

# A Gender Study on Mexican College Students' Body-Image Perception

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the present study is to compare the scores on current, ideal, and social body shape and body size dissatisfaction between Mexican male and female college students. A total sample of 1,497 participants, 739 women and 758 men, aged 18-29 years participated in this study. A quantitative approach with a descriptive and transversal survey design was used. All the participants completed the Contour Drawing Rating Scale. The results of the one-way multivariate analysis of variance, followed by the one-way univariate analyses of variance, showed that compared to men, women expressed a greater discrepancy between ideal and actual body shape and lower score of ideal body shape. However, in the current body shape and social body shape no statistically significant differences were found. Because of the found body-image perception differences between men and women, results suggest that in order to design any intervention for improving students' perceived body image, the gender variable should be taken into account.

**Keywords:** Body Image, Gender Differences, Body Size Dissatisfaction, Figure Rating Scale

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## 1. Introduction

In the past few years, modern societies have overrated body image; hence, people worry too much about body weight, and even if such standards are currently considered aesthetic, they are not necessarily healthy. These body-image / body-weight parameters may have negative effects expressed via body dissatisfaction. Rejection is manifested as the degree to which individuals accept or disdain their body and/or in their body-image distortion, the inaccuracy to determine their body size [1].

The ideal "thin" person and the concerns about weight come from a cultural ideal although nowadays it is considered aesthetic, this is, only a passing fashion and not necessarily healthy nor accessible which could have negative consequences as great concern about weight and body image that can be expressed as body size dissatisfaction, seen as the extent in which individuals value or despise their bodies in distortion to body image, that is the lack of accuracy in body size determination [2].

The ideal thin-weight and worries about weight come from a cultural idea, that even nowadays is considered esthetic, it is just a fashion and it is not necessarily healthy or accessible, which might have negative consequences that generate

anxiety such as a great worry about weight and having good physical shape which could be shown as body dissatisfaction that reveals how individuals value or despise their own bodies, and/or their body distortion, which is the lack of precision in determining the body size [1].

The body image and the esthetic norms that actually rule the occidental world can affect the physiological development in men as well as in women, but are pre-adolescent and adolescent women who present a higher tendency on having problems doing the body image elaboration linked to development problems on alimentary behaviors [3, 4]. The previous information is because the "beauty and thinness" standards are especially strict for them [5].

Specially adolescence and youth are very vulnerable stages to experience body image problems since there are moments in this vital cycle characterized by physiologic, emotional and cognitive changes that contribute to increase the physical appearance concern [6, 7]. Besides, in these stages, the wish of getting thinner or being thin generates one of the most notable risk factors for alimentary behavior disorders [8].

Raich [9] says that in a society that glorifies beauty, is not strange that youth and health increase the concern of physical appearance. In fact every year millions of pesos are spend on improving physical appearance. But excessive worry might be highly perturbing and even incapacitating for a lot of people.

Body-image dissatisfaction applies to the body as a whole or parts of it. This dissatisfaction is seen from both, the influence of the current trending aesthetic body standards, as well as the difference between the individual's perception of his/her actual shape and the ideal one [10]. Without a doubt, wishing for a weight change, hence the possibility of developing an eating disorder is the result of body-image dissatisfaction. The desire to change one's weight to have the perfect image manifests itself in a stressed tendency towards perfectionism, which sets the individual on a chase for imitating unreachable models; hence, generating a deep dissatisfaction with one's body image. Consequently, this sets the path to possibly ignite and settle into eating disorders [11].

Most of the investigators [6, 8, 12-14] on alimentary behavior disorders, agree that these come from several unplanned situations, highlighting the worry for body shape and getting on diets, but most of all losing weight, which specialists consider risky these kind of behaviors [6, 13, 15]

Reference [16] studies, as well as [17] research reveal a larger female tendency for eating disorders compared to their male counterparts. This inclination may be due to the more demanding standards on the female body-image stereotype imposed on women by society. These imposed demands lead women into extreme behavior, even against their own health, to reach the desired thinness look [18, 19].

Therefore, such evidence highlights the relevance of inquiring whether being of a specific gender produces or not physical and/or cognitive benefits contributing to decrease physical self-consciousness by improving one's body-image perception.

The present study aims at outlining differences and similarities between male and female, Mexican, college students regarding their perceived current, ideal, and social body image and their body dissatisfaction. The study takes into consideration the fact that in the past few years body image has boomed immensely in modern societies, some of which have created a whole subculture based on the perception and importance of the ideal image [2].

The purpose of the present applied research project is to provide information enhancing education with a higher degree of quality in the context of attention to diversity. This study aims at pedagogically contributing to the elucidation of the conforming elements of a whole human development model. The underlying basis is that educational efforts must focus on fostering students' self-worth and competence feelings, nurturing self-esteem and self-concept which in turn will increase motivation for achievement, interpersonal relationships, and the particular means to perform various tasks and face challenges.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

A sample of 1,497 Mexican college students, 739 women and 758 men, aged 18-29 years ( $M = 20.74$ ;  $SD = 2.30$ ) participated in the present study. A convenience sampling

was used in order to try covering the different school levels included in the cross-section.

### 2.2. Instrument

Scale for body shape estimation adapted and computerized for Gastélum and Blanco [20] from the original version "Contour Drawing Rating Scale" (CDRS) of Thompson and Gray [21] was implemented. The CDRS consists of nine female figure drawings (for female participants) or a male figure (for male participants). Each drawing increases in size from extremely thin (1) to very obese (9). Participants are asked to rate their current, ideal and social body shape. The discrepancy between the ideal and current size scores is an index of body size dissatisfaction

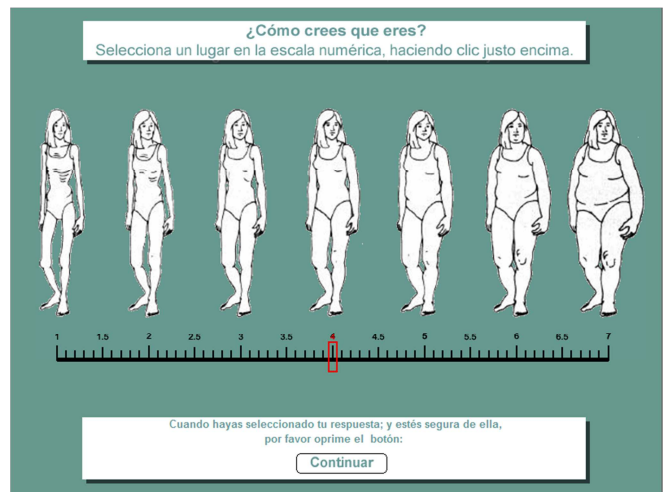


Figure 1. Example response for items of the questionnaire. Women

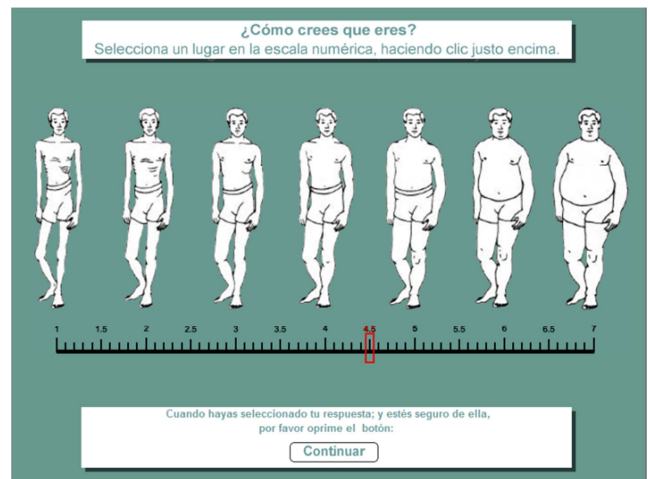


Figure 2. Example response for item of the questionnaire. Men

### 2.3. Design

A quantitative approach with a descriptive and transversal survey design was used [22]. The independent variable was gender (male and female) and the dependent variables were the scores on body shape (current, ideal and social) and body size dissatisfaction (ideal minus current body shape).

**2.4. Procedure**

College students were invited to participate in the present study. These students were fully informed about all the features of the project. Then, all the students who had agreed to participate were asked to sign a written informed consent. After the students' approvals were obtained, participants completed the above mentioned questionnaire by means of the instrument module administrator of the Scales Editor Version 2.0 [23].

Participants completed the questionnaire in the computer labs at their schools during a session. At the beginning of the session, researchers gave a general introduction on the importance of the research project and how to access the questionnaire through the software. Once the participants accessed the editor, instructions on how to correctly fill out the questionnaire appeared before the instrument. Additionally, participants were advised to ask for help if confused concerning either the instructions or the clarity of a particular item. Completion of the entire questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes. At the end of the session, their participation was welcomed. Afterwards, when all the participants had completed the questionnaire, the data were collected by means of the results generator module of the Scales Editor Version 2.0 [23].

**2.5. Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for

*Table 1. MANOVA results for gender differences in the four body shape variables.*

	Women (n = 739)	Men (n = 758)	F	p	$\eta^2$
Current body shape	4.12 (0.87)	4.096 (0.77)	54.628	<.001	.128
Ideal body shape	3.69 (0.69)	4.01 (0.41)	0.364	.547	.000
Social body shape	4.17 (1.16)	4.08 (1.02)	174.918	<.001	.105
Body size dissatisfaction	0.70 (0.67)	0.47 (0.55)	2.617	.106	.002
			49.420	<.001	.032

Note. Descriptive values are reported as mean (standard deviation).

**4. Discussion and Conclusions**

Results show that even though there were no significant differences between men and women's current and social shape perception, women exhibit more body dissatisfaction; besides, they choose thinner ideal shape models to represent their ideal shape. This result mirrors what other studies have reported: women, compared to same-age, same educational level men, usually wish to be thinner or to lose weight, regardless of whether it is necessary [24-27]; and they seem to be more dissatisfied with their body image [18, 25].

Analyzed data also point at women being more susceptible victims of a sociocultural pressure promoting a far from real beauty canon via media, family, and life partners, as shown by [10, 28-30].

Furthermore, gender differences found regarding body-image perception suggest the need to incorporate the gender variable in any effort aiming at improving body-image perception. Nevertheless, it is key to promote further research, since the topic of body-image perception and dissatisfaction

all the variables were calculated. Subsequently, after verifying that the data met the assumptions of parametric statistical analyses, a one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), followed by the one-way univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA), were used to examine the differences between men and women on the reported body shape (current, ideal and social) and index of body size dissatisfaction scores. Moreover, the effect size was estimated using the eta-squared ( $\eta^2$ ). All statistical analyses were performed using the SPSS version 20.0 for Windows (IBM® SPSS® Statistics 20). The statistical significance level was set at  $p < .05$ .

**3. Results**

Table 1 shows the mean values and standard deviations of the body shape variables, as well as the results of the MANOVA and the follow-up univariate ANOVAs. The MANOVA results indicated overall statistical significant differences between genders on the body shape scores (Wilks'  $\lambda = .872$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $\eta^2 = .128$ ). Subsequently, the follow-up ANOVAs showed that compared to men, women expressed a greater discrepancy between ideal and actual body shape ( $F1 = 49.420$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and lower ideal body shape score ( $F1 = 174.918$ ;  $p < .001$ ). However, in the current body shape and social body shape, no statistically significant differences were found ( $p > .05$ ).

broadly transcends the boundaries of the present study. The study also underlines the relevance and need of further research in this topic within the Mexican context.

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