

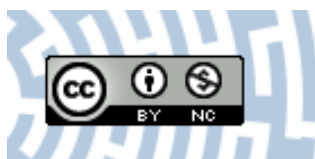


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**Title:** Sense of Personal Attractiveness, Perceiving Social Pressure on Attractive Appearance, Behaviour Leading to its Achievement among University Students

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## **Sense of Personal Attractiveness, Perceiving Social Pressure on Attractive Appearance, Behaviour Leading to its Achievement among University Students**

### **Abstract**

The aim of the study was to determine how university students perceive their personal attractiveness, how pressurized they feel into being up to the dominant ideals of body attractiveness and if they undertake actions aimed at shaping their appearance.

A cross-sectional design was used. A total of 257 university students (including 160 women) aged 19 to 27 (M 21.0 SD 1.70) were surveyed. The students completed questionnaires measuring perceived social pressure on attractive appearance, satisfaction with one's appearance and actions aimed at shaping one's appearance. The results suggest that the respondents are moderately content with their body images with more positive scores obtained by men. The parts of the body which are the source of disappointment in women are buttocks, hips, thighs and stomach while in men stomach and legs. What is interesting is that the women see the above-mentioned parts as too fat or shapeless whereas the men consider them too weak. The approval of the body image seems to depend on the level of social pressure under which the respondents are; however, the negative influence of the social pressure was noticed mainly by the women. A very low score has been observed in actions taken towards one's own body eg. physical activity, dieting, taking medicines or paramedicines and beauty sessions.

**Key words:** *body image, health education, young adults*

## **Introduction**

Human body is sometimes an object of care and attention or on the contrary an object of aggression or neglect. As many psychologists say, our body is the most fundamental sphere of our identity and at the same time a mirror of our emotional fears and tensions (Babiker, 2002).

The image of our own body is usually defined as “thoughts, observation and emotions concerning our bodies” (Papadopoulos, 2005). It means that the image is not identical with the objective perception of appearance but with the subjective one. The image is a constituent part of one’s personality and its character greatly decides about one’s state of mind and one’s attitude towards the world around. A positive image assures emotive balance,

Self-assurance and positive attitude towards others while a negative image evokes fear, bitterness or lack of adjustment (Papadopoulos, 2005). The image of one’s own body is created under the influence of many different factors, among which the most important are social factors.

One of the facts is that the canons of beauty have been changing throughout centuries, what is more, they differ from culture to culture as well.

As L. Papadopoulos (2005) says: in ancient China we would be worried about the size of our feet, consequently in 21<sup>st</sup> century England we are worried about outfits eg. we look too fat in our new pair of jeans.

In poorer cultures being thin/slim means poverty, improper nutrition or sickness and being plump is the sign of wealth and good health. In richer cultures good health and success is associated with being slim while obesity is associated with laziness and sickness. Nowadays we recognize a body which is exceptional, which in nature occurs very rarely

A very good example is the Barbie doll case, which seems to be one of the best recognized picture of a woman’s body that we impose onto young girls. While it has been proved that a woman with a Barbie doll body can never exist as she would not be able to keep her upright position and her internal organs would not work properly. We live in a world dominated by the obligation of beauty and perfection in which a negative body image threatens the sense of personal identity and value. Perceiving the body does not only concern our own bodies but also influences the conclusions we make about other people’s character traits based only on their appearance.

Unfortunately, many people equate having a slim, sun-tanned “ideal” body with self-discipline and emotional strength (Papadopoulos, 2005).

Nowadays the criteria of beauty are broadcast mainly by the media, especially through commercials. The authors of the commercials usually take advantage

of the fact a human being tends to imitate other humans commonly thought to be beautiful or attractive. In E. Aronson's (1995) opinion the more attractive the person advertising a product is, the more probably we are going to imitate his or her, as people whose appearance we admire have more influence on us than those less attractive ones. The investigations of M. Braun-Gałkowska (1997) show that imitating those who appear in commercials is not necessarily bound to only one feature.

It means that watching a commercial does not need to lead us to buying the product but can make one imitate the outfit, hairstyle or image of the model taking part in the commercial. What is more, the evoked emotions become part of the recipients' mental life influencing their attitudes and actions. The paradox of commercials is that show a false picture of reality in which unhealthy and full of calories products are presented by young, slim, attractive people, which makes us buy them. Finally we become more and more unhappy with our images (Melosik, 1999). Apart from the media the family attracts our attention towards body attractiveness. We are influenced by the judgments made by any family members, which generate particular emotions. The experience brought from home is usually the basis of deep negative thoughts in one's adult life. A. Carron (2003) who was organizing therapeutic workshops for girls with a negative image of their bodies, stated that the mothers of her female patients were seriously dieting, always talking about the necessity of keeping fit or were even encouraging their daughters to lose some weight. Similarly S. Minuchin (quote after Jablow, 2000) working with anorexics, came to the conclusion that some characteristic features occurred in their families which were: lack of distinction among the family members, over-care, avoiding conflicts, lack of acceptance of any changes, involving children in parents' problems.

Those features determined the way of perceiving the world and of course the body. Finally, the social environment influences an adolescent person's attitude towards his or her own body. In this period of our life we always compare ourselves with others. The image of our body is more endangered when we make friends with people who we consider attractive and so we start comparing ourselves with them. The comments given by our friends greatly influence our image of attractiveness. Negative judgments, teasing, ironic remarks about one's body become the source of frustration and fears while positive remarks positively influence self-esteem. (Papadopoulos 2005). The aim of the study was to determine how university students perceive their personal attractiveness, how pressurized they feel into being up to the dominant ideals of body attractiveness and if they undertake actions aimed at shaping their appearance.

## **Material and methods**

A diagnostic pool method of research was adopted. The sample consisted of 257 students (including 160 women) from two universities in Katowice – the Academy of Physical Education (AWF) and The Department of Pedagogy and Psychology of the University of Silesia (UŚ). The respondents' age ranged from 19 to 27 (M 21, SD 1.70). They filled in an anonymous questionnaire stocked up in 5-point Likert scale (1=definitely do not agree, 5=definitely agree). The questionnaire consisted of three subscales: 1) perceived social pressure on attractive appearance – 11 items e.g. “In our society, to be regarded as physically attractive, one should be slim and athletic”, “Having a well shaped-body makes people more competitive on the job market”; 2) satisfaction with one's appearance – 7 items e.g. “I am satisfied with my body appearance”, “I have got complexes about my appearance”; 3) actions aimed at shaping one's appearance – 13 items e.g. “I do physical exercises to get slim”, “I do slimming diets”. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed by the method of internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha, accepting according to A. Sokołowski and A. Sagan (1999), that value  $\alpha = 0.60$  is a threshold above which the tool is considered reliable. All the three subscales reached this criterion achieving values  $\alpha = 0.76$ ,  $\alpha = 0.78$  and  $\alpha = 0.83$ , respectively. The questionnaire was additionally stocked up in two open-ended questions: 1) Are you particularly dissatisfied with any parts of your body? With which? Why? What would you change in them? 2) Are you particularly satisfied with any parts of your body? With which? Why?

In the quantitative analyses descriptive statistics, analysis of variance (ANOVA), the regression analysis and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were used. All calculations were executed in Statistica 5.0 PL.

## **Results**

The respondents declared a neutral level of satisfaction with their own appearance (M 3.35 SD 0.68). However, as expected, the attitude toward one's own body was more positive among men than women ( $3.60 \pm 0.48$  and  $3.21 \pm 0.74$ ;  $p = 0.000$  respectively). The means, standard deviations and gender differences in the means are shown in Table 2.

The analysis of the obtained qualitative data showed that among women only 17 out of 127 (13.39 %), who answered the open-ended questions and expressed their opinion, declared full satisfaction with their appearance, eg. “I accept myself 100% because if we accept ourselves, life is much easier”, “I feel well in my body and I expect others will accept me because I do not estimate them for their appearance”,

“I am satisfied, I exercise a lot, but only because I like it. In the future I would like to be a fitness instructor”, “I like my body, maybe it is not an ideal one, but I try not to bring imperfections to my attention, what for?”, “In general I am very satisfied with my body, but nowadays having a beautiful body is very important. I am the kind of person who cares for myself and my body”.

Among body parts that the female respondents were the most dissatisfied with were especially buttocks, hips and thighs (n=55, 43.31%) followed by abdomen (n=36, 28.35%). The reasons for this dissatisfaction were mostly their size (in the respondents' opinion usually too big) and shape (for example, slenderness of the hips), for example “I am dissatisfied with my thighs, hips and buttocks because I think they should be smaller (mode slender)”, “I am dissatisfied with my legs, I would rather they had a better shape”, “My abdomen - because I have a tendency to keep fat in this part of my body, it should be somewhat smaller”. What was interesting, only somewhat over 6% of the respondents (n = 8) were dissatisfied with the body part which is considered a strong symbol of feminine sexual attractiveness and for this reason most often modified through plastic surgery – the breasts. Six students considered them as too small (e.g. “I would like to have larger breasts”, “the breasts are too small”), while the remaining as too large and/or shapeless (“my breasts are too large and shapeless”, “abdomen, thighs and breasts - they are too large, I want to reduce their size”). The remaining body parts that were mentioned as causing dissatisfaction were: face (nose, skin, teeth, ears), feet, back, arms and hands, and some respondents treated their body as a whole, not mentioning specific parts (e.g. “all parts of my body are too fat”, “generally none feminine shape”) or mentioned their height (e.g. “I would like to be taller”).

Over one hundred female respondents answered the question concerning the body parts with which they are especially satisfied. The most frequently mentioned were legs (e.g. “my legs, because they are long and straight”, “I like my calves, because they are well shaped”; n=29, 23.2%), face (eyes, mouth, e.g.. “I like my eyes, I think they are »ornament« of my face”, “face – it is nice and smiling”; n=27, 25.71%) and abdomen (“I like my abdomen very much, because with little effort it looks nice, especially in summer”, “my abdomen – it is firm”; n=22, 17.6%), followed by breasts (“my breasts are well shaped and fit the rest of my body”; n=16, 12.8%), arms (“my arms because they are slender and slightly muscular”; n=13, 10.4%), buttocks (“bottom – nice shape”; n=8, 6.4%).

Among the male students only 27 respondents (27.8%) declared dissatisfaction with specific aspects of body-build. In ten cases (37.0%) it was not muscular enough and cut abdomen (eg. “abdominal muscles are too weak and not visible”, “I don't like my abdomen, it is too fat), in seven cases (25.9%) legs (eg. “I have too much fat and too small muscles in my legs”), and in the remaining cases face (nose,

teeth), height, arms and backs. The majority of the statements regarding satisfaction concern “the whole” body (eg. “I think that my body is close to optimal”, “I am satisfied with all the parts of my body”). Only 15 people indicated particular body parts, within which stomachs were the most frequently mentioned ( $n = 5$ ), and the remaining were shoulders, legs, chest, buttocks and penis.

The level of the perceived social pressure on attractive appearance was moderate and no gender differences were identified (females  $3.26 \pm 0.54$ , males  $3.30 \pm 0.54$ ;  $p = 0.497$ ). The lowest mean was observed in actions at shaping one’s appearance, where a trend toward significant differences between the sexes was observed (females  $1.95 \pm 0.51$ , males  $1.83 \pm 0.58$ ;  $p = 0.088$ ).

Some interesting data were obtained when regression analyses were performed and regression coefficients obtained for both sexes compared with the aid of the tests of parallelism (ANCOVA). Among both sexes a significant decrease of satisfaction with one’s appearance is observed with increasing perceived social pressure on attractive appearance. At the same time, an increase in both the above-mentioned variables was accompanied by an increase in actions aimed at shaping one’s appearance. The only difference between regression coefficients calculated for female and male students appeared in relation to the influence of perceived pressure on the level of satisfaction ( $p=0.006$ ) – while in the males an increase in the perceived social pressure by 1 unit causes decrease in satisfaction with one’s appearance of 0.39, in the female it is nearly twice as high (cf. Table 2).

## **Discussion**

The canons of body attractiveness shape humans attitudes towards self-attractiveness. Dominating culture denominates not only the place of attractiveness in important- non important human feature scale but also defines the notion of appearance attractiveness. In M.M. Marzano-Parisoli’s (2001) opinion the unknown in history generality of attractiveness patterns is the specification of today. The idealization of attractiveness made the patterns of beauty abstract and non-existent whereas the myth of full control over the body is still existent. Control of this type is identified with an ability to control one’s own life as an ideally young, slim body became ‘not only an esthetic but also ethic marker’ (p. 220) symbolizing and conditioning success, self-control and high social- economic status as well as love, power, respect and self-esteem. The authors of “Self-Esteem and Body Image” report say that “body attractiveness has so much value that it may become one of the most important factors influencing people’s self-esteem feelings” (Canadian Medical Association 1995, p. 607).



High disapproval of one's own body leads to eating disorders, social fears, depression, etc. (Rieves, Cash, 1996) One of the best means of transition of cultural patterns concerning body attractiveness are- beside close family and friends - the mass-media, whose influence has been severely criticized in "Eating Disorders, Body Image and the Media" a report prepared by the British Medical Association. Criticising the image of a perfect body presented by the media, the association urged to present more realistic body images (Morant 2000). The influence of the media on the level of acceptance of one's own body has been generally noticed among women. Men are not as much influenced by the media as women, which does not mean that the problem does not concern them at all.

"More and more men are under the social influence to obtain well-shaped, muscular mezomorphic body" (Grogan, 1999 p. 19). It should be stressed here that the process of shaping images described above starts at a young age, when the transmission of body patterns is acted with the help of toys (vide Barbie dolls for girls, action toys for boys) followed by teens magazines, cartoons on TV, etc.

All in all, the dissonance between the actual body and the image of it is observed as early as at the level of nursery school children- the toddlers (Ambrosi-Randic 2000). A.E. Field et al. (1999) say that the importance of being slim among young children and watching slim actresses and models on TV and in magazines made 8-14 year old girls start using vomiting and pledging products (Field et al. 1999). Considering the role of recognition of human attitudes towards one's own body, as well as their predictors and implications towards healthy lifestyle, the investigations made are very important in current pedagogy and health psychology in the world. There is still too little research done in Poland though. Our investigation was aimed at answering a question how young people from two different universities of Katowice perceive their bodies and how high the social pressure is concerning the body image.

Do these factors make young people act accordingly to change the body shape? Is there a distinction between men and women as far as body image is involved? The obtained data suggest that young people are moderately content with their body images. It has been also noticed that men are happier with their bodies than women, which confirms the previously presented opinions (eg.: Rieves, Cash 1996, Grogan 1999, Marzano-Parisoli 2001).

The conclusions were based on the quantity and quality data analysis. The parts of the body which are the source of disappointment (among women) are buttocks, hips, thighs and stomach and (among men) stomach and legs. What is interesting is that women see the above-parts mentioned as too fat or shapeless while men consider them too weak. The approval of the body image seems to depend on the level of social pressure under which the respondents are. Although the level of the



social pressure was nearly the same both on women and men, the negative influence of the social pressure was noticed mainly among the women. A very low score was observed in the section of the questionnaire measuring actions taken towards one's own body, eg. physical activity, dieting, taking medicines or paramedicines and beauty sessions.

The result obtained suggest that these types of actions are rarely taken by the respondents. However, the conclusions stated here are limited due to the fact it was not possible to distinguish the different actions categories.

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics (average and standard aberration)**

Variable	average	SD	1	2	3
1. Satisfaction	3.35	0.68	-	-.48	-.39
2. Pressure	3.27	0.54		-	.42
3. Action	1.90	0.27			-

**Table 2: Descriptive statistics, differences between women and men (test t)**

Variable	Women	Men	test tdf=257	p
1. Satisfaction	3.21±0.74	3.60±0.48	4.70	0.000*
2. Pressure	3.26±0.54	3.30±0.54	0.68	0.497
3. Action	1.95±0.51	1.83±0.58	-1.71	0.088**
4. Global index	2.80±0.25	2.91±0.29	3.17	0.002

\* Cochran – Cox test was used to estimate this variable (due to not meeting the condition of variance equality according to this variable)

\*\* liability to relevant differences

**Table 3: The results of multiple regression analysis**

Regression	Women	Men	ANCOVA
pressure – satisfaction	F(1, 160) = 69.60, p = 0.000 B = -0.76, t = -8.34, p = 0.000	F(1, 97) = 22.42, p = 0.000 B = -0.39, t = -4.73, p = 0.000	F(1, 255) = 7.59, p = 0.006
pressure – action	F(1, 160) = 27.07, p = .000 B = .36, t = 5.20, p = .000	F(1, 97) = 29.81, p = .000 B = 0.52, t = 5.46, p = 0.000	F(1, 255) = 1.87, p = 0.173
satisfaction – action	F(1, 160) = 31.40, p = 0.000 B = -0.28, t = -5.60, p = .001	F(1, 97) = 13.61, p = 0.000 B = -0.42, t = -3.69, p = 0.000	F(1, 255) = 1.35, p = 0.246

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