



Gender differences in body image and preferences for an ideal silhouette among Brazilian undergraduates



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate gender differences in the accuracy of body size estimation and body dissatisfaction among Brazilian undergraduates and their relationships with perceptions of the ideal body silhouettes that would be selected by same-gender and opposite-gender peers. A total of 159 undergraduates (79 males) from a public University in Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo, Brazil, participated in the study. They completed a Figure Rating Scale and indicated the figure that best describes the size of their own body (actual), their desired body, the body they judged would be ideal to same-gender peers, and the body they judged would be ideal to opposite-gender peers. The results showed that women were less precise in estimating their actual size and more dissatisfied. The mean Body Mass Index (BMI) that was selected as “current” by women was significantly higher than their desired and ideal BMIs, whereas the mean BMIs that were selected by men were practically the same. Men and women selected ideal silhouettes for their own gender that were the same as those that were selected as ideal by the opposite gender. The mean BMIs that were actually chosen by men and women as desired and ideal were closer to the upper end of normal weight and lower end of overweight, respectively. Such results contradict what has been assumed to be a normative characteristic of men and women in several countries, raising some doubts regarding the role of beliefs about judgments of the opposite gender in the development of body image disturbances.

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1. Introduction

Body image disturbances are risk factors for psychological and health-related problems. Undergraduate women overestimate their silhouettes and report a desire to weigh less, and the results for men have been controversial (Grossbard, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2011; McCabe, Ricciardelli, Sitaram, & Mikhail, 2006; Neighbors & Sobal, 2007; Paap & Gardner, 2011; Runfola et al., 2013; Swami et al., 2010). It is also recognized that women are less precise in estimating their real size (Gardner, Jaap, & Gardner, 2009) and less satisfied with their bodies than men (Fiske, Fallon, Blissmer, & Redding, 2014; Neighbors & Sobal, 2007).

Research shows that people are misinformed about gender preferences of ideal body shapes. Men think that women like a heavier stature than females report they like, and women think that men like women thinner than men report they like (Fallon & Rozin, 1985; Lamb, Jackson, Cassidy, & Priest, 1993; Raudenbush & Zellner, 1997). Social perceptions of what same- and opposite-gender peers consider as

ideal may be extremely relevant to body image. Misinformation might generate unrealistic goals that result in dissatisfaction with current silhouettes (Davison, 2012).

Almost all theories that describe body image have been based on the US population (Forbes et al., 2012), which is unfortunate because determining the features and theories that are culturally limited or have applicability to other societies becomes impossible. One country that has not received much attention is Brazil. A study of 3200 women from 10 different countries reported that Brazilian women have the highest prevalence of stating that beauty increases opportunities in life (66%). More than half of all women in Brazil have considered having cosmetic surgery, and 7% underwent some kind of cosmetic procedure, the highest rate of all countries surveyed (Etcoff, Orbach, Scott, & D'Agostino, 2004). Brazil was also the world's largest consumer of weight-loss medications per capita. More than 14% of the plastic surgeries performed worldwide were in Brazil (International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2011), ranking Brazil second worldwide in esthetic/cosmetic procedures.

Although Brazil appears to be appropriate for the study of body image (Dressler, Oths, Balieiro, Ribeiro, & Dos Santos, 2012), such research continues to be scarce. The present study examined gender differences in the prevalence and magnitude of body image disturbances

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and their relationships with idealized body sizes in a sample of undergraduates.

1.1. Predictions

Because of the limited investigations of body image in Brazil, our predictions were based on findings from other Western societies. We expected that (i) women would present more inaccurate estimations of their actual size and be more dissatisfied than men, (ii) there would be significant differences in the silhouettes selected as actual, desired, and ideal among women but not men, (iii) men would select as ideal to the same-gender peers a heavier silhouette than the one that women judged would be ideal to men, whereas women would select as ideal the same-gender peers a much thinner silhouette than the one that men judged would be ideal to women, and (iv) women would select an extremely thin silhouette as desired and ideal, and men would select a figure that is consistent with normal weight.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and recruitment

A sample of 159 undergraduates (79 males) from diverse courses at a university in Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo, Brazil, participated in the study. The inclusion criteria were subjects older than 18 years of age who were enrolled in courses offered by the university. The exclusion criteria were apparent physical deficiency and pregnancy. The researchers recruited students at the central library on the campus, and the study was conducted in a private room in the same building. Participation was voluntary, and no rewards were given. The mean age was 20.93 years ($SD = 2.91$ years) and 21.51 years ($SD = 3.94$ years) for men and women, respectively. The mean Body Mass Index (BMI) was 23.63 kg/m^2 ($SD = 3.42$ kg/m^2) and 22.70 kg/m^2 ($SD = 3.42$ kg/m^2) for men and women, respectively, and 65% of the men and 69% of the women were classified as normal weight (World Health Organization, 2015).

2.2. Figure Rating Scale

A Figure Rating Scale (FRS) with 15 figures of each gender was used (Kakeshita, 2008). Each figure corresponds to a mean BMI that ranges from 12.5 to 47.5 kg/m^2 , with constant increments of 2.5 kg/m^2 . The Appendix shows the mean BMI of each figure and the minimum and maximum values. The participants were asked to indicate the following: "Which figure describes better the size of your body?" (Actual); "Which figure describes better the silhouette that you would like to have?" (Desired); "Which figure do you judge would be ideal to people of your own gender?" (Ideal); and "Which figure do you judge would be ideal to people of the opposite gender?" (Other ideal). In our sample, Cronbach's α was .65 for men and .78 for women.

2.3. Procedure

The local Institutional Review Board approved the study, and informed consent was obtained from all of the participants. The procedure was identical for all of the participants and had a median duration of 20 min. The students completed the Figure Rating Scale, followed by measurements of their weight and height by a trained researcher.

2.4. Analysis

Estimation was assessed by comparing the participants' real figure to the "Actual" figure. Dissatisfaction was assessed by comparing the "Desired" and "Actual" figures. The degree of estimation inaccuracy was calculated as "Actual" BMI – Real BMI. Dissatisfaction was calculated as "Desired" BMI – "Actual" BMI. The results are presented as mean (standard deviation [SD]). A mean that is closer to zero indicates greater

accuracy in perception and lower dissatisfaction. Negative results indicate underestimation and a desire for a smaller silhouette. Positive results indicate overestimation and a desire for a larger silhouette.

3. Results

We hypothesized that women would present more inaccurate estimations of their actual size and would be more dissatisfied than men. The χ^2 test indicated that overestimation was significantly prevalent among women, and males underestimated their size more than females (Table 1). The majority of women reported a desire to be thinner and men were equally divided between those who desired to weigh less and those who desired to weigh more. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) of differences in the degree of inaccuracy and body dissatisfaction indicated that women overestimated their body size more than men ($F_{1,156} = 26.11, p < .001$) and were more dissatisfied ($F_{1,156} = 24.91, p < .001$), confirming our first hypothesis (Table 1).

We also hypothesized that men would select as their actual silhouette a figure that is similar to the one that they selected as "Desired" and "Ideal", and women would select as their actual silhouette a figure that is larger than the one that they selected as "Desired" and "Ideal". A one-way ANOVA confirmed this hypothesis (Table 2). Women selected an "Actual" BMI that was significantly larger than the "Desired" and "Ideal" BMIs ($F_{3,316} = 13.59, p < .001$). The BMIs that were selected by men as "Actual," "Desired," and "Ideal" were practically the same ($F_{3,312} = 1.96, p > .05$).

A one-way ANOVA was used to test our third hypothesis. The BMI that men judged would be ideal to men was significantly larger than the BMI that women judged would be ideal to men ($F_{1,157} = 4.75, p < .05$). The BMI that women judged would be ideal to women was significantly smaller than the BMI that men judged would be ideal to women ($F_{1,157} = 11.80, p < .001$; Table 2). Interestingly, although the BMIs that men and women judged would be ideal to the opposite gender were statistically different, they all corresponded to FRS Figure 6, which contradicts our third hypothesis.

Finally, we hypothesized that the silhouette that women would select as "Desired" and "Ideal" would be extremely thin, and men would select a figure that is consistent with normal weight. The BMIs that were chosen by men and women as "Desired" and "Ideal" were closer to the upper end of normal weight and lower end of overweight, respectively (Table 2). These BMIs correspond to FRS Figure 6 (23.75–26.24 kg/m^2), contradicting our fourth hypothesis.

4. Discussion

We found that Brazilian women experience body image disturbances to a greater extent than men, confirming our first hypothesis and corroborating previous studies (Fiske et al., 2014; Gardner et al., 2009; Neighbors & Sobal, 2007). The "Actual" BMI that was selected

Table 1
Characterization of body image variables by gender (n = 159).

Variables	Men		Women		Difference		
	n	%	n	%	χ^2	df	p
Body size estimation							
Underestimation	14	17.7 ^a	4	5.0 ^b	11.30	2	.004
Accurate	18	22.8 ^a	10	12.5 ^a			
Overestimation	47	59.5 ^a	66	82.5 ^b			
Body size satisfaction							
Weigh more	30	38.0 ^a	17	21.3 ^b	11.74	2	.003
Satisfied	22	27.8 ^a	14	17.5 ^a			
Weigh less	27	34.2 ^a	49	61.3 ^b			
Estimation, mean (SD)	1.18(4.11) ^a		4.11 (3.97) ^b				
Dissatisfaction, mean (SD)	.00 (5.40) ^a		–2.25 (4.18) ^b				

Different superscript letters denote a subset of gender categories whose columns significantly differ from each other ($p < .05$).

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