

Body Image and Body Satisfaction Among Korean College Women

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Abstract : This study examined Korean college women's perceptions of their body image, ideal body, and body satisfaction. Five research questions assessed participants: 1) self-defined image, 2) ideal body image, 3) body dissatisfaction, 4) body satisfaction, and 5) perceptions of their friends' weight concerns. A convenience sample of 101 female college students participated in the study. Respondents' average age is 20.78, ranging from 18 to 36 years. Two approaches were used to define Korean college women's body image and body satisfaction: A scale of illustration showing nine females' body drawing, and a verbal scale for the satisfaction with body image. The findings revealed that Korean college women pursue "thinness." Although they were somewhat happy with their height, the development of their figure, and their overall good looks, they were significantly dissatisfied with their weight. These results indicate that Korean college women would benefit from positive body image education.

Key words: body image, self image, body satisfaction, ideal body

1. Introduction

For many years and in many countries, researchers have studied topics related to women's body image. In recent years this topic has come under particularly intense scrutiny, as in many modern societies a thin body shape has come to symbolize success (Brownell, 1991).

Body image, or body self, refers to the images and feelings an individual holds about his or her body (Schilder, 1935; Rosenbaum, 1979). Another definition of body image centers on the way people perceive their own bodies, including collective attitudes, feelings, and fantasies (Fisher, 1986; Sault, 1994). Thus, body image mediates the relationship between an individual's personal and social identity (Öberg & Tornstam, 1999).

In recent years, obesity has become a major problem for not only adults but also children in countries around the world and Korea is no exception to this trend. Today, business related to cosmetic surgeries, diet and cosmetic products in Korea is booming. It has also been suggested that Asian females tend to perceive Caucasian-American females as more physically attractive than Asians (Lin, 1988; Patel, 1994).

Many researchers have observed that females tend to perceive their bodies more negatively than males do. In a cross cultural study, researchers found that Korean women were more dissatisfied with their bodies than American women (Lee *et al.*, 2001) and increasing numbers of Korean women are pursuing their ideal of a "thin" body. Studies seeking to discover what is considered beautiful in terms of a body, especially for women, have found

that in general it is likely that females feel more media pressure to be attractive than do males because the media place more emphasis on female attractiveness, and that exposure to this thin ideal tends to reduce body satisfaction, increase self-consciousness, and reduce self-esteem (Ogletree *et al.*, 1990; Reeves *et al.*, 2004). For example, Stormer and Thompson (1998) demonstrated that social comparison and societal factors were significant predictors of body dissatisfaction and eating disturbances, while Lennon and Rudd (1994) concluded that idealized media images strongly influenced a "thin" standard of beauty for women.

In Japan, which is of particular interest because of its geographical proximity to Korea and the close cultural ties between the two countries, during the past 35 years, a slim body has become increasingly desirable for young women as a symbol of beauty and success (Shih & Kubo, 2005).

1.1. Statement of problem

Although there has been some research into Korean college women's perceptions of their body image, body size, and body shape (Lee *et al.*, 2001; Kim & Lennon, 2006), none of these studies have been based on the use of a standard scale for women's perception of body image using nine female visual drawings (Stunkard *et al.*, 1983) or the body satisfaction scale (Blyth *et al.*, 1985). A consideration of their perceptions of their friends' weight concerns is also lacking; this is potentially especially important, as this age group is highly involved with their peer group and peer influence is a major factor. Thus, it would be useful to determine whether their peers' perceptions of body image are related to their body satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of Korean college women regarding their own body, their ideal body, their satisfaction with their body, and their friends' weight concerns.

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The following research questions guided the study of Korean college women:

1. What is their self-defined body image?
2. What is their ideal body image?
3. How dissatisfied are they with their bodies?
4. How satisfied are they with their bodies?
5. What is their perception of their friends' weight concerns?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Body Image and Women

Body image is what the mind does to the body in translating the experience of physical embodiment into its mental representation. This translation from body to body image and to body-cathexis is a complex and emotionally charged process (Hutchinson, 1982).

Thornton and Maurice (2004) noticed that an attractiveness ideal was considered as a possible mediator of a physique contrast effect among Caucasian women. The study found that exposure to photographs of models typifying idealized thin physiques led to women displaying decreased self-esteem and increased consciousness, social physique anxiety, and body dissatisfaction.

Fallon and Rozin (1985) studied 248 male and 227 female college students using a set of nine figure drawings arranged from very thin to very heavy. Subjects were asked about (1) their current figure, (2) their ideal figure, (3) the most attractive figure for the opposite sex, and (4) the opposite-sex figure that they would be most attracted to. The findings showed that for women, their current figure was heavier than the figure they selected as their most attractive figure, which was itself heavier than the ideal figure. Both male and female college students had the opposite opinion of what the opposite sex would find attractive in the study. Men thought that women liked a heavier stature than females actually reported, while women thought that men liked women who were thinner than they actually do. Overall, men's perceptions indicated that they were more satisfied with their figures, whereas women's perceptions revealed the pressure on them to lose weight.

Rucker and Cash (1992) studied perceptions of body image and body size, in particular body image attitudes, body image perceptions, weight concerns and eating behaviors, and judgments of the thinness or fatness of varying body sizes. One of the interesting approaches taken by this study was to look at racial differences between African American and white female college students regarding body image and eating behaviors. The instrument included the 69-item Multidimensional Body Self Relations Questionnaire (MBSRQ), the Body Image Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire (BIATQ), the Body Image Avoidance Questionnaire (BIAQ), and the Goldfarb Fear of Fat Scale (GFFS). African American college females evaluated positively their overall appearance, expressed fewer negative thoughts about their bod-

ies, and had fewer concerns about dieting, fatness, and weight concerns. In contrast, white women desired thinner bodies and their ideal body was significantly thinner than their perceived size.

In the racial difference study conducted by Rucker and Cash (1992), African-American college women had far more positive attitudes to their own body images. Black women evaluated their overall appearance more positively, reported fewer negative thoughts about their body, and displayed less concern about dieting, fatness, and weight fluctuations. In contrast, the white female participants indicated more frequent behaviors designed to avoid or conceal their body size, experienced more distress while being weighted, and maintained a stronger drive to be thin, including more frequent dieting and eating restraints (Rucker & Cash). Although 16 years have passed since Rucker and Cash conducted their study, it is still worth following up their work with a future study to compare the body image perceptions of Korean, white, and black college women.

2.2. Body Image and Body Satisfaction

Han (2000) showed 75 Korean female college students video segments that contained either a variety of thin characters and or no thin characters, and divided their reactions in terms of three processing variables: (1) upward social comparison, (2) perceived realism, and (3) thinness as a social norm. Han's findings indicated that the more realistically the thin characters on TV were perceived to be and the more the thin ideal was seen to be acceptable, the less the female college students were satisfied with their own body images.

Williamson, Davis, Goreczny, and Blouin (1989) studied body image distortion and ideal body size preferences among 423 non-bulimic college women and 108 bulimic women from an outpatient eating disorders clinic. Nine women's silhouettes from very thin to very obese were used for body image assessment. Two dependent variables, current body size score (CBS) and ideal body size score (IBS), were recorded for data analysis. Bulimic women chose a significantly larger current body size than non-bulimics and also chose thinner ideal body sizes than non-bulimics. The results demonstrate that perception of large body size and thin ideal body size result in higher body dissatisfaction in bulimia nervosa patients.

A body image and body size overestimation study was also conducted by Strauman and Glenberg (1994). Female college students were asked to determine a Body Shape Concern (BSC). They were interviewed regarding five self-states: actual/own, ideal/own, ought/own, ideal/significant other, and ought/significant other.

Öberg and Tomstam (1999) studied 3,000 Swedish men and women aged from 20 to 85 years to investigate body images among men and women of different ages. Their results suggested that in all age groups, physical appearance was more important for women than for men. Among women, older respondents expressed

a more positive body image. Younger women were found to be more influenced by cultural standards regarding the ideal body.

2.3. Body Image and Peer Influences

Studies have found that appearance is likely to be an important factor by which teenagers make friendship choices, regardless of social class (Ogletree *et al.*, 1990; Stephens *et al.*, 1994). Their peers become the main source for standards, models of behavior and advice when making important decisions (Schultz, 1989). Group belongingness and social participation are influenced by individual feelings about the self as a member of a group (Horn & Gurel, 1981). Solomon (1992) pointed out that the pressure to be slim is continually reinforced, both by advertising and by peers. Individuals evaluate their bodies differently in their environment through comparisons with others (Lennon & Rudd, 1994). Social comparison theory is based on the individual's comparison of self with other people (Festinger, 1954). Those of the studies were demonstrated that the relationships between body image and group belongings, peer pressures, and social classes.

3. Methods

Stimuli for the study were Stunkard *et al.*'s (1983) nine female drawings (Fig. 1), used to identify the college women's self-defined figure and their ideal figure, and the satisfaction with body image scale (Blyth *et al.*, 1985). The satisfaction with body image scale asked about the participants' satisfaction with three aspects of their own bodies, namely height, weight, and figure development, using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from (1) *not at all happy* to (4) *very happy*, and their overall looks with a 4-point scale ranging from (1) *not at all good looking* to (4) *very good looking*. These instruments are widely used to measure body size perception, ideal body size, and dissatisfaction with the body (Cohn *et al.*, 1985; Wilson *et al.*, 1994). The friends' perception of weight concerns scores came from the PEERDIET scales (Levine *et al.*, 1994) with scores ranging from (1) *none* to (5) *all*.

To determine the characteristics of the sample, descriptive data analysis, nonparametric statistical analysis, and paired sample *t* tests were conducted for the research questions. A convenience sample of 101 female college students in classes participated in this study. They ranged in age from 18 to 36 years, with a mean age of 20.78 (SD=4.24). Data were collected in a college located in Seoul, Korea, in 2006. Ninety-seven percent of the participants were not married.

4. Results and Discussion

Research Question 1. What is the Korean college women's self-defined body image?

Descriptive data analysis was performed to find the self-defined

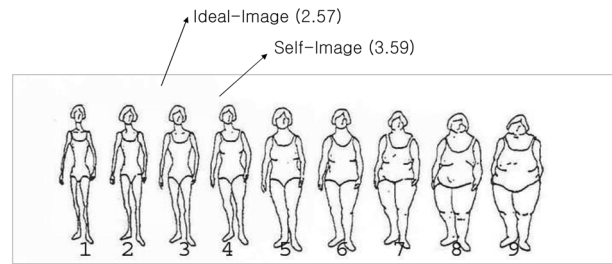


Fig. 1. Korean college women's self and ideal body image

body image of the study participants, which was found to be 3.59 using the scale shown in the nine female drawings (Fig. 1). Approximately, 47% of the participants chose #4 as their self-defined image, followed by 25% who chose #3, and 12% who chose #5 and #6 as their self-defined image. When viewing their self-defined image, 72% of the participants chose either #3 and #4 of the nine female drawings. It was noticed that the participants were likely to select #1 and #2 as being underweight, #3 as a normal weight, and from #4 upwards as overweight. Therefore, the participants' perception of their self defined body image tended towards a slightly overweight (mean 3.59) figure.

Research Question 2. What is the Korean college women's ideal body image?

Descriptive data analysis was performed to find the ideal body image of the study participants, which was found to be 2.57 using the scale shown in the nine female drawings (Fig. 1). Approximately, 50% of the participants chose #2 as their ideal body image, followed by 37% who chose #3. It is interesting to note that half of the participants chose #2, which is categorized as underweight, as their ideal; figure #3, which is also categorized as underweight, was chosen by over a third. One significant finding of the study was that the Korean college women's perceived self-defined body image was noticeably heavier than their ideal body image and that the study participants were likely to select an underweight image as their ideal. This finding therefore supports previous researchers who reported that women's perceptions revealed the pressure on them to lose weight (Fallon & Rozin, 1985; Öberg & Tornstam, 1999).

Research Question 3. How dissatisfied are Korean college women with their bodies?

Guided by a previous study (Lee *et al.*, 2006), body dissatisfaction scores were calculated by finding the difference between the students' perception of their actual size and the identification of their ideal size. A positive score for body dissatisfaction signifies that the ideal size identified to be bigger than the perceived actual size, while a score of zero means that the actual size and ideal size were identical, in which case there was no body dissatisfaction. A

Table 1. Frequency of Body Dissatisfaction Score

Body dissatisfaction score	Frequency	Percentage
2	1	1.0
1	7	6.9
0	17	16.8
-1	45	44.6
-2	27	26.7
-3	3	3.0
-4	1	1.0
Total	101	100

negative score for body dissatisfaction signifies that the ideal size identified to be smaller than the perceived actual size.

The results (Table 1) revealed that the mean of the participants' dissatisfaction scores with their own bodies was (-1.02), which indicates that the ideal body image was smaller than the self-defined body image. Approximately 75% of the participants had a negative score for body dissatisfaction with their body, with the remaining 25% of the participants having a positive score for body dissatisfaction with their body, including a score of zero. Of the 25% with a positive score for body satisfaction, approximately 17% chose the same ideal body image and self defined body image, indicating no body dissatisfaction, and the remaining 8% chose a smaller body image than the one they identified as having an ideal size.

Research Question 4. How satisfied are Korean college women with their bodies?

Descriptive data analysis was performed to find the perception of college women's body satisfaction. Using the body satisfaction scale (Blyth *et al.*, 1985), for height, weight, and figure development the scale used was: (1) *not at all happy*, (2) *somewhat happy*, (3) *happy*, and (4) *very happy*. For their overall looks the 4-point Likert scale used was: (1) *not at all good looking*, (2) *somewhat good looking*, (3) *good looking*, and (4) *very good looking*. The mean of the participants' body satisfaction scores for height, weight, figure development, and overall looks were 2.31, 1.82, 2.05 and 2.25, respectively, as shown in Table 2. The participants were more unhappy with their weight than with any of the other categories. Table 4 shows that only 19% of the participants

Table 2. Means of Body Satisfaction Scores

	Mean (n=101)	Std. Deviation	χ^2
Height	2.31	0.903	22.366***
Weight	1.82	0.829	38.366***
Figure development	2.05	0.740	45.812***
Overall looks	2.25	0.830	56.531***

Note. Significant *p* values are noted by: ****p* ≤ 0.001, ***p* ≤ 0.01, **p* ≤ 0.05

Table 3. Visual body image (Stunkard *et al.*, 1983) of body dissatisfaction and verbal body image of the satisfaction with Body Image scale (Blyth *et al.*, 1985)

	Mean of The Satisfaction with Body Image scale	Mean of Body dissatisfaction	<i>t</i> -value
Height	2.31	-1.02	26.413***
Weight	1.82	-1.02	30.535***
Figure development	2.05	-1.02	24.656***
Overall looks	2.25	-1.02	28.116***

Note. Significant *p* values are noted by: ****p* ≤ 0.001, ***p* ≤ 0.01, **p* ≤ 0.05

Table 5. Frequency of Scores for Overall Looks

	Frequency	Percentage
Not at all good looking	13	12.9
Somewhat good looking	53	52.5
Good looking	29	28.7
Very good looking	6	5.9
Total	101	100

answered *not at all happy* with their height and 24% for their figure development, but this rose to 43% for their weight. Approximately 35% of the participants considered that they were either *good looking* or *very good looking* regarding their overall looks, although 13% of the participants thought they were *not at all good looking* (Table 5). Compared to their height, figure development, and overall looks, Korean college women were more dissatisfied with their weight. For further analysis of dissatisfaction with height, weight, figure development, and overall looks, nonparametric statistical analysis were conducted. Paired sample *t* tests

Table 4. Frequency of Height, Weight, and Figure Development Scores

	Height frequency (%)	Weight frequency (%)	Figure development frequency (%)
Not at all happy	19 (18.8%)	43 (42.6%)	24 (23.8%)
Somewhat happy	43 (42.6%)	35 (34.7%)	49 (48.5%)
Happy	28 (27.7%)	21 (20.8%)	27 (26.7%)
Very happy	11 (10.9%)	2 (2%)	1 (1%)
Total	101 (100%)	101 (100%)	101 (100%)

Table 6. Mean of the friends' perception of weight concerns scores

PEERDIET scales	Mean (n=101)	Std. Deviation
How many of your girl friends would like to be thinner? (PEERDIET-1)	4.26	0.658
How many of your girl friends would like to be heavier? (PEERDIET-2)	1.28	0.512
How many of your friends are on a diet to try to lose weight or slow down weight gain? (PEERDIET-3)	3.68	0.958
How often do you and your friends talk about weight, weight loss, and dieting? (PEERDIET-4)	3.98	0.824

were performed to explore visual approach of body image (Stunkard *et al.*, 1983) with body dissatisfaction and verbal approach of the satisfaction with Body Image scale (Blyth *et al.*, 1985) in Table 3.

Research Question 5. What is the perception of Korean college women regarding their friends' weight concerns?

Descriptive data analysis was performed for this analysis. The friends' perception of weight concerns scores came from the PEERDIET scales (Levine *et al.*, 1994) with scores consisting of: (1) *none*, (2) *a few*, (3) *about half*, (4) *most*, and (5) *all*, and for the question "How often do you and your friends talk about weight, weight loss, and dieting?" a 5 point Likert scale consisting of: (1) *never*, (2) *rarely*, (3) *sometimes*, (4) *often*, and (5) *very often*. The scale consisted of four statements related to peer weight perception, namely "How many of your girl friends would like to be thinner?", "How many your friends are on a diet to try to lose weight or slow down weight gain?", "How often do you and your friends talk about weight, weight loss, and dieting?" and "How many of your girl friends want to be heavier?". The final question was reverse coded to relate to the content of the other questions.

Table 7. Frequency of PEERDIET-1, PEERDIET-2 and PEERDIET-3 Scores

	PEERDIET-1 frequency (%)	PEERDIET-2 frequency (%)	PEERDIET-3 frequency (%)
None	1 (1%)	75 (74.3%)	2 (2%)
A few	1 (1%)	25 (24.8%)	9 (8.9%)
About half	3 (3%)	0	20 (19.8%)
Most	62 (61.4%)	1 (1%)	56 (55.4%)
All	34 (33.7%)	0	14 (13.9%)
Total	101 (100%)	101 (100%)	101 (100%)

Table 8. Frequency of PEERDIET-4 Scores

	PEERDIET-4 frequency (%)
Never	1 (1%)
Rarely	4 (4%)
Sometimes	13 (12.8%)
Often	60 (59.4%)
Very often	23 (22.8%)
Total	101 (100%)

For friends' weight concerns, most of the participants' girl friends were highly interested in weight loss or diets (3.68), and thinness (4.26). Eighty-two percent of their girl friends often talk about weight, weight loss, and dieting and the majority of the study participants' friends would like to be thinner.

5. Conclusions and Implications

The purpose of this research was to examine the perceptions of Korean college women regarding their own body image, their ideal body, their satisfaction with their body, and their friends' weight concerns. A convenience sample of 101 female college students participated in this study. Two approaches were used to define Korean college women's body image and body satisfaction: a scale based on an illustration showing nine female drawings as a visual approach and the Satisfaction with Body Image scale (Blyth *et al.*, 1985) as a verbal approach.

5.1. Self-defined Image, Ideal Body Image, and Body Satisfaction

The main finding of this study was the Korean college women's pursuit of "thinness." Korean college women were significantly more dissatisfied with their weight than with their height, the development of their figure, or their overall looks. Although weight is a ratio related to height, the Korean college women were far more seriously concerned about their weight than their height. This probably reflects Korean women's perception of thinness as a western ideal of beauty.

Korean college women's body satisfaction scores measured using nine female visual drawings were also negatively correlated with their body image, with their ideal body image being smaller than their self-defined body image for the great majority of the study participants. This result supports the observation made by previous researchers that social stereotypes for women tend to mean that thinness is more attractive than obesity and that society reacts more positively to physically attractive women (Klerk *et al.*, 2005).

According to Stice (2001), this thin-ideal internalization predicts subsequent increases in body dissatisfaction, dieting, and negative affect, which in turn predict subsequent increase in bulimic symptoms. Body image is uniquely connected to health because there is a strong, often moral, connotation to the behav-

iors that arise from body image attitudes and perceptions; risky behaviors may be expected or encouraged because they accord the individual greater "worth" or social value, even when they compromise physical health or emotional well-being (Rudd & Carter, 2006). Body image plays an important role in an individual's life because it affects one's self-esteem (Cash & Horton, 1983).

Therefore, the findings of this study regarding the college women's perceptions of their body image and their degree of body dissatisfaction may have important implications in terms of how this dissatisfaction emotionally affects their daily life, their social well being, and their physical and psychological health and self-esteem throughout their lives. Although the study did not include specific questions regarding eating behaviors, the participants may in fact be candidates for inclusion in a future study of eating behaviors based on their reported perceptions of body image and the associated pursuit of thinness.

5.2. Perceptions of Their Friends' Weight Concerns

Korean college women's girl friends often talked about weight, weight loss, and diets. This is particularly important because younger women are known to be strongly influenced by their peers. Most of the participants' girl friends were highly interested in weight loss or diets, and thinness. They often talk about weight, weight loss, and dieting and the majority of the study participants' friends would like to be thinner in this study.

For example, Lennon and Rudd (1994) showed how this can reflect social stereotypes and the social reinforcement of the thin body by peers and society. The perception of the desirability of a thin body image and body dissatisfaction is thus not only influenced by their own experiences but also by the attitudes of their peers.

Recent research has noted that the diet industry in Korea is now selling many different types of diet products, many of which are intended to be taken orally but have never been subjected to proper clinical tests or proof of efficacy (Kim & Lennon, 2006). An awareness of their weight and the need to be thin is also a source of considerable stress in the everyday lives of many women. This study points to the need to encourage a positive body image for college women and also to strengthen awareness that body image is not a symbol of a person's inner qualities. At the same time it is crucial that people of either gender be empowered with the skills to resist and transcend the cultural, interpersonal, and developmental forces that impair body image (Cash, 1997).

The relatively small sample size limits the study, but the results suggest the value of further study using a larger sample and also consider difference between participant's actual size based on BMI (Body Mass Index) and self-defined or ideal size. The findings of this study will serve as a useful basis for further work that will eventually lead to a better understanding of issues concern-

ing body image and self-esteem across different cultures. Understanding the body image and body satisfaction in the clothing and textiles market has direct implications for apparel manufacturers and retailers as a consumer behavior segment.

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