

Relationship between body image and clothing perceptions: Among women aged 18-55 years in the UK

Dr. Shweta Reddy

Assistant Professor,
Department of Fashion Merchandising,
IDME at Texas Christian University.

Dr. Rose Otieno

Senior Lecturer,
Department of Clothing Design and Technology
Manchester Metropolitan University.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the body image perceptions and its influence on clothing preferences among women aged 18-55 years living in the United Kingdom. The objectives were to determine these women's perceptions towards their bodies and the related socio-cultural influences of this view and to examine their clothing preference.

Key words: Body image, clothing, aging

1.1 Introduction

Body image is a multifaceted psychological experience relating to physical appearance and self perceptions and attitudes encompassing perceptual, affective, cognitive and behavioural aspects (Cash, 2004; Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990). It is the picture we have in our minds of the size, shape and form of our bodies and our feelings concerning these (Slade, 1988). Body image constitutes both 'perceptual' and 'attitudinal' components that are influenced by historical, cultural, social, individual and biological factors.

Clothes or dress and body image have similar consequences on what one looks like and how one feels about themselves. Rudd and Lennon (2001) posit that body image includes how one perceives the physical body and thereby influences how the body is present to others through the medium of dress. Because body image is a mental picture we have of perceptual and affective components of our bodies, it affects how we interact with clothes, and how the 'clothed appearance' is presented publicly (Rudd & Lennon, 2001). Individuals utilise clothes to make their bodies social and gain an identity (Entwistle, 2000; Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002) and because the female gender has largely been associated with its desire for 'fashionable' body and clothes, this paper examines women's body image concerns and its influence on clothing preferences.

1.2 Literature Review

An influential factor in determining body image and clothing preferences of women is the culturally prescribed idea of aesthetics (Kaiser, 1997; Ussher, 1989). In order to achieve the fashionable body, women alter their bodies through diet, exercise and make-up choices (Jung, Sharon & Rudd, 2001). For the sake of 'self-enhancement' women of all ages are willing to undergo painful and intrusive medical procedures or use anti-aging treatments. The cultural message regarding how women should look and act is propagated by

media eliciting heightened body dissatisfaction among women (Groesz, Levine & Murnen, 2002). Although for many women the media generated beauty standards are unattainable, it does not prevent them from using a variety of methods to alter their appearance in the pursuit of these beauty standards (Sarwer & Crerand, 2004; Sarwer, Grossbart & Didie, 2002).

The illusionary 'perfect figure' and 'ideal beauty' has been sought by women through the ages. Cash and Pruzinsky (2002) explain that the more different one's self evaluation is from the cultural ideal, the greater the dissatisfaction with one's own appearance. According to Ussher (1989) the concept of the perfect female body has a pervasive influence on women's consciousness. The cultural expectations of the ideal female body appear to be inconsistent with aging. Aging is a continual but inevitable process that results in physical changes that are often incompatible with cultural conceptions of beauty. (Tantleff-Dunn & Agliata, 2001).

Thus, an aging population is faced with a dilemma; they live in a culture that is obsessed with youth, beauty and thinness but also face a diminishing ability to achieve or maintain appearance ideals. As a result, there is a growing discrepancy between how people see themselves and how they would like to look (Spitzer, Henderson & Zivian, 1999). Although these changes (like, the skin wrinkles, the backbone hunches and the hair becomes thinner and grey) are a product of one's genetic and environmental background. Such changes influence the social aspects of their lives and choices including clothing preferences. The physical changes which occur with aging (e.g. sagging bust lines, thickened waists and loss of muscle tone) tend to affect clothing preferences because of fitting problems. For example, older women prefer A-line shirts, front closures, set in sleeves, dresses with jackets, three-quarter-length sleeves in order to conceal upper arms and designs that do not emphasise the waist (Kaiser, 1997, p.133). Thus indicating that women's body image is likely to influence their clothing preferences.

1.3 Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were utilized in this study. A questionnaire with 100 women aged 18-55 years and 15 in-depth interviews were utilized. The questionnaire utilized 'self-concept measures' (Gilbert and Morris, 1995) to gain an insight into the body image perception of the sample. Drawings of five body types were presented to enable women to select and compare theirs with those they considered ideal. Questionnaires and interviews (Moser and Kalton, 1971) generate rich data. The questionnaire design, administration and procedures for sample selection were carefully considered to enhance validity and reliability (Bryman, 1989; Oppenheim, 1992) thereby enabling a comparison between two cohorts of women (18-30 years and 31-55 years). Using a questionnaire enables transparency of method and procedures, accessibility to large data at a low cost, standardisation and anonymity (Robson, 2002). The interview schedule used during interviewees was advised by the findings from the data collected using the questionnaire.

The 'self-concept measures' was assessed on a scale of 1 to 10, the items were adopted after being approved by experts and forethought was given to use simple words and sentences that anybody speaking English would be familiar with; thereby contributing to validity (Lee, 1993). The 'figure preference ratings' method (Tiggemann, 2001; Fallon & Rozin, 1985), whereby a set of drawings organized from 'very thin' to 'very heavy' are presented to the respondent, was adopted to examine body-image attitudes. A similar tool was utilised in the questionnaire, where a set of five female drawings was shown, in order to avoid a progressive growth of body weight that could have made respondent uncomfortable. The women were asked to indicate by choosing a visual in response to the following questions: (i) the media projected 'ideal' body type (ii) the

figure that approximates their current figure and, (iii) the figure type they would like to look like. These drawings were not labelled when shown to the respondent. The drawings were later categorised by the researchers using labels such as skinny, trim, average, fleshy and obese during data analysis.

The interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed and analysed, thereby generating themes. Open-ended questions enabled probing (Miller, 1991). The interviews were conducted in an informal manner which resulted in rich and illuminating qualitative data, increase the response rate, flexibility when probing, allowed on the spot assessment and enabled the interviewer to clear any misunderstandings (Robson, 2002; Oppenheim, 1992; Miller, 1991). The interview consisted of open-ended questions regarding: (i) participants' views on the influence of media in creating the image of the 'ideal' female body, (ii) participants' perceptions of and feelings towards the media propagated 'ideal' bodies, (iii) participants' assessment and interpretation of current female beauty standards, (iv) participants' views on social and gender orientation of women, (v) influence of participants current body type on their clothing choices, and, (vi) tracing the changes in the participants clothing choices over the past few years.

1.4 Demographics of the Sample

The responses were collected using self-administered questionnaire from 110 respondents (aged 18-55 years) in Manchester, UK. Following the feedback from the piloting, alterations were made regarding wording and the sequence of questions thereby enhancing the response rate (Oppenheim, 1992). The ratio of younger women in age group 18-30 years and older women 31-55 years was 59:41.

Demographic data were collated. Age was an important factor when comparing body image perception and clothing preferences among the two age cohorts; 18-30 years (59%) and 31-55 years (41%). Respondents' religious backgrounds were explored: 48.4% (protestant), 14.3 % (Roman Catholic), Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim (less than 6% each). A majority (66%) were White British, 10 % were Europeans, 7% Indians and the balance 5 % were identified as other mixed category. For education, 35.1% were graduates, 19.6% were post-graduates, 16.5% had completed GCSE, 15.5% had completed A-levels and 11.3% had professional training. 25.3% earned less than £10000, 26.7 % earned £10000- £20000, 25.3% earned £20001- £30000, 10.7% earned £30001- £40000, 12% earned £40001 and above. Seventy five women responded to the item concerning their earnings. 61% of these received remuneration on a monthly basis, while 15% earned on a weekly and 12% earned on an hourly basis. This reflects the financial stability of the women and that a majority were involved in jobs of higher skill, as more senior jobs are almost always salaried. A majority of 63 % women were employed, while 27 % were students and about 5 % were housewives or did not work.

From the pool of respondents who completed the survey, fifteen women were interviewed. To explore body dissatisfaction, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 of the respondents in order to gain an understanding of the various factors that affect women's body image and clothing preferences.

1.5 Results

Women's feelings of body dissatisfaction can also be associated with unhappiness in finding apparel and clothing products that enhance their appearance. The women who were size 16 and above revealed that clothes available on high street were made for women of the 'ideal' size, usually considered UK size 10 or 12. Although some basic styles were available in the bigger sizes, most often fashionable clothes were available for smaller sizes. Four women indicated that their preference for a certain style of clothing could induce them to lose weight. Women claimed to be size 14 and above, experienced disappointment while

shopping as they would not be able to find clothes that fit them well and had limited selection available to them. Although the women who were size 16 and above had observed an increase in fashionable garments, they yearned to lose weight and wear UK size 10 or 12.

All the interviewees used clothes to either accentuate or conceal certain body features. As revealed by one of the respondents, *"I wear clothes to make me look thinner...during my fat days, I will wear something that covers more. I psychologically feel fat not that I actually have gained weight. I wear lot of layers or baggy clothes; if I feel fat then I wear thick tights to cover my legs. The days when I am more confident about myself, I would wear clothes that are more revealing"*. All the eight women had in the past bought clothes that they never wore because they felt that these did not project their self-image. For the older women, clothing choices were influenced by their body image as revealed by a respondent, *"Well I wouldn't dream of wearing a mini skirt right now, I stick to trousers and I wear long skirts occasionally and yes, it is dictated by my figure. I won't even go swimming because I am too embarrassed to wear my swimming costume"*. Women in the age group 31-55 years appeared to be more conscious of their lower body: hip, waist and thighs, which was similar to the concerns of the younger women in the age group of 18-30 years. Most women pointed out that they would prefer clothing that would not emphasise their thighs and hips. When prompted further, women in older age group of 30-55 revealed that younger women are likely to experience more pressure these days than women 20-25 years ago.

The importance of appearance is described by a respondent, *"My concept of control is being in control of how I look because people are going to judge to a great degree by the way you look or at least that is what women are told or taught"*. Using a bipolar scale, women were asked how important they considered clothing to be in a person's appearance. Only 30% of these respondents in the present study considered clothing to be the third most important factor in the appearance of a person, 16% considered it as second, 13% considered it as the most important, 11% considered it as fifth most important and 10% considered it as fourth most important.

1.5.1 Media and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with body image

In the present study women were asked about satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the body by indicating the media promoted 'ideal' figure, the figure they would like to have and their current figure type. The response on this question indicated the level of body satisfaction experienced by the respondent. Results revealed that 81% of women chose the skinny figure as the media promoted 'ideal' body type. 56% of women considered themselves to be of an average body type, 19% considered themselves as trim, 15% considered themselves as 'fleshy', 6% considered themselves as skinny and 4% considered themselves as obese. The much 'preferred' figure type was the 'trim' female body with 71% women having chosen this body type.

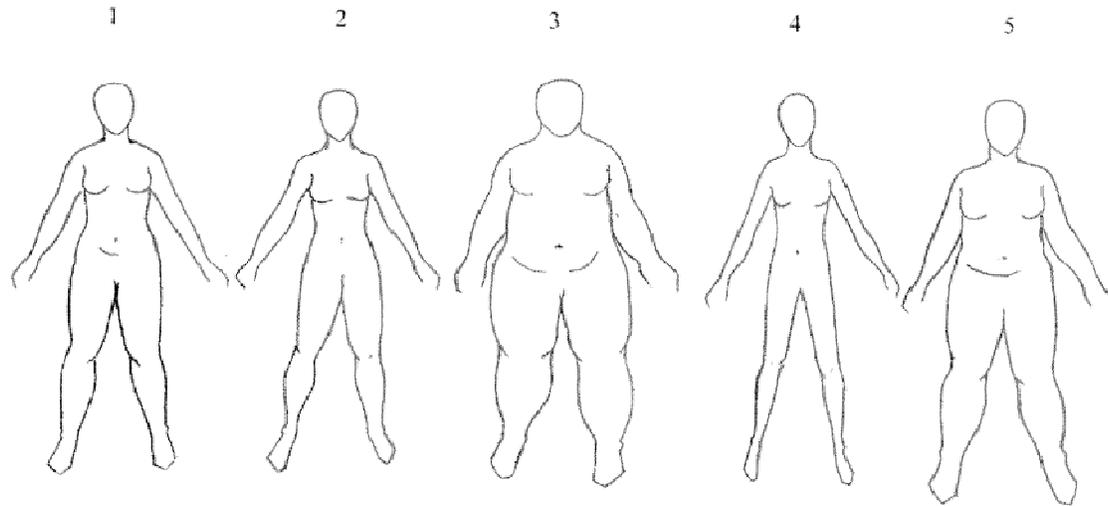


Fig. 1 Figure ideal versus current identification scale. *Visual cue used to identify body image dissatisfaction.*

All women in the younger age cohort reported that the figures idealised by media are that of young and skinny girls. Although the personal body ‘ideal’ chosen by the interviewees were that of glamorous women, an overwhelming majority of women thought that this body ‘ideal’ was not achievable, *“All these ideals that the media flashes are about young women. There are no standards for mature woman. Sort of making women wanting to hold on the youth, look younger, act younger and make them feel old very early”*. Criticising the role of media in objectifying women, one of the interviewees says, *“In general the media doesn’t always use men as sex symbol though, now that is changing, but women have always been portrayed as sex symbols”*.

All older women (31-35 years) chose the young and skinny girl as that promoted by the media. *“The magazines show perfect models. They don’t show real women like me who are curvaceous, buxom, and slightly overweight. That is why girls have anorexia and complexes about the way they look”*. One interviewee in the age group 49-55 years suggested, *“It could be helpful if media projected the women in my age group as attractive, at least women my age don’t have to look at these young women and feel ‘look at her and I am finished’”*. All women considered media to be an influential factor in creating an atmosphere where they are judged only by their appearance, *“It is easy to get influenced and affected by the media when you are constantly bombarded by the press and television”*.

The ‘ideal’ woman depicted in the media made these women to feel inadequate. Issues regarding self-esteem and self-confidence were recurring terms when the interviewees discussed body dissatisfaction. Women are torn between the popular ‘media created ideals’ and ‘self constructed ideals’. Even the women who claimed to be confident with their bodies said that they would prefer having a slimmer body type. *“I like to look at pictures like that and appreciate. I would like to be like that. I don’t know if I can but I would like to. I doubt if I can reach that perfection but then I also think how real is that picture or how much make up has been used on her?”*

1.5.1.1 TV programmes and stereotypes

Women stated that films frequently showed how an ordinary or unattractive girl is turned into a slim beautiful woman and this occurrence would coincide with her becoming successful and attractive, drawing the attention of a rich handsome man. From the interviews it was gathered that women believed that TV

promoted stereotype of young women and being slim is synonymous with being beautiful. Also women who are big are always portrayed as caricatured female characters on TV. The respondents also mentioned that TV soaps seldom show large women as successful women or a woman who can get the attention of a good looking man. One of the interviewees belonging in the age category of 49-55 years pointed out, *“you don't often see women of our age, unless they are caricatured. If they are middle aged then they are shown as brash or showy, they are exaggeratedly old, depressingly old and I think this increases the pressure on you to not be that kind of stereotype”*.

1.5.1.2 Magazines

The influence of the media, television and magazines in promoting body size consciousness among women regarding fashion, glamour, weight and health were explored. From the questionnaire responses of the current study, it was gathered that 64% women believed media promoted body image consciousness. Furthermore, 58% respondents agreed that glamour was the primary focus of these magazines, followed by 57% respondents who believed magazines promoted weight consciousness and lastly, 54% respondents acknowledged that magazines also drew attention to health.

1.5.2 Issues related to body weight

Tiggemann (2004) observes that individuals are held responsible for their body shape and weight in a way that they are not for their height, eye colour or size of their feet. A majority (90%) of women reported that obese people faced discrimination and 57% of the women had witnessed such discrimination. Also 76 % of the respondents feared weight gain and were weight-conscious as a result of these fears. It is interesting to observe that 74% of the respondent had also attempted dieting at some point of time. Questionnaire data revealed that only 31.9% of the women had considered body enhancing and altering treatments and the same percentage of women reported that they might consider employing these treatments in the future.

Younger women (18-30 years) reported that they were conscious of their weight, always yearning to be thinner. The data from interviews in the current study shows that seven out of the eight women had tried dieting. These women were unhappy with their legs, hip, waist or bust size. One interviewee stated, *“Someone has said that there are no ugly women, only lazy women”*, indicating the importance placed on the relationship between beauty and women, where women seem to be held responsible for their appearance. This interviewee also placed a great deal of importance on approval from family and friends.

The interview data further indicates that women consider weight control an important factor in determining how one looks and feels good about ‘self’. Also it was evident that these women felt happier after losing weight as they could wear stylish clothes, leading to a sense of satisfaction in these women. *“I used to be lot bigger than I am and, luckily, I lost a lot of weight. Now, I can wear clothes that I have wanted for ages but before that I couldn't find anything that looked good on me, even if it did fit me”*.

A picture of one slim celebrity was shown to the interviewees and unanimously all of them responded by suggesting that the body of the woman in the picture had been digitally manipulated. Women further pointed out that such body ideal was certainly not achievable by a common person. Most participants also stated that celebrities had personal trainers and lifestyles which an average person could not afford. One of the two women who were size 16 stated, *“I am not happy with my weight but I am dealing with my weight”*. This interviewee also revealed that in her family all women are size ‘medium’ referring to a similar body type to her own, *“I tell myself that I am fat because I don't eat right, because I eat too much, and at nineteen I know*

that if I want to lose weight then it depends on me". Many women experience social pressure to be thin which promotes unhealthy eating and weight loss practices. They also reported having been subjected to rude comments about their body weight.

Weight gain and control emerged as a major concern for the older women; five out of the seven indicated dissatisfaction with their current size and appearance. One of the women described her experience *"I am a reformed fat, I tried 'Weight Watchers' because I wasn't happy with my weight and I wouldn't go out. It is not physical, it is about your mind. You are as old as you think. I have a self-image that I am tall and slim and good looking. You can be really thin and you can look into the mirror and think you are fat"*.

1.5.3 Body enhancement and alteration treatments

Five of the eight younger women reported that they were not completely opposed to plastic surgery or other body alteration and enhancement treatments especially in the future. For them, self-esteem issues that occur due to aging could make them consider such treatments. However some women did not agree with this view. Side effects from such treatment were cause for concern. When older women were asked to express their opinion on plastic surgery, laser treatment and other such procedures; five out of seven women in this cohort reported that they would only consider such treatments for medical reasons. *"You get a plastic surgery to reconfigure your face, just to look younger or bit better is wrong. I think to be that vain is quite terrible in a way. Plastic surgery should belong to those victims like burn victims"*.

1.5.4 Aging and Clothing

Although women in the age group of 31-36 years thought that older women had many choices for clothing, the latter disagreed, *"I don't want baggy but I don't want tight either. Often, there aren't clothes for people my age. You either buy very sophisticated and expensive clothes, but that is not a lifestyle I live, so there isn't much in between the young clothes and old lady's clothes or the sort of expensive middle aged lady's clothes"*. Furthermore, these women suggested that clothes for younger women are cheaper than those for mature women and that synthetic instead of natural fabrics are used for the latter.

Women were asked about aging and clothing choices. Most of the women (31-36 years) felt that aging was not considered a stigma, *"I think women are lot more confident these days, I think it not about growing old, it is how you grow old"*. Women acknowledged that their clothing preference had changed. *"When I was younger I wore dresses and skirts now I don't wear skirts"*. It was observed that women were pressured to stay younger looking. When asked to state changes in their clothing preferences, women stated the tight-fitting garments used when they were young had been replaced with comfortable clothing as they matured. Several changes in the body shape and size take place during menopause and after and that the physical changes can be much apparent and sometimes drastic. Talking about the changing hormone levels that accompany menopause, one of the interviewees said *"Around 50 is when your body starts changing, your waist becomes bigger than it has been and it doesn't matter if you exercise or not, it just changes"*.

1.6 Conclusions

Findings of this study have revealed that majority (81.3%) of women in this study supported the idea that their clothing style was influenced by the reaction received from others (Barnard, 2002). Most women therefore dressed up for social occasions, especially when meeting with the opposite sex (Guy & Banim, 2000; Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002). Clothing provided psychological satisfaction for women. Larger women expressed dissatisfaction with clothing sizes available to them and also that smaller women were able to find

fashionable clothing more readily. Body size and image influenced their clothing choices; women who felt thinner were able to select fashionable clothing to reveal their body shapes.

For most women, clothing reflected their personality and their figures influenced their clothing types. Older women felt that there was a discrepancy between society's preferences of beauty and the physical changes that accompany aging. This view concurs with Tantleff-Dunn & Agliata (2001) regarding the incompatibility between aging and cultural concepts of beauty. The findings also agree with Tiggemann's (2004) in that women are held responsible for their weight and body shape. Clothing preferences for women are therefore the product of how they feel about their body size and image and societal influence including media projections of what is acceptable (Entwistle, 2000; Turbin, 2003). Women's preferences for clothing are therefore closely linked to how they feel about their bodies, how others in their cultural context react to them and how society including media projects the 'acceptable' body shape and size.

1.7 References

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