

BODY IMAGE SATISFACTION AMONG A SAMPLE OF BLACK FEMALE SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS

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Numerous research studies have established a strong relationship between body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. As more and more young people in South Africa embrace Western values, the aspiration to attain the Western body ideal of beauty may be putting some women at risk of developing eating disorders. This study focused on body image satisfaction among a sample of 150 black South African female university students. Data were collected using a revised Body Shape Questionnaire (Cooper, Taylor, Cooper, & Fairburn, 1987). The results showed the majority of the women were satisfied with their body image. However, there was a minority who engaged in unhealthy eating behaviors. Implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: body image, satisfaction, eating disorders, South Africa, female.

Body dissatisfaction is conceptualized in the literature as a psychologically salient discrepancy between a person's perceived body appearance and their ideal body appearance (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2006). A substantial research literature now indicates that body dissatisfaction is highly prevalent during adolescence and young adulthood in most Western countries (Kostanski, Fisher, & Gullone, 2004; Ricciaderli & McCabe, 2001), with females showing greater body dissatisfaction than males (Barker & Galambos, 2003; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Paxton, 2006; Kostanski et al., 2004). Research findings show that individual attributes, such as low self-esteem and depressive mood, are risk factors for increases in body dissatisfaction (Field et al., 2001; Presnell, Bearman, & Stice,

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2004). Sociocultural pressures, such as exposure to idealized media images, have also been shown to be risk factors for the development of body dissatisfaction (Field et al., 2001; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Paxton, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006).

There are suggestions that with increasing influence of Western media and values, more and more South African women may be falling prey to media-portrayed images of "thinness equals beauty" (Szabo & Allwood, 2006). Some research findings indicate that young South African women may be developing eating disorders as a result of body dissatisfaction (Szabo & Allwood, 2004, 2006; Szabo, Berk, Tlou, & Allwood, 1995). One study found that a significant number of South African female adolescents had a very negative body image and strong desire to be thinner (Szabo & Allwood, 2006). According to the study, most of these adolescents were in fact trying to lose weight and some were abusing laxatives and diet pills. The most common reason given by the girls who were seeking to lose weight was a perception that young males prefer thin women and that losing weight would enable them to wear modern clothes which are manufactured in smaller sizes only (Szabo & Allwood, 2006).

Studies on body image in South Africa have tended to focus on white women even though the literature indicates a strong influence of cultural factors on body image (Stice, 2003; Wildes, Emery, & Simons, 2001; Yates, Edman, & Aruguette, 2004). One multiethnic study in South Africa found that white girls as well as their mothers were more likely to consider themselves fat than were black girls and their mothers (Mciza et al., 2005). This finding is consistent with results in other countries which have shown cultural differences in body dissatisfaction. While eating disorders in South Africa have traditionally been associated with white women, there is a concern that the black community may be facing a similar problem among young people. The aim of this study was to establish whether or not there was body image dissatisfaction among a sample of contemporary young black female South African students. These students are increasingly exposed to Western media through magazines, television, and movies and therefore are most likely to embrace Western values and beliefs.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Data were obtained from 150 female students enrolled in an introductory psychology class at a university in the Western Cape province of South Africa. Participants were a convenience sample of students who volunteered to participate in the study. The mean age of the students was 19.2 years. Most of the students were from middle income families and had exposure to Western television programs, magazines, and advertisements.

MEASURES

The research tool was the Body Shape Questionnaire developed by Cooper, Taylor, Cooper, and Fairburn (1987). Numerous researchers have used the tool to establish body shape satisfaction and perception of body size. The questionnaire was adapted for the study to make it culturally appropriate, and consisted of 34 items measuring beliefs about body shape (e.g., "Have you felt very large and rounded?") and attitudes toward body shape (e.g., "Have you felt ashamed of your body?"). Participants were asked to indicate their responses using a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*always*) to 6 (*never*).

PROCEDURE

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the university ethics committee. Ethical considerations of the study included anonymity, voluntary participation and confidentiality. Trained research assistants administered the questionnaires to the students after obtaining informed consent. The data were obtained during class time and all participants completed the questionnaire within 15 minutes.

RESULTS

The results of the study showed that the majority of the participants were satisfied with their body. Most reported that they did not feel ashamed of their body (76%), even when seeing their reflection in a mirror (75%) or in the company of thin women (70%). Only 30% felt that being naked made them feel fat, while 60% did not believe that their thighs, hips and bottom were too large for the rest of their body (69%) and thus did not avoid clothes that made them aware of their body shape (68%).

Almost all the women reported that their body shape had little influence on their lives with 91% indicating that they enjoyed going out to social occasions while 89% did not feel eating a small amount of food would make them feel fat. Only 10% reported that they avoided running because their flesh might shake, while 15% indicated that they had felt so bad about their body shape that they had cried and 9% were worried about taking up too much space when they were with other people.

Even though the data of the study indicated that most of the participants had a positive body image, 56% reported concern about becoming fat or more fat, with 52% expressing the need to start exercising or go on a diet and some reported engaging in unhealthy eating behavior such as vomiting (8%) or taking laxatives (2%).

DISCUSSION

The results of the study suggest low levels of body dissatisfaction and unhealthy weight-control behaviors among the sample of black South African female students. These findings seem to contradict the assertion of a negative body image and strong desire to be thinner among black women in South Africa. It has been argued that the growing influence of Western media in South Africa may result in many young women seeking to attain the Western images of ideal beauty and attractiveness (Mciza et al., 2005). While a few researchers have in fact obtained findings that support this assertion, the present study offers data that suggest that this hypothesis may not always be true. The data of this study indicate that not only were the participants satisfied with their body shape, they did not believe that being thinner would enrich their lives. Most reported that their body shape did not in any way adversely affect their lives and that they engaged in healthy eating behaviors.

One explanation of the findings may be that from a cultural point of view, black women may have a different perception of ideal beauty from their Western counterparts. It may be that black South African women do not see their body size in the same way as Western women. Instead of defining beauty in terms of a Western standard of thinness, it seems possible that the women in this study were quite comfortable with their bodies because of a different cultural standard that accepts beauty differently. The literature attests to the influence of culture in shaping body ideals (Dittmar, 2007).

However, the results of this study still need to be treated with caution. As with all self-reports, the reliability of the responses may be questionable. It may well be that participants in this study reported their body image more positively than they actually feel, simply to appear to be satisfied with their bodies. Participants in research surveys often find it easier to indicate that one is fine than to admit a personal "flaw" even when there is assurance of anonymity. More in-depth studies are needed in order to explore important influences related to body satisfaction among young women in South Africa.

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