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# Body image perception of Mexican youth: A gender comparison

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the present study was to compare the scores on body shape (current, ideal and social) and body size dissatisfaction between men and women high school Mexican students. A total sample of 653 participants, 322 women and 331 men, aged 13-19 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 with the men, the women expressed a greater discrepancy between ideal and actual body shape and had higher score of social body shape and lower score of ideal body shape ( $F_1 = 90.123$ ;  $p < .001$ ). However, in the current body shape statistically significant differences were not found. Because of the differences between men and women in their perception of body image found, these findings suggest that in order to design any intervention for improving the perceived body image of the students, the variable gender should be taken into account.

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

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## 1. Introduction

Adolescence and youth are vulnerable stages to experiment body image as moments of their life cycle characterized by physiological, emotional, and cognitive changes which contribute to the increase of concern of body image [1, 2]. In addition to these stages, the desire of losing weight and keeping fit contribute to one of the most significant risk features for behavioral eating problems [3].

The ideal of a thin person as well as concerns about weight, come from a cultural ideal, and even when nowadays it is considered as esthetic, it is only a passing fashion and not necessarily healthy or accessible. This can have negative consequences, generating anxiety as a great concern about weight and image, which can be expressed as body size dissatisfaction, where individuals value and despise their distorted body image, the inaccuracy while determining their body size [4].

Body image and aesthetics standards, which currently rule Western World, can affect psychological development of man and women. But pre-adolescent and adolescent women

present a greater tendency to manage conflicts toward body image related to the eating behavioral problem development [5, 6]. This is due to the "Slimness and Beauty" which are especially rigid for them [7].

Reference [8] points out that a society, which glorifies beauty, youth and health; it is not surprising that concerns about body image increase. In fact, millions are spent every year to improve their body image. But excessive concern can be disruptive, even disabling for a lot of people.

Self-concept plays a decisive and central role in the development of personality, such as it is highlighted in the main psychological theories. A positive Self-concept is the base of proper personal, social and professional performance depending on him to a large extent, his personal satisfaction and feeling fine with himself. In particular, Physical Self-concept proves to be a good indicator of mental health and life adjustment [9-11]. Feeling fine with our body helps generating positive feelings. So that achieving a positive Self-concept is one of the main pretended goals in large number of psychological intervention programs (Education, Clinical, Community, Civic...) for those who demand

strategies and resources which permit its improvement [12].

In almost all the studies made by different authors, differences in gender were found. “Women” Self-concept is meaningfully inferior to “Man” [13-15] where a possible explanation may be the fact of a socialization process in the physical practice of sports such as it happens in other development fields, where exists a stereotype which helps man to participate, in a special way, in competitive sports where they have the opportunity to develop certain physical skills more than women [16, 17].

In this sense, it is of special relevance to find out if belonging to a determined gender produces or not physical or cognitive benefits that contribute to decrease concern about physical appearance while improving perception about their body image.

This study is attempted to determine the differences and similarities among middle school and high school Mexican men and women regarding their current body image, ideal, social and image dissatisfaction, considering that in the last years body image has taken a significant importance in modern societies, which has created a subculture based on perception and the importance of the ideal image [18].

As a result, this study pretends as an applied research to contribute with information which can be transformed into a greater quality of the Educational Practice in the context of attention to diversity; contributing to the pedagogical knowledge revealing the factors which form an integral human development; under the premise that Educational Efforts must focus on the increase of feelings and self concept which will strengthen self-esteem and self-concept. This will favor motivation toward success, interpersonal relationships, in general, the particular form to carry out different tasks and challenges presented to them.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

A sample of 653 high school Mexican students, 322 women and 331 men, aged 13-19 years ( $M = 15.30$ ;  $SD = 1.65$ ) participated in the present study. A convenience sampling was used in order to try covering the representative of different school levels studied (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Distribución de los participantes de acuerdo al género y escolaridad

	Women	Men	Total
Secundaria	138	139	277
Bachillerato	184	192	376
<b>Total</b>	<b>322</b>	<b>331</b>	<b>653</b>

### 2.2. Instrument

Scale for the estimation of body shape, adapted and computerized [19], of the original version “Contour Drawing Rating Scale” (CDRS) of [20]. The CDRS consists of nine drawings of a female figure (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.

### 2.3. Design

Regarding the design of the study, a quantitative approach with a descriptive and transversal survey design was used [21]. The independent variable was gender (women and men) 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

All the high school 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 that agree 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 [22].

Participants completed the questionnaire in the computer rooms of their schools during a session. At the beginning of the session the researchers gave a general introduction about the importance of the research and how to access the questionnaire through the software. When the participants were into the editor, the instructions about how to fill out the questionnaire correctly appeared before the instrument. Additionally, the 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. Afterward, when all the participants completed the questionnaire, the data were collected by means of the results generator module of the Scales Editor Version 2.0 [22].

### 2.5. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for 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 the athletes and non athletes 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 2 shows the mean values and standard deviations of the variables of body shape, 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'  $\lambda = .811$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $\eta^2 = .189$ ). Subsequently, the follow-up ANOVAs showed that compared with the men, the women expressed a greater discrepancy between ideal and actual body shape ( $F1 = 46.451$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and had higher score of social body shape ( $F1 = 6.688$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and lower score of ideal body shape ( $F1 = 90.123$ ;  $p < .001$ ). However, in the current body shape statistically significant differences were not found ( $p > .05$ ).

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

Results show that even when no significant differences were found between men and women toward perception of their current image, women are the ones who select thicker models for their social image and show higher body size dissatisfaction; in addition to choosing thinner models for their ideal image, this is consistent with the information reported in other studies where it is confirmed that in comparing men to women same age and same level of

studies, women frequently show more concern about losing weight and look thin, regardless it is necessary or not [23-25]; and they are even more dissatisfied with body image [26].

These results can also be explained on basis in Western Cultural Gender Stereotypes [27, 28]; the process of socialization encourages determined ways of thinking, feeling and acting and depending on being a man or a woman promotes an identity of gender; this explains development of beliefs differentiated among men and woman [13].

Results obtained also show that young women can be more susceptible to socio-cultural pressure which promotes an unrealistic beauty ideal; transmitted by media, family and couples as it is proposed by [29-31].

Differences found between men and women toward their body image perception, in addition suggest that while designing any type of intervention with the goal of improvement has to take into account the variable of gender; however it is necessary to develop more studies about this because this topic goes beyond all the scope of this study, and also highlights the importance of making more studies about this in our country.

**Table 2.** Results of MANOVA for the gender differences on the four variables of body shape

	women (n = 322)	men (n = 331)	F	p	$\eta^2$
current body shape	4.01 (0.92)	3.90 (0.81)	37.841	<.001	.189
ideal body shape	3.38 (0.80)	3.89 (0.56)	2.407	<.121	.004
social body shape	4.17 (1.12)	3.94 (1.14)	90.123	<.001	.122
body size dissatisfaction	0.82 (0.72)	0.49 (0.48)	6.688	<.01	.010
			46.451	<.001	.067

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

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