

Gender and Regional Differences in Body Image Dissatisfaction in Modern University Students: A Pilot Study in Two Cities of Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT

Complex anthropological and psychological study of the university students was carried out in two regions (the cities of Moscow and Tiraspol) with the aim to reveal gender and regional differences of body image dissatisfaction and their connection with the body build. 502 individuals (187 males and 315 females) aged from 17 to 25 years were investigated. The program included anthropometric measurements (height and weight, with further calculation of Body Mass Index – BMI), evaluation of body mass components, as well as psychological testing with Stunkard's silhouette scale and the Situational Inventory of Body-Image Dysphoria (SIBID). It was found that among the representatives of both sexes the level of dissatisfaction with their own body is relatively similar (69% of males and 67% of females). However the girls were mostly dissatisfied with their excessive, as they perceived, body mass (83% of the total number of dissatisfied individuals) while the boys were dissatisfied mostly because of their underweight (60% of the total number of dissatisfied individuals). Besides, the girls were more likely to exaggerate their weight while the boys perceived it as smaller than it really was. In girls certain social influences had more impact on body image dissatisfaction than in boys. Among the girls studied, the Muscovites were more critical to their own physical appearance, which resulted in lower self-assessment of their body image and, consequently, in less positive influence of this assessment on the quality of life compared to the girls from Tiraspol.

Key words: *body image dissatisfaction, self-assessment of physical appearance, body mass index, body build, young generation, Moscow, Tiraspol*

Introduction

In all times people were interested in how they looked like. They made special efforts to improve their appearances according to the beauty canons prevailing at a particular historical or cultural period. However, in modern society due to the increased role of visual culture and increased possibilities for visual representation of different aspects of human life functions, human physical appearance is becoming particularly important. More than ever, people are concerned of how they look like in real life and in media space. In the context of unrealistic stereotypes of physical attractiveness being widely spread by mass media, this concern becomes the reason of a steady increase in dissatisfaction with their body image among young people^{1, 2}.

Negative emotions towards people's own physical appearance became quite common³. However, if such a situation is being considered as «normal», there is a risk of its underestimation.

It is shown in the numerous studies that negative perception of one's own body has a negative influence on human psychic and physical health, becomes a cause of low self-esteem, increased anxiety, depression, distorted food behavior, body dysmorphic disorders^{4–6}. In one latest study it was found that perceiving one's own weight as «overweight» was significantly associated with increased 10-year risk of a cardiovascular event when compared to those perceiving their weight to be «about right», regardless of body composition⁷.

Besides, such an attitude serves as a trigger to potentially dangerous forms of behavior directed to the improvement of one’s own body⁸, such as special training programs, destructive practice of weight control, surgical interventions⁹.

Before starting the study of variations in self-assessment of body image, it is necessary to evaluate real morphological status of each individual, to assess if subjective perception of one’s own body really relates to certain anthropological characteristics, how close it is to reality, and if dissatisfaction with physical appearance is based on real reasons or caused by sociocultural influences and/or by specific personality features. In this connection, only an interdisciplinary approach with simultaneous investigation of both anthropological and psychological traits could be considered as the most optimal one.

Up to now a lot of data have been accumulated in the relevant literature dealing with the associations between subjective perception of one’s own appearance and individual morphological characteristics^{10–16}. The results of these studies demonstrate that in certain life situations distress associated with one’s physical appearance may have particularly negative impact on social adaptation of a person^{13, 17}.

Most of the studies dealing with morphological precursors of physical appearance self-assessment were performed on children and adolescents. However, bearing in mind the importance of body image in self-identification and social behavior of modern young generation, it is necessary to understand the nature of combined variation in the pattern of physical appearance self-assessment and morphological characteristics in a particular group. This is exactly what the present study is aimed at, and what determines its current importance.

Materials and Methods

Materials collected in the course of complex anthropological and psychological investigations of students in different universities of Moscow and Tiraspol were used in this study. The investigations were performed in May–December 2018 in accordance with bioethical principals (expert agreement of Bioethical Committee of Lomonosov Moscow State University, application N 22-ch, protocol N 55 of 26.03.2015). Informed consent protocols were signed by each participant, all obtained data were depersonalized.

Total number of the individuals under study consisted of 502 persons – 187 males and 315 females aged from 17 to 25 years. In Moscow 111 girls were studied, mostly of Russian ethnicity (89.2%). In Tiraspol – 391 individuals, among them 187 young males and 204 young females of Russian (47.2%) and Moldovan (39.1%) ethnicities.

The program of anthropological investigation included height and weight measurements taken according to the standard protocol¹⁸.

To evaluate the relationship between height and weight Body Mass Index (BMI) was calculated according to the following equation

$$BMI = m/h^2,$$

where *m* = weight (kg), *h* = height (m).

BMI values were classified in accordance with WHO recommendations¹⁹ (Table 1).

TABLE 1
BMI CLASSIFICATION AS RECOMMENDED BY WHO¹⁹

Category	BMI, kg/m ²
Underweight	≤ 18.4
Normal weight	18.5 – 24.9
Overweight	25.0 – 29.9
Obesity	≥ 30

Psychological testing was accomplished with the following methods:

- 1) The Stunkard Scale or Figure Rating Scale to determine dissatisfaction of a person with his/her own body and to evaluate how accurate an individual perceives his or her own physical appearance^{20,21};
- 2) SIBID questionnaire (Situational Inventory of Body-Image Dysphoria) for assessment of the frequency of negative body-image emotions across specific situational contexts^{22,23}.

The silhouette scale or Stunkard scale was developed in 1983 with the purpose to reveal and assess the level of dissatisfaction with one’s own body in men and women²⁰. It still remains in use as the most reliable and valid one among similar psychological techniques developed later²¹. The assessment of body image dissatisfaction with the Stunkard scale is based on the differences in rating of silhouette figures with different body shape. The scale consists of nine silhouette figures (one set for each sex group) (Figure 1) increasing in size from very thin (a value of 1) to very obese (a value of 9). (Figure 1)

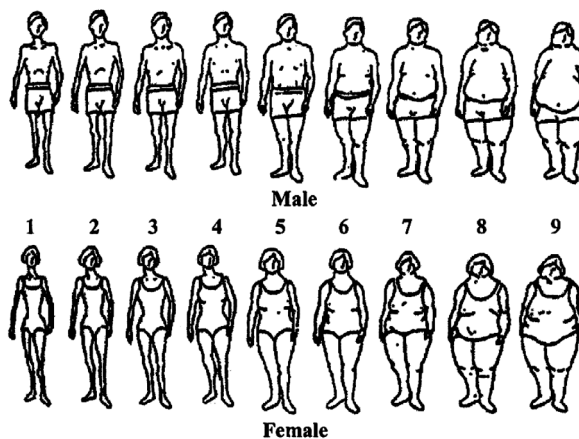


Fig. 1. The Stunkard Scale²⁰.

The participants were asked to choose among the figures of their own sex set, the one that from their point of view was most similar to their own appearance (a «real» figure). Then they were asked to choose the figure that they would like to have (an «ideal» figure). The difference between the real and ideal choice determined Body Image Dissatisfaction (BID). BID value may equal zero, in which case the respondent does not experience any dissatisfaction with his or her body size. Negative or positive BID values demonstrate dissatisfaction with one's own body due to insufficient or excessive weight, respectively. Moreover, the silhouette scale also allows assessing the reality of body perception, the relationship between body image perception and actual BMI.

SIBID questionnaire (Situational Inventory of Body-Image Dysphoria)²³ translated into Russian and successfully adapted to Russian studies²² helps to reveal social contexts, which could provoke negative attitudes towards one's own body image and concern about physical appearance, as well as to assess the degree of susceptibility of a person to socially induced evaluations of his or her physical appearance.

The test contains twenty assertions, each describing the situation which a person regularly confronts with (meeting new people, being with attractive people of one's own or the opposite sex, buying new clothes, thinking about one's own physical appearance at the old age etc.). Then the subjects were asked to rate the frequency of negative emotions towards one's own appearance with the scale of ratings from 1 to 4 in each category. Then the ratings summed up and the mean was calculated, which then was transformed into dummies. The higher the mean score is the greater is the situational dissatisfaction with one's body image.

Statistical analysis was performed with the software «STATISTICA 10.0». To check for normality of the distribution of psychological characteristics the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used. Significance of differences between means and standard deviations in two groups was established with Student's t-test and Mann-Whitney test, and in some samples – with one-way ANOVA and its non-parametric equivalent – analysis of variance in ranks, or Kruskal-Wallis test. In those cases when non-random intergroup differences were found, Scheffe's method of multiple comparisons was used²⁴.

Results

In Tiraspol representatives of different ethnic groups were investigated. For that reason before starting of comparative analysis it was necessary to check if the differences between means in psychological characteristics were non-random. The results revealed random differences both in male and female groups. Basing on this conclusion, further analysis was performed for combined ethnic group for males and females of Tiraspol.

Dissatisfaction with one's own body was approximately the same between young males and females of Tiraspol. Thus, 33.3% (68 individuals) among females and 31.5%

(57 individuals) among males were satisfied and 66.7% (135 individuals) and 68.5% (124 individuals) dissatisfied, correspondingly.

However, despite of this similarity, the causes of dissatisfaction with physical appearance were significantly ($p < 0,001$) different in male and female groups (Figure 2). Young men were mostly dissatisfied because in their opinion they were underweight (59.7%), while young women – because they were overweight (82.9%) (Figure 2)

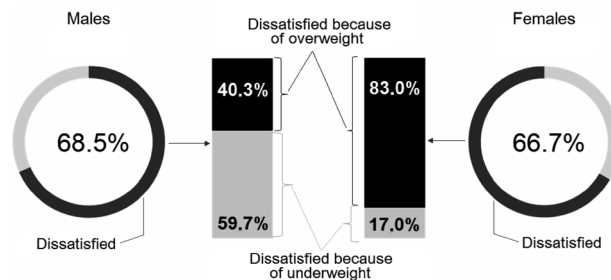


Fig. 2. Proportion of males and females dissatisfied with their body image because of under- or overweight.

Regional differences in the proportion of girls satisfied and dissatisfied with their physical appearance were not found: 69.1% and 66.7% of those examined in Moscow and Tiraspol, were dissatisfied with their body image, and the reason of this dissatisfaction was in both cases their overweight (Figure 3).

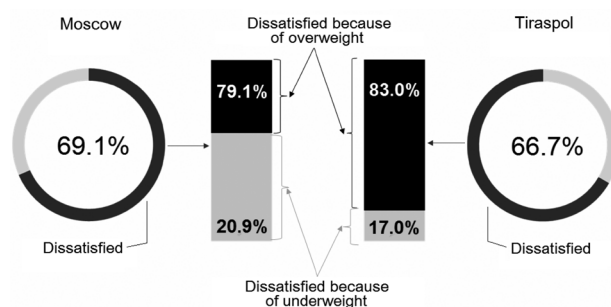


Fig. 3. Proportion of girls dissatisfied with their body image in Moscow and Tiraspol.

In order to understand if there were real reasons for such dissatisfaction, anthropometric characteristics were compared in the groups of satisfied and dissatisfied individuals. Males in the Tiraspol sample and females in both groups revealed significant differences: both males and females dissatisfied with their bodies because of overweight really had bigger values of weight and BMI compared to other groups (Table 2).

As there were no significant differences found either in the proportion of individuals satisfied and dissatisfied

with their physical appearance or in mean values of the morphological traits between the two female groups (Moscow and Tiraspol), those groups were combined for further analysis (Figure 3, Table 2). (Figure 3)

TABLE 2

MEAN VALUES OF THE MORPHOLOGICAL TRAITS IN THE GROUPS OF SURVEYED MALES AND FEMALES WITH DIFFERENT ATTITUDE TO THEIR BODY IMAGE

	Tiraspol males			Tiraspol females			Moscow females		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
BMI, kg/m ²	23.98	26.28	20.26	20.13	22.96	18.47	19.91	22.83	18.44
Height, cm	176.7	177.5	176.8	163.1	164.6	162.3	166.4	164.6	165.4
Weight, kg	71.2	83.0	63.4	53.4	62.2	46.6	55.2	61.8	50.4

1 – Satisfied, 2 – Dissatisfied because of overweight, 3 – Dissatisfied because of underweight

Proportions of individuals satisfied or dissatisfied with their body image depending on their own BMI are presented in Figures 4 and 5.

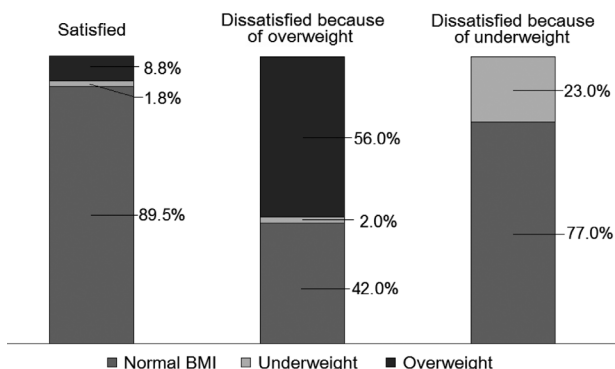


Fig. 4. Proportion of the Tiraspol males with different BMI satisfied and dissatisfied with their body image.

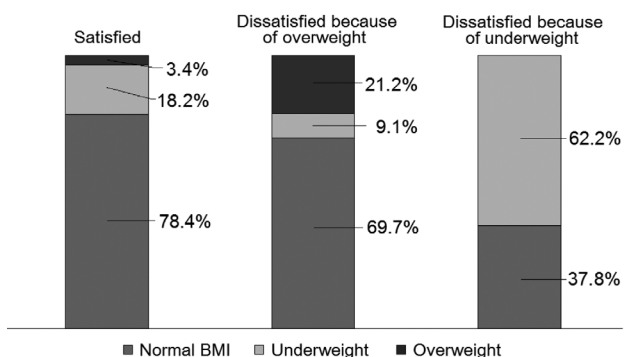


Fig. 5. Proportion of girls with different BMI satisfied and dissatisfied with their body image.

Among males satisfied with their body, the majority had normal BMI (89.5%), 8.77% were overweight and 1.7% – underweight. It was also shown that among males dissatisfied because of their excessive weight, 56% were really overweight.

It is also worth noting that among those who were dissatisfied because of their insufficient to their opinion body mass, 77.03% had normal BMI, and only 23% were underweight. (Figure 4)

Most of the girls satisfied with their body image had normal BMI (78.4%). However, in contrast to the males, 18.2% of the satisfied girls were underweight. Among those girls who were dissatisfied because of the excessive, to their opinion, weight, 21.2% were really overweight while 69.7% had BMI values within normal ranges and 9.1% were even underweight. Among those girls who were dissatisfied because of their insufficient body mass, the majority (65.2%) really had low BMI but not normal as in case of the males (Figure 5).

Mean values of the characteristics of situational dysphoria (SIBID) were 0.95 for the males and 1.25 for the females. Thus, the level of situational dissatisfaction was significantly higher in girls (p<0.01). It means that women in the context of different life situations are more critical to their physical appearance than men and more often are not happy of how they look like.

Mean value of the SIBID scores in Moscow girls was 1.45, significantly higher than in their Tiraspol peers with the mean score of 1.25 (p<0.05), which showed higher dissatisfaction of Moscow girls with their body image.

In Table 3 the ratings of situational dysphoria for males and females with different BMI are given.

Discussion

The results of this study on the proportion of individuals with different level of body image dissatisfaction and its gender variability correspond with those published by other researchers^{4, 16, 25–27}. It is evident that the pressure of social stereotypes in relation to physical attractiveness is almost the same for men and women in modern society. However negative emotions in women are mostly connected with their divergence from the predominant canon of thinness, while in men – with their inconsistency to the ideal muscular body.

The results obtained in this study showed that most of the girls were not happy because of their overweight despite of their real somatic status. This type of behavior expressed in a constant wish to become thinner, so called «drive for thinness», is universal for women of different ages living in different countries^{28, 29}. Even when their weight is normal or – what is more dangerous – can be classified as underweight, women still try to lose weight, as was demonstrated in our study.

It should also be noted that among women the proportion of those who were satisfied with their body image in spite of being underweight, was higher as compared to men. Similar results were obtained by other authors^{4,30}.

TABLE 3
MEAN VALUES OF THE SIBID SCORES IN MALES AND FEMALES WITH DIFFERENT BMI

Group according to BMI value		<18.5 kg/m ²	18.5 -24.9 kg/m ²	>25.0 kg/m ²	Level of significance	
					ANOVA	Kruskal-Wallis test
Tiraspol	Males	1.29	0.87	1.13	p<0.01	p<0.01
	Females	1.16	1.23	1.46	p=0.25	p=0.18
Moscow	Females	1.33	1.46	1.68	p=0.42	p=0.53

Evidently, that underweight women positively percept their weight and body shape, do not show any dissatisfaction with their physical appearance and do not want any changes. It occurs because they are close to the modern ideal of leptosomic body structure and are positively assessed by their surroundings. While women long for a slim figure, men want to have more massive body. According to the present study, young men were mostly dissatisfied with their body image when they were underweight. Obviously, not only an increase in body mass was important for the youngsters but mainly — stronger muscles development (*drive for muscularity*)^{29,31}.

Practically identical percentages of girls satisfied or dissatisfied with their body image in Moscow and Tiraspol demonstrate that dissatisfaction with one’s own physical appearance becomes an international trend^{32,33}, uprooted in the spreading of western ideals of beauty.

Majority of young males and females were realistic in their body assessment. However when the results for both sex groups were compared, it was shown that girls were more apt to overestimate their body mass than young men who in their turn, were more inclined to underestimate it. (Figure 6)

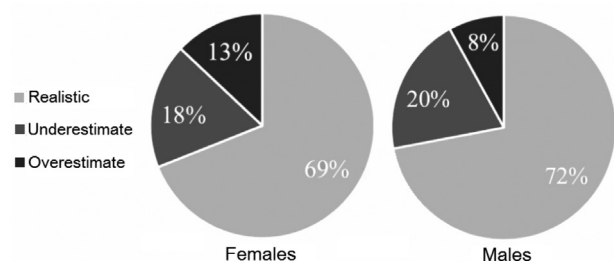


Fig. 6. Proportion of young men and women with realistic self-assessment, under- and overestimation of their body mass.

The tendency to non-realistic estimation of their body mass by women was already mentioned in some previous studies. It was shown that women were inclined to overestimate it^{30,34}. Underestimation of their body mass by young men could be explained either by the fact that males were less attentive to their weight than females^{27,30,35}, or by their wish to have bigger weight mostly due to their muscle development³⁴.

The results obtained in the present study for the estimation of situational dysphoria (SIBID) are in accordance with those from the previous researches^{36,37}. It was demonstrated that women’s physical appearance turned to be an object of discussion and practical evaluation more often than that of men. As a result, women are more anxious than men about how they look like³⁸. Besides, men pay more attention to the looks of their romantic partners³⁹, and women themselves also think that physical appearance plays an important role in their lives and relationships⁴⁰. This social context becomes the reason for an increased critical attitude of women to their physical bodies, for the discomfort felt in certain life situations, particularly in those when body image is especially accentuated, and, consequently, becomes the cause of some special efforts in creating and maintaining of physical attractiveness³⁸.

The results of regional differences in the SIBID ratings indicate that Moscow girls in general were more critical to their physical appearance, while its influence on many aspects of their life was less positive compared to their peers from Tiraspol. This could be interpreted in terms of differences in the attitude towards one’s body image in the population of big cities and less urbanized places. As have been shown before^{33,41}, physical appearance and physical attractiveness are much more important for the inhabitants of megapolises than for those who live in small towns or rural villages. For the latter, social mobility is very limited but it sharply increases in the big cities. Megapolises’ dwellers communicate with a large number of different social partners, while those who live in less urbanized environment socialize with a limited circle of people, often not changing during the whole lifetime. To put it differently, the necessity to establish new relationships that are not based on family connections or old contacts, dictates the need to present oneself and one’s own appearance to unknown people. Thus, body image becomes an object of scrupulous attention as it is exactly physical parameters that are being evaluated in the first place during the introduction process. Or, in other words, the differences in the influence of self- assessed physical appearance on the quality of life between inhabitants of more or less urbanized places depend on their significance for establishing of social contacts.

Comparison of mean values in SIBID scores among the groups of individuals with different BMI (see Table

2) did not reveal any statistically significant differences for the young females. However there is a steady trend towards an increase in the SIBID scores both in Moscow and Tiraspol women with the increase of BMI values in the subsamples. More negative influence of body image self-assessment on the quality of life in the group of overweight girls is connected with social stigmatization of obesity and fatness, especially among women⁴². At the same time, more positive impact in the group of underweight young females can be explained by the fact that their leptosomic body build is more preferable in youth communities^{29,30}.

In the group of Tiraspol males, individuals with different BMI significantly vary from each other in the situational dysphoria scores, although the trend in this case is not the same as in girls. Situational dysphoria with body image is the highest in the contrasting groups of overweight and underweight youths, and the lowest – among the individuals with normal BMI values. In the latter, self-assessed body image brings favorable impact on different aspects of their life. Similar results were obtained by S.B. Austin and colleagues who found U-shaped connection between BMI and the level of body image dissatisfaction: young men with low and high BMI values were more dissatisfied than their counterparts with the average values⁴³.

The following explanation seems most plausible: individuals with the contrasting (“polar”) BMI values are more inconsistent with modern ideal of male’s physical attractiveness, which implies slender athletic body-build with well-developed muscles^{29,31}.

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Conclusions

The results of the present study showed that in both sex groups the proportion of individuals dissatisfied with their physical appearance was practically equal (69% males and 67% females). While women were mostly dissatisfied with their body because, in their opinion, they were overweight, for men the cause of their dissatisfaction was underweight. Specific social contexts had more impacts on females. Apparently, the pattern of subjective attitude towards physical appearance in young men and women is dominated by the prevailing stereotypes of male’s and female’s beauty. Among the examined females, the Muscovites were more critical to their body image. For that reason they had lower self-assessment of their physical appearance and its less positive influence on the quality of life than their peers from Tiraspol. The cause of the regional differences in the values of psychological characteristics between Moscow and Tiraspol girls was probably connected with the differences in life style patterns of young women in the megapolis and a smaller city.

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SPOLNE I REGIONALNE RAZLIKE U RAZINI NEZADOVOLJSTVA TJELESNOM SLIKOM KOD SVEUČILIŠNIH STUDENATA: PILOT STUDIJA U DVA GRADA ISTOČNE EUROPE

SAŽETAK

Složeno antropološko i psihološko istraživanje među studentima sveučilišta provedeno je u dvije regije (gradovi Moskva i Tiraspol) s ciljem utvrđivanja spolnih i regionalnih razlika u nezadovoljstvu tijelom i njihove povezanosti s tjelesnim statusom. Ispitana su 502 studenta (187 muškaraca i 315 žena) u dobi od 17 do 25 godina. Program je uključivao antropometrijska mjerenja (visina i težina, uz daljnji izračun indeksa tjelesne mase – BMI), procjenu komponenata tjelesne mase, kao i psihološko testiranje sa Stunkardovom skalom percepcije tjelesnog izgleda i Situacijskim upitnikom disforije zbog tjelesnog izgleda (SIBID). Utvrđeno je da je u oba spola razina nezadovoljstva vlastitim tijelom relativno slična (69% muškaraca i 67% žena). Međutim, djevojke su uglavnom bile nezadovoljne prekomjernom tjelesnom masom (83% od ukupnog broja nezadovoljnih ispitanica), dok su mladići bili nezadovoljni uglavnom zbog nedostatne težine (60% od ukupnog broja nezadovoljnih ispitanika). Osim toga, djevojke su češće preuveličavale svoju težinu, dok su je mladići doživljavali manjom nego što stvarno jest. U djevojaka su određeni društveni utjecaji imali više utjecaja na nezadovoljstvo vlastitom slikom tijela nego u dječaka. Među proučavanim djevojkama, Moskovljanke su bile kritičnije prema vlastitom fizičkom izgledu, što je rezultiralo nižom samoprocjenom slike tijela i posljedično negativnijim utjecajem ove procjene na kvalitetu života u usporedbi s djevojkama iz Tiraspolja.

