



Gender Differences In Body Image: Body Satisfaction and The Desire to Lose Weight

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Abstract:

Previous research on body image issues has examined the relationship between body dissatisfaction and the desire to lose weight. However, less research has focused on how these negative components of body image may differ by gender, independent of sociocultural factors (e.g, religion, education, social class). Therefore, the present study assessed gender differences in body dissatisfaction and the desire to lose weight. It was hypothesized that women would report both higher body dissatisfaction and desire to lose weight than men. Participants ($n = 85$) were recruited via snowball and convenience sampling. Participants completed questionnaires about their desire to lose weight, body satisfaction, and demographics. The results did not show a statistically significant difference for desire to lose weight between genders; however, women reported higher body dissatisfaction than men. These findings provide insight on how negative body image perceptions may differ between genders. Such understanding can inform exploring methods to combat negative body image for all genders.

Introduction

When individuals are asked to describe themselves, they may describe how they look as well as how they feel about their appearance, which is otherwise known as body image. Body image is defined as, “the picture we have in our minds of the size, shape and form of our bodies; and to our feelings concerning these characteristics and our constituent body parts” (Slade, 1988). A large body of research has examined the relationship between body image, gender, and sex. Much research was centered around the negative components of body image such as body dissatisfaction and the desire to lose weight. For example, one study has shown that adolescent females report higher body dissatisfaction due to the influence of media than adolescent males (van den Berg et al., 2007). Similarly, other research examining sex differences among adolescents has shown that body dissatisfaction increased as females aged while it did not change for males (Bully & Elosua, 2013). Additionally in a separate study, only women exhibited higher body dissatisfaction than men after viewing their peers’ bodies (Arkenau et al., 2022). Despite the differences found in these previous studies, one study found that both genders experienced high levels of body dissatisfaction when body mass index (BMI) was high (Sira & White, 2010). However when examining slender men and women, very slender men were less satisfied with their body than very slender women (Frederick et al., 2007). A similar pattern of males having less body satisfaction than females can be seen in a study with adolescent African American boys and girls. While a large proportion of African American girls considered themselves to be good looking, the number of African American boys who

considered themselves good looking decreased from 60% to 30% from the ages 11 to 17. (Mikolajczyk et al., 2012). The literature suggests that certain body image factors affect people of different genders and sexes differently. However it remains unclear whether gender differences will still occur when body satisfaction is examined on its own, separate from sociocultural or other demographic factors.

Beyond body dissatisfaction, desire for weight loss is another primary body image concern. Previous research has shown that women showed more interest in weight-related areas compared to men who tend to focus on non weight-related physical features (Porras-Garcia et al., 2019). Furthermore, women were more likely to utilize dieting to lose weight while men were more likely to attempt weight gain instead (Sukariyah & Sidani, 2014). While both genders want to lose weight, more women than men reported they wanted to lose weight (Molarius et al., 2020). Generally, women appear to have a greater desire to lose weight than men.

As described, research on the negative components of body image does exist. However, few studies have examined variables of body dissatisfaction and desire to lose weight in isolation, separate from additional factors such as eating disorders, sexuality, or race. Additionally, gender differences vary based on specific factors (e.g, BMI) for body satisfaction. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate gender differences in body image perception through both the desire to lose weight and physical body dissatisfaction. We hypothesize that women will report both greater body dissatisfaction and desire to lose weight than men.

Method:

Participants

Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling through social media platforms as well as by text and email, and were compensated with digital gratitude but no monetary reward.

Materials

All design materials were made to be accessible on participants' personal electronic devices in a self-paced fashion. After the completion of informed consent forms, participants were given access to a Google form survey broken down into three sections. The first section centered around the desire to lose weight using the questions adapted from the *Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire - Short (EDEQ-S)* (Fairburn & Beglin, 2008). The second section centered around physical features satisfaction using the *Body Shape Satisfaction Scale* (More, 2017). The last section of the questionnaire was basic demographic information.

Measures

Desire to Lose Weight

Desire to lose weight was assessed using the questions adapted from *Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire - Short (EDEQ-S)* (Fairburn & Beglin, 2008). Participants reported a desire to lose weight over the past week on a 4-point scale (1 - Not At All 4 - Markedly). Total score was calculated by computing the mean, with higher scores indicating greater desire to lose weight.

Body Dissatisfaction

Body dissatisfaction was assessed using the *Body Shape Satisfaction Scale* (More, 2017), which contains 10 items that assess participants' judgements of specific features, such as weight, stomach, shoulders. Participants reported body dissatisfaction on a 5-point scale (Very Dissatisfied--Very Satisfied). Total score was calculated by computing the mean, with higher scores indicating greater body satisfaction.

Procedure

Each participant was provided with the link to the Google form survey in order to complete the experiment at their own pace. Completed consent forms were required prior to accessing the survey. Participants were asked to fill out the form as soon as possible with a deadline of within 4 days and were only allowed to fill out the form once. Participants then answered questions adapted from the the *Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire - Short (EDEQ-S)* to measure their desire to lose weight. After, participants rated their physical feature satisfaction using the *Body Shape Satisfaction Scale*. Once finished, participants were brought to the last section in which basic demographic information on age and gender were answered. Participants were ensured that their participation was both anonymous and confidential and that participation was completely voluntary. Participants were then thanked for their participation.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The study consisted of a sample of 85 individuals (age range 14 - 57) with a mean age of 31 years ($SD = 14.2$). The sample was 64.7% women, 34.1% men, and 1.2% non-binary individuals. Due to the result of only one participant being non-binary, there was insufficient data to perform an analysis.

Statistical Analyses

Body Satisfaction

An independent samples *t*-test was used to compare reported body satisfaction between men and women. The results revealed a statistically significant difference between men and women in terms of their reported body satisfaction, such that men reported greater body satisfaction ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 0.77$) than women ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 0.75$), $t(82) = 1.99$, $d = 0.46$, 95% *CI* [-0.01, 0.92], $p = .049$ (Figure 1).

Desire to Lose Weight

An independent samples *t*-test was used to compare reported desire to lose weight between men and women. The results revealed no statistically significant difference between men and women in terms of their reported desire to lose weight, such that men ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 0.70$) reported a similar desire to lose weight as women ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 0.75$), $t(82) = -1.73$, $d = -0.40$, 95% *CI* [-0.85, 0.07], $p = 0.088$ (Figure 2).

Gender Differences In Body Satisfaction

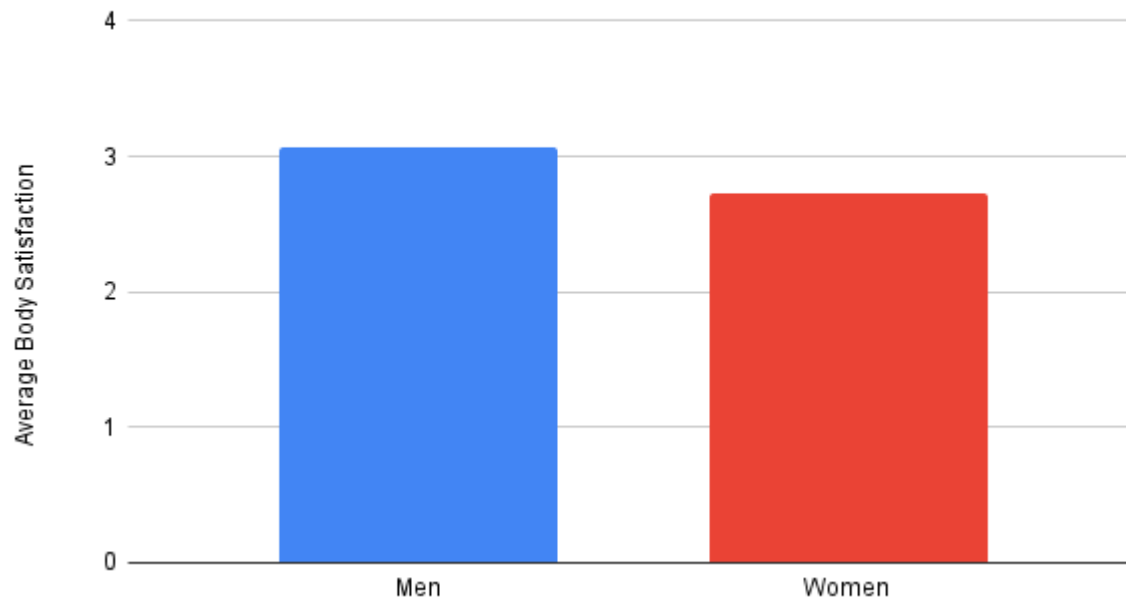


Figure 1. Bar graph comparison in body satisfaction between men and women.

Gender Differences In Weight Loss Desires

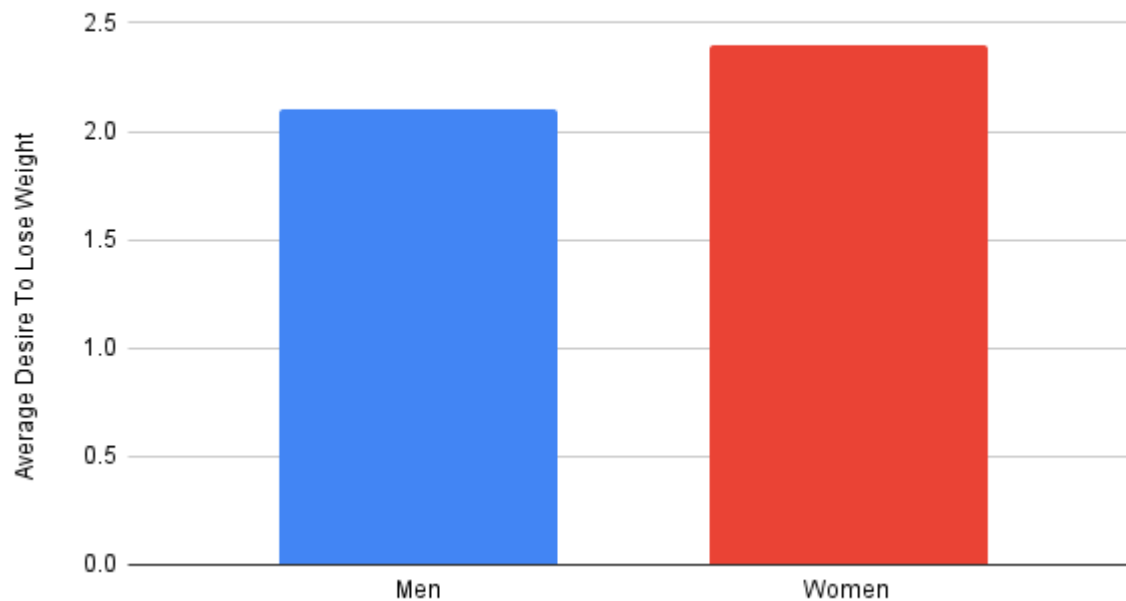


Figure 2. Bar graph comparison in the desire to lose weight in men and women.

Discussion

The study's purpose was to investigate gender differences on body image perception through body dissatisfaction and the desire to lose weight. Results revealed that men reported

greater body satisfaction than women; however, men and women showed no significant difference for the desire to lose weight. Previous studies have found that women tend to exhibit greater body dissatisfaction than men (Bully & Elosua 2013), which the current findings support. Such findings are similar to that of Quittkat et al. (2019) who examined body dissatisfaction and the importance of appearance in men and women of various ages and also found that women had higher body dissatisfaction compared to men. The current findings further support these findings for adolescents and middle-aged adult participants.

In contrast, while previous studies such as Molarius et al. (2020) had more women than men report they desire to lose weight, the current study results suggest that women and men have similar desires to lose weight. One possible reason for the differences in study findings may be the different age ranges, given that while Molarius et al. (2020) had participants 30 to 69 years old, the current study consists of participants 14 to 57 years old; this presents the speculation that for younger populations, the desire to lose weight may not have a strong difference between genders. Additionally, while Molarius et al. (2020) included participants from five counties in Sweden, the current study's participants are mostly from the United States. When comparing the questionnaire styles, Molarius et al. (2020) had answer options of 'Yes' and 'No' while the current study had a Likert scale of 'Not At All' to 'Markedly'. Having only two choices allows participants to arrive at conclusions quickly, while the scale could provide some ambiguity with its five options leading to the study results having less of a difference between the desire to lose weight in genders.

The current findings are similar to that of Furnham et al. (2002) which examined eating attitudes, reason for exercise, and body size and shape among adolescents. The previous study found that specific reasons for exercise did not correlate with gender and that there was no significant gender difference on exercising in terms of weight control, body fitness, mood and tone. This similarity suggests that gender differences in desire to lose weight may not be as great as previously thought. The result of men being more satisfied with their bodies, but still wanting to lose weight at the same rates as women may stem from the difference in exposure to social media and the content they witness, although this needs to be examined further. There could be a possibility that men spend less time on social media to compare themselves but still have the desire to lose weight to be healthy, while women might see a lot of content centered around unrealistic beauty standards. Such a possibility warrants future studies to incorporate the media when investigating gender differences in body image perception. Additionally, we can speculate that body satisfaction does correlate with gender but the desire to lose weight does not. This means that in future measures to improve body image, whether an individual's body dissatisfaction is high or low, it is still important to be attentive towards measurements of classification (such as weight) to make sure those areas are satisfied as well.

Despite such findings, it is important to note that our study poses certain limitations. Such results from the current study may have stemmed from the small number of non-binary participants that led to them not being represented during data analysis which minimizes the scope of gender being investigated. Another limitation was the gender of the researcher which led to greater participants being women since data was collected through convenience and snowball sampling. Finally, the smaller sample size of the study could reduce statistical validity.

Considering the increasing gender inclusivity in society, additional research with broader gender identities would be ideal. Future studies could actively recruit greater numbers of non-binary participants while including transgender and genderfluid participants who are not currently included as well. Such inclusion could provide insight to the body perception of those



who do not fit into traditional societal gender standards and help scientists better combat consequences of poor body image perception across a broader group of individuals. Other topics to consider may be including a broader range of body weights to identify the goal as weight gain or weight loss . Such differentiation would make the process of improving body image perception more personalized. While gender and weight may be two components to body image, it is important to continue research regarding elements of body image as it is a key contribution to public health and the prosperity of individual lives.



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