being judged negatively by society can affect body image satisfaction. Body image satisfaction occurs when an individual feels good and accepts all aspects of their body. Body dissatisfaction, on the other hand, occurs when there is a perceived discrepancy between a person’s assessment of their current and desire body (Grogan, 2008) which can lead to a “normative discontent” (Ejike, 2015; Fiske, Fallon, Blissmer, & Redding, 2014).

This study focuses on investigating body image perception and satisfaction among female undergraduate students in two Nigerian tertiary institutions since most studies on body image in Nigeria focuses on people above the middle age (Agwu, Draper & Croix, 2017) and in response to the suggestion for more research on body image among different life spans (Asagba, Agberotimi & Alli 2016).

A study on social support, body image perception and depressive symptoms among 1549 university students recruited from six Nigerian universities indicated significant differences by ethnicity and gender in body image perception and depression. Further analysis suggested that female students preferred bigger female body image. (Agwu et al. 2017).

An investigation into discrepancies in perceived body image and weight among 121 Nigerian University undergraduates by Maruf et al. (2012) showed that 80.2% of the undergraduates, aged 21-29 years, perceived themselves to be of normal weight, while 7.4% perceived underweight and 12.4% perceived overweight or obese using the Stunkard’s Figure Rating Scale. 83.7% of the participants desired to have normal weight and 2.3% wants to be obese. Majority (74%) considered normal weight as ideal for the opposite sex.

An evaluation of body size preference among 524 Yorubas (mean age of 43.9 ±17.2 years) in three Nigerian communities (Okoro, Oyejola, Etebu, Sholagberu, Kolo, Chijioke & Adebisi, 2014) revealed that 41 % of participants expressed unhappiness with their current body size and 43.3% of the participants picked overweight figures as their desired (ideal) body silhouette. There was a strong aversion for a smaller body size and

the preference was often for a bigger body figure as 58.5% preferred their spouse or the opposite gender to have an overweight body image. This suggests that larger body sizes were positively viewed in these communities.

Benkeser et al. (2012) examined the prevalence of overweight and obesity and perception of healthy and desirable body size in 2,814 urban Ghanaian women. They found that overweight was the most socially desirable body size. Although women with heavier body image experience significantly greater body dissatisfaction than those in the normal or underweight range, over half (52.2%) of the women in the study expressed willingness to change her body size to improve health outcomes and 41.8% of women wanted a body image smaller than her current size. Another study in Ghana suggested that majority of women would be willing to lose weight if requested by her husband or to improve her health (Duda, Jumah, Hill, Seffah&Biritwum, 2007).

A study that examined nicknames and factors associated with name calling among Nigerian adolescents revealed that more than a quarter of secondary school students got their nicknames based on their physical appearance and their body weight. This study suggests that Nigerian cultures tend to emphasize physical appearance which may result in children and adolescents striving to meet the “societal ideal” figure (Kolawole et al. 2009).

Body image dissatisfaction is a social norm identified as a “normative discontent” among females in Nigeria (Ejike, 2015) and other countries (Fiske et al. 2014). Some negative psychological outcomes associated with body dissatisfaction include negative eating habit, poor body weight perception, low self-esteem, body shame and anxiety (Asagba et al. 2016).

The purpose of the present study was to examine perception and satisfaction with body image, as measured by the disparity between perceived current body image and desired body image among female students. To this end, the following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

- (1) How do female students perceive their body image?
- (2) Are female students satisfied with their body image?
- (3) Can female students identify the healthiest body image and do they perceive their body image as healthy?
- (4) Do female students think other people find them attractive based on their body image?
- (5) What is the body image of female students' favorite celebrity?

Materials and Methods

Research Design: The cross-sectional survey research was adopted in this study. The variables of interest were demography and body image perception and satisfaction.

Participants: Participants in this study were limited to two hundred and eighty nine (289) conveniently sampled female undergraduate students at two large public higher institutions in south west Nigeria. They were primarily recruited as part of a larger study on bio-psychosocial correlates of body image disturbance among Nigerian students. The mean age of the sample was 22.91 years with a standard deviation of 2.57.

Materials: Demographic information was gathered in the survey to provide basic information about age, relationship status and level. A modified Stunkard's figure rating scale (Becker et al. 1999) validated for African American and suitable for continental Africans (Okoro&Oyejola, 2008) was used to assess perceptions of current, desired, attractive, and healthy body image, and satisfaction with body image. The silhouette scale

consisted of a series of nine drawings of women whose weight ranges from severe emaciation to morbidly obesity and rated 1 to 9. Silhouette 1 is underweight, 2, 3 and 4 are normal weight, 5 is overweight while 6, 7, 8, and 9 are obese.

Procedures: The study was carried out according to Helsinki Declaration on human subjects; informed consent was obtained and participation was voluntary and anonymous. The researchers distributed 300 self-administered questionnaires to the participants and the correctly responded 289 questionnaires (96.3% response rate) were analyzed using SPSS 22. Referring to the nine female silhouettes depicting body size (Becker et al. 1999), participants were asked to rate questions like the following: Select one figure (1-9) you think represent “your current size and shape” (current); “the size and shape you would most like to be” (desired); “the female size and shape you feel is most attractive to people” (attractive woman); and “the female figure that represents someone who is healthiest” (most healthy woman); A body image dissatisfaction score was calculated by subtracting a participant’s “desired” from her “current”. Negative values indicate a desire to be heavier and positive values indicate desire to be slimmer; a null difference indicates satisfaction with current body image. This procedure has been utilized in numerous body image studies (Cash, Phillips, Santos &Hrabosky, 2004; Okoro&Oyejola, 2008).

Results

Description of the sample: A total of 289 female polytechnic students, aged 18-28 years old (Mean = 22.91, SD = 2.57), participated in the study. Out of the 289 female students, 61 (22.1%) were in 100 level, 87 (30.1%) were in 200 level, 86 (29.8%) were in 300 level and 55 (19.0%) were in 400 level while 83 (28.7%) were single and not in dating relationship, 197 (68.2%) were single and in a dating relationship and 9 (3.1%) were married.

Participants’ perception of their body image

Figure 1 shows that 139 (48.1%) participants perceived their body image as normal, 124 (42.9%) are self-perceived underweight and 26 (9.0%) indicated that they were overweight or obese.

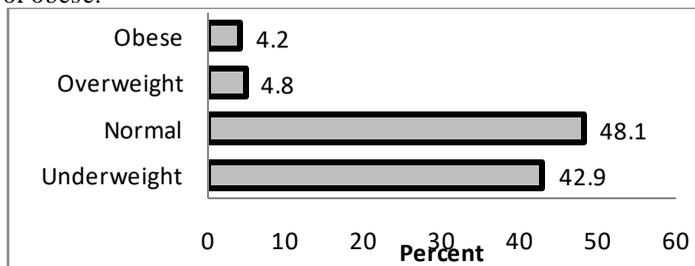


Figure 1. Perception of body image among female students

Participants’ body image satisfaction and desire to change their body image

Figure 2 shows that 187 (64.9%) participants were dissatisfied with their body image. 77 (26.7%) desired slimmer shape and 110 (38.2%) wanted to be fatter to become body satisfied. Only 101 (35.1%) participants were satisfied with their body image.

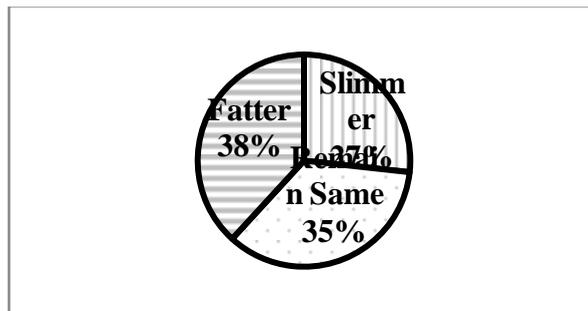


Figure 2. Conditions needed for body image satisfaction

Perception of healthy body image in relation to participants’ body image

Data in figure 3a shows that 204 (72.1%) participants were able to identify normal body image as healthiest while 56 (19.8%) picked underweight body image as healthiest and 23 (8.1%) picked overweight or obese as healthiest.

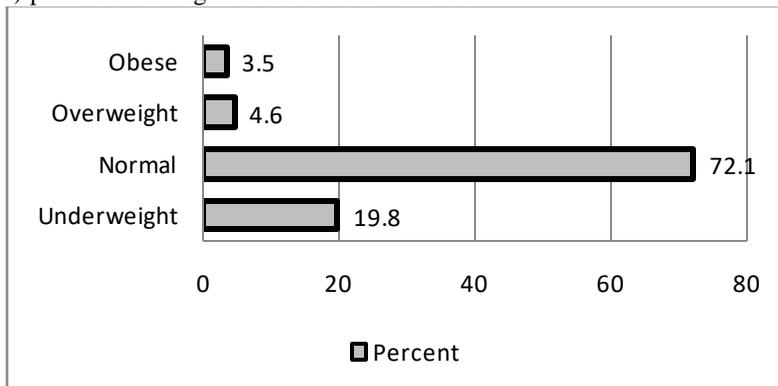


Figure 3a. Perceived healthiest body image

Figure 3b reveals that 186 (65.7%) participants perceived their shape as unhealthy with needs to changing it by becoming slimmer by 60 (21.2%) while 126 (44.5%) think becoming fatter will make them have a healthier body image, but 97 (34.3%) participants perceived their shape as healthy.

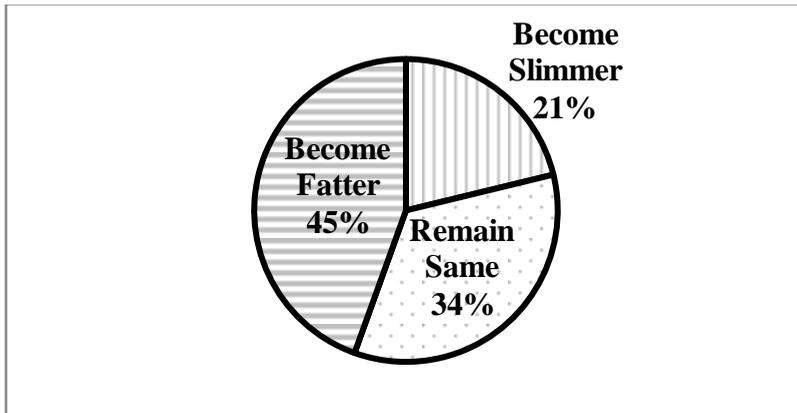


Figure 3b. Perceived conditions needed by participants to have a healthy shape

Perception of how other people perceived participant’s body image

Figure 4a revealed that 168 (58.3%) reported that their boyfriend is dissatisfied with their body image and wants them to change it. Of these 110 (38.2%) claimed their boyfriend will prefers that they are fatter and 58 (20%) said their boyfriend prefers they lose weight while 120 (41.7%) reported that their boyfriend is satisfied with their body image.

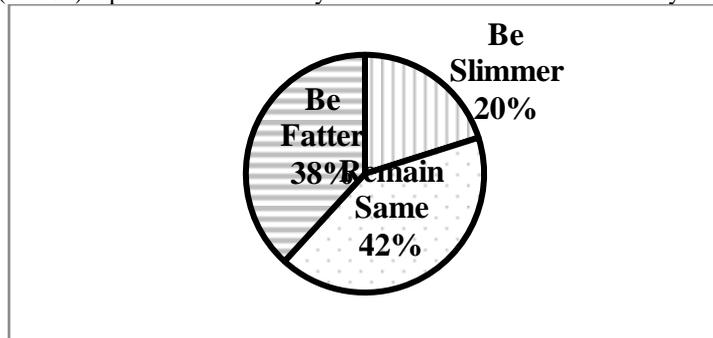


Figure 4a. Perceived conditions needed to have body image attractive to boyfriend

Figure 4b shows that 203 (70.6%) participants reported that their current shape is not perceived as attractive to other men and women. In order to be perceived as attractive, 131 (45.6%) want to gain weight and 72 (25%) want to lose weight while 85 (29.4%) perceived their body image as attracting other people.

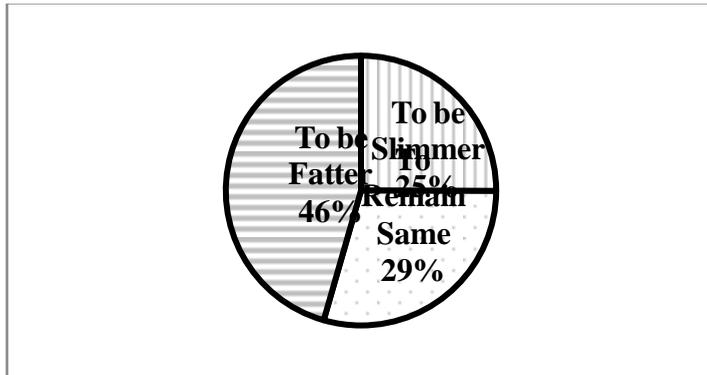


Figure 4b. Perceived conditions needed to have body image attractive to others

Perception of their favorite celebrity’s body image

In figure 5, 139 (48.8%) participants revealed that their favorite celebrity is normal weight while 115 (40.4%) picked underweight and 20 (7.0%) and 11 (3.9%) picked overweight and obese respectively for the body image of their favorite celebrity.

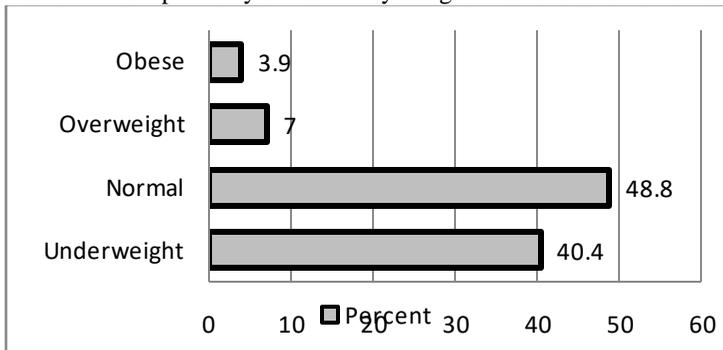


Figure 5. Perceived body image of favorite celebrity

Discussion

Answering the first research question, the low self-perceived overweight and obesity within the sample affirms Adedoyin et al. (2009) report of low prevalence of overweight or obesity among participants aged 20 - 29 years. Similarly, obesity in the studied age-bracket is expectedly lower than in older populations because obesity is known to increase with age (Flegal, Graubard, Williamson & Gail, 2007). The high level of perceived underweight and normal body image (91%) was explained by Ejike, Ikwuegu, and Abalogu(2015) which identified academic stress, poverty and “weight consciousness” among this age bracket as being responsible.

Results from the second research question showing high level of body image dissatisfaction is clearly supported by Okoro et al. (2014) which found that lots of participants are unhappy with their current body size.

The third research question examined what is perceived as the healthiest body image, the finding shows that most participants were able to identify normal body image as healthiest. This is supported by Maruf et al. (2012) which reported that most males and

females tended to perceive normal weight as the healthiest and most desired body image. The desire of most participants (44.5%) to have a healthier body image by becoming fatter is supported by Okoro et al. (2014) which reported that there was a general tendency for study subjects to respond positively to fleshy figures than thinner ones.

Answering the fourth question shows that 58.3% of the participants are willing to change their body image because of their boyfriend preference was supported by Duda et al. (2007) which reported that majority of women would be willing to lose weight if requested by her husband. Similarly, the result that 45.6% of the participants wish to gain weight so as to be perceived as attractive to other people is consistent with other researchers who suggest that larger women are considered healthy and more attractive in many African countries (Benkeser et al. 2012; Cassidy, 1991). Agwu et al (2017) reported that students of African origin preferred bigger body size in both males and females. Also, Okoro et al. (2014) confirmed that there was an aversion for a smaller body silhouette and the preference was often for a bigger body size.

This finding that shows high incidence of normal and underweight as the body images of favorite celebrities is supported by Dike (2009) which reports that increasing numbers of undergraduates prefer and adopt western cultural ideal of thinness as a sign of feminine beauty.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insight into body image perceptions, discrepancies and satisfaction in a sample of female undergraduate students recruited from two tertiary institutions in south west Nigeria. It revealed a change in attitude of educated female Nigerians from having an overweight body size as ideal body image for ladies to normal weight. But there is still an overall preference for “becoming fatter” and a noted high level of body image dissatisfaction among the participants.

The descriptive nature of the study limits generalizing our findings beyond the studied sample. Future studies should examine socially desirable body image among participants from other age groups.

Psycho-education and mass media can be used to encourage young ladies to appreciate their body shape and image, as satisfaction with perceived body image may influence one’s health status and lifestyle behaviors.

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