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Comparing the Effects of Body Image and BMI on Women's Romantic Relationships

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ABSTRACT

This literature review explores the relationship of how excess weight affects women's romantic relationships. Romantic relationship success has been assessed through the measures of body image and BMI. These similar measures of excessive weight were compared to determine the best measure/method to represent the relationship between excess weight and women's romantic relationships. The hypothesis stated that excessive weight (in terms of body image, and not BMI) would decrease the overall success of women's romantic relationships. Findings throughout this literature review have concluded that women have higher social pressure to be thin, women feel excess weight stigma more and this can result in worse body image, and that women who have worse body image due to excess weight are less likely to have successful romantic relationships. The main findings illustrated that the excessive weight measures of body image and BMI were related to romantic relationship success for women (whereas when body image decreased romantic relationship success decreased and when BMI increased romantic relationship success decreased overall); however, body image was found to be the better measure of excessive weight in looking at this relationship as the perception of weight was statistically significant in determining relationship success whereas BMI was not. Overall, the hypothesis was supported.

INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationships have proven to be an important social identifier not only on an individual level, but also on a societal level. The collective importance can be seen in everyday life through marriage incentives such as tax deductibles and health insurance benefits, the special media attention to celebrity couplings, and the not-so-subtle pressures on young women to get married and start a family. While this concept of an “ideal” romantic relationship may be encouraged widely, romantic relationships and their success can look very different depending on numerous factors. Previous research has agreed that one of the most important factors of romantic relationships is beauty or what are considered attractive traits in a particular culture (Paxton, Norris, Wertheim, Dunkin, and Anderson 2005). In fact, Paxton et al. (2005) claim, the “greater the departure from the current beauty ideal, the greater exposure to negative and teasing” which, in turn, serves to reinforce the importance of a culture’s beauty standards being upheld. These findings are further supported by the well-known Selection Hypothesis or Marriage Market Theory, which suggests that healthier people may be more likely to be selected into marriage and other romantic relationships; one such criterion for health includes “physical attractiveness” (Averett, Sikora, and Argys 2008; Goldman 1993; Laus, Almedia and Klos 2018). Overall, it appears that having attractive features can play a key role in determining relationship success; however, like many concepts in sociology, the connection does not stop there.

While it is true that many cultures around the world vary as to which traits are considered attractive, it is important to note that research examined in this literature review is composed primarily of those who could be considered Eurocentric study participants, and thus there is a distinct culture and beauty culture that exists within this group. In Eurocentric culture, it is a

commonplace understanding that the attainment and maintenance of beauty standards is something especially stressed on women (Smith 2012). Pressure to live up to beauty standards is thought to fall mostly on women as specifically physical attractiveness has “traditionally played an important role in attracting a mate” for women, and these traditional role ideologies still exist (Averett et al. 2008). Even beyond those seeking relationships, research has found that there is a far “stronger association between popularity and physical attractiveness for women” than for their male counterparts (Ambwani and Strauss 2007; Feingold 1990). One so-called quality women must attain to achieve this attractiveness is thinness.

According to Paxton et al. (2005), beauty standards for women manifest towards thinness; this result is often attributed to “men’s preference for slender physiques” in heterosexual preferences. This standard also exists as the view in general society, as Ambwani and Strauss (2007) stress, this is the cultural environment: one where constant “sexual objectification socializes to women to treat themselves as aesthetic objects” that must adhere to a male-centric beauty standard. Even for those who do not agree with the pressure they placed on them, they too “[internalize] others’ responses to their physical appearance,” conditioning them to this norm of thinness further (Ambwani and Strauss 2007). Additionally, these standards of thinness are deeply unattainable for many women do not fit into the cultural ideal of a thin body type.

In fact, it is becoming increasingly difficult for women to acquire thinness as average body shapes are continuously leaning towards getting bigger. “Research consistently documents dramatic increases in adult, adolescent, and child obesity over the last 30 years” Gutin (2018) claims according to data collected by Anderson and Butcher (2006). Obesity, normally understood as a category for excessive and unhealthy weight according to the Body Mass Index

scale, is a severe and timely health risk for much of the population (Gutin 2018; Saguy and Almeling 2008). In fact, obesity appears to be on the rise so much that some are even wondering if new standards might emerge for what is culturally and socially accepted to be “normal” or “average” in weight as even the “definition of obesity” becomes modernized (Gutin 2018; Reinecke 2012). Considering inclusive terms beyond obesity, this paper will be using the term “excessive weight” or “excess weight” to account for “abstract social views of weight”, as Reinecke (2012) calls it. Beyond health concerns, not ascribing to this ideal of thinness where one may have excess weight can lead to a lasting stigma that can be found in many aspects of everyday life for individuals. To the larger society, obesity may carry the meaning of being equivalent to an illness of health and morals where “obese individuals attain their ‘sick’ or ‘diseased’ status” (Gutin 2018). With such a negative stigma and pressures placed around beauty ideals for women, it is possible that women deemed obese or of excessive weight by societal standards may have greater difficulty attaining and maintaining successful romantic prospects.

This literature review intends to explore the relationship of how excess weight may affect women's romantic relationships. Previous research has generally used body image and/or BMI to study body weight. However, this literature review questions which of these two measures of excessive weight is more effective in representing excessive weight as an indicator of romantic relationship success. All in all, examining this relationship further will enhance a general sociological understanding of how being of excess weight, particularly for women, can impact romantic relationships. Like Laus et al. (2018) claim, there is more to discover about how romantic relationships relate to body image and BMI.

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

As has been established previously, attractiveness, particularly for women, is key to ensuring one is a desirable dating partner (Eastwick, Eagly, Finkle, and Johnson 2011; Laus et al. 2018; Smith 2012). Not only is this standard of attractiveness important to men, but it is equally important to women. For example, research has found that, unlike men, women's confidence in social interactions, like dating, is linked to self-ratings of attractiveness (Ambwani and Strauss 2007). Thus, if a woman is perceived as having greater attractiveness, they are more likely to have the confidence to initiate romantic relationships as they desire. Alternatively, studies have found that those who “perceive themselves as unattractive” tend to be much more likely to avoid “cross-sex interactions” and to engage less in “intimate social reactions” (Davison and McCabe 2005; Mitchell and Orr 1976; Nezlek 1988). Also, just as attractiveness can enhance relationship success, those who do not “fit the mold of prescribed attractiveness” are equally likely to be deemed as non-desirable partners or as less-desirable partners, and this can hurt their romantic prospects (Harris 1990; Reinecke 2012). Even though attractiveness in partners might spark a relationship, that alone is not necessarily what sustains a successful relationship.

There are important categories and characteristics of relationships that must be considered when trying to understand what a successful romantic relationship might look like. Some romantic relationship categories include non-cohabitation, cohabitation, those never married, those married, and those unmarried (Averett et al. 2008; Laus et al. 2018). It is equally important to look at how the quality of these romantic relationships are measured, as not all relationships are healthy. Some romantic relationship characteristics that can help determine relationship quality include length, satisfaction, commitment, passion, intimacy, support, trust, and partner respect. (Juarez and Pritchard 2012; Laus et al. 2018). Research from Fletcher and

Simpson (2010) and Connolly and Johnson (1996) establish that support from a romantic partner can predict positive relationship quality and has the overall tendency to improve the longer a relationship exists. Relationship trust was also found to predict relationship satisfaction, meaning that the greater trust partners had for each other, the greater the success of their relationship (Wieselquist 2009). These romantic relationship characteristics can help establish what is and is not successful for romantic relationships for most people in a culture. Determining these categories and characteristics of healthy romantic relationships is instrumental in understanding how excessive weight may impact one's romantic relationships.

EXCESSIVE WEIGHT STIGMA

To grasp the sociological importance of the research done on this topic, one must have a contextual understanding of what it can mean to have excess weight in society. As discussed above, stigma against people with excess weight exists. This stigma can additionally take on a physical form as “fat individuals are disliked, rejected, and ridiculed” in many different settings (Crandall 1994; Smith 2012). According to Reinecke (2012), it is not just that this stigma exists in one part of life but that it can seep into all aspects of life, such as personal character, perceived job worth, and perceived desirability as a romantic partner. Some ways in which excessive weight stigma can manifest include being teased by peers and family, being associated with the negative attributes of laziness and less competence by important connections like employers and doctors, and much more (Chen and Brown 2005). In terms of physical health, there are many risks; Averett et al. (2008) and Strum (2002) claim that obesity can be linked to several “chronic illnesses including diabetes, hypertension, asthma, heart disease, and cancer”. Furthermore, if an individual with excess weight is at the same time exposed to “smoking, heavy drinking, or poverty” these health conditions can present more negatively (Averett et al.; Strum 2002).

Research has continuously shown that there are “strong relationships” between “low self-esteem, depression, body dissatisfaction and disordered eating” (Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, and Muir 1999), meaning there are also severe mental health impacts for those who face this stigma directly. There is much to worry about around the health and safety of individuals of excessive weight.

Considering how excessive weight might apply to relationships, Smith (2012) explains that the main reason for negative stereotypes against women with excessive weight is that “[they] were perceived as physically unattractive.” Excessive weight stigma especially matters for women because “body esteem plays a less central role in men’s romantic and sexual relationship experiences than in women’s,” which makes the need to feel confident in bodies higher for women (Ambwani and Strauss 2007). Smith (2012) further reiterates that beauty is an important aspect of relationships and that “women are supposed to be attractive”, which can insinuate that “fat women” violate the mandate of beauty and in turn are “punished harshly” by failing in their romantic lives. In general, a consensus can be found that heavier women are considered less attractive than their thinner counterparts, and this can put them at jeopardy for attaining and maintaining successful romantic relationships (Smith 2012).

BODY IMAGE AS A MEASURE OF EXCESSIVE WEIGHT

The term “body image” in this context refers to the “perceptions and attitudes individuals hold about their bodies” (Davison and McCabe 2005). Research conceptualizes negative body image or body image dissatisfaction as “the negative subjective evaluation of one’s physical body” (Stice and Shaw 2002). The distinction body image offers as a measure of excessive weight is that it allows for consideration of the perception of an individual’s weight rather than relying on physical definitions of excessive weight. This measure leaves room for more variance

in social settings, such as how some might have skewed views of themselves because of body image despite actual body and weight, or as Reinecke (2012) suggests, “how much one believes they weigh and how much one actually weighs is not always consistent.”

The connection between that of excessive weight and poor body image can be seen through the findings of Lieberman, Gauvin, Bukowski, and White (2001) where weight and shape were found to be “important predictors of body esteem.” Therefore, it can be concluded that those with excess weight may tend to have a more negative body image. Additionally, in various studies, women were found to have an overall “lower level of body image satisfaction” and a “higher level of social physique anxiety” than their male counterparts, which solidifies the negative results of the pressures women face around constantly evaluating their bodies (Davison and McCabe 2005). Furthermore, body image is related to romantic relationships. Some researchers claim “negative body image may also be related to problematic sexual functioning” which can lead those with more negative views of their bodies to avoid sexual activities that individuals in romantic relationships may engage in (Davison and McCabe 2005; Faith and Schare 1993); this suggests that women with excessive weight have more negative body image which can result in less successful relationship endeavors.

Beyond logical support for this argument, there is support in much of the research reviewed. One study found that “body esteem and romantic love experiences” were related particularly for women in their quantitative data, and that “women suggested that body image...influences sexual relations in romantic relationships” supporting the idea that positive body image can result in successful romantic relationships (Amhwani and Strauss 2007). Particularly, this study found that trust had an especially significant association with body esteem (Ambwani and Strauss 2007). In another study looking at groups that participated much less in

romantic relationships, single participants were typically “more dissatisfied with their overall appearance” speaking to how those who have less romantic relationship success may have more negative body image (Laus et al. 2018). Furthermore, this study suggested that women were provided a “psychological buffer against societal pressures to attain a slim appearance” in “successful intimate relationships” (Laus et al. 2018). Laus et al.’s findings suggest that there is a relationship between positive body image and successful intimate relationships despite the exact causality being uncertain as it was admitted that they could both influence each other.

Additionally, Juarez and Pritchard (2012) found “a negative correlation between body image dissatisfaction and support” and a “negative correlation...between body image dissatisfaction and trust” in women. This finding speaks to how the relationship characteristics of support and trust were particularly influenced by body image perception and supports the claim of body image being a valid measure of excess weight.

BODY MASS INDEX AS A MEASURE OF EXCESSIVE WEIGHT

While body image is one way that excessive weight has been measured in research, there is also the equally commonly used quantitative measure of BMI. As mentioned before, BMI can be understood as a medical measure of one's height and weight combined to determine their relative health; BMI has been used to measure obesity to such an extent that it eventually was referenced as “*the* measure of obesity” (Gutin 2018). As this measure has a long history of use over 180 years, it has a reputation for demonstrating obesity in a comprehensive and consistent method (Gutin 2018). However, as Gutin (2018) warns, BMI is debated in terms of accuracy, and problems can emerge. One example of this is when BMI is *misused* to promote specific narratives about weight and health. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that BMI is a measure of healthy weight as a societal ideal and is not without its flaws when used in different situations

(Gutin 2018). In considering all benefits and drawbacks of BMI, Gutin (2018) was able to determine that there were still important “insights gained from its use in aggregate analyses of population health”. In this context, it can be assumed that BMI offers a reasonable assessment of the relationship between weight and romantic relationships by representing excessive weight measures in large groups.

As has been shown, BMI can be useful in representing excessive weight alone through its categorization of obesity ranges. Beyond the measure itself, it can be demonstrated that “higher BMI consistently predicts greater body dissatisfaction” (Paxton et al. 2005; Wetheim, Paxton, and Blaney 2004). According to further research, there is also a connection between BMI and romantic relationships as medically “overweight women were less likely to be dating than their [normal-weighted] peers,” and that weight was further “negatively correlated with satisfaction in women” (Laus et al. 2018). Through this, it can be reasoned that BMI could predict individuals of excessive weight’s romantic relationship success with higher BMI correlating with less romantic relationship success.

While BMI may appear to be a good indicator of relationship success with the research above, there were also conflicting findings for this argument. For example, one study found that there was a “significant difference in the proportion of girls who reported ever having a boyfriend according to BMI category.” Looking from a distance, this finding would appear to indicate support for the argument in favor of BMI as a measurement of excess weight as one would expect a higher BMI indicating less dating. However, the study instead found it was the “thinnest girls” who were least likely to “report ever having had a boyfriend.” From this, the study gathered that “dating behavior was not significantly associated with body size”, which refutes the argument that BMI is a good indicator of excessive weight (Paxton et al. 2005). There

appeared to be some minor support in the finding that “BMI was positively correlated to overweight preoccupation”, meaning that as excessive weight went up, so did the individual’s conscious focus on their weight (Laus et al. 2018). This may provide support for suggesting that increasing weight may result in less romantic relationship success due to an increase in the individual’s negative body image. Again, supporting the original argument, Averett et al. (2008) found that “BMI levels vary with respect to a woman’s marital and cohabitation status.” Specifically, Averett et al. (2008) found that “women with lower BMIs [were] more likely to be married or cohabitating”, leaving the implied understanding that women with higher BMIs were less likely to be married or cohabiting (Averett et al. 2008). Although there tends to be much more varying data conclusions for this measure, findings still suggest that BMI has an influence on romantic relationship success (Laus et al. 2018; Paxton et al. 2005; Wetheim, Paxton, and Blaney 2004).

CONCLUSION, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper compared two measures of excessive weight -- body image and BMI -- and examined the effect they had on romantic relationships for women. The main goal of the literature review was to consider what might be the best method for representing excessive weight when contextualized in the relationship between weight and romantic relationships to expand upon current sociological understandings. This paper provided context for understanding how gender, weight, and romantic relationships relate. It also analyzed relationship categories and quality characteristics and explored and defined excess weight. Finally, this paper reviewed both measures of body image and BMI with comparative evidence to reach conclusions about the overall findings in the larger literature. Despite varying evidence and interpretations from

research, assessing the current research around this topic and coming to some main findings is important when considering adding new and relevant insights regarding the literature.

One of the main findings suggested that body image may be a better measure of excessive weight than BMI. As Reinecke (2012) compares the two, the study did not find that “one’s physical body weight as measured by BMI served as a useful predictor in one’s odds of marriage” even though the “variables measuring the perception of one’s weight,” or perceived body image, “were found to be statistically relevant” to the prediction of marriage. Therefore, despite some support indicating that BMI may influence body image, body image overall best serves as a measure for the excessive weight of women when connected to one’s possible success in a romantic relationship. This could possibly be due to a “change in cultural standards of weight”, especially as an ever-increasing number of individuals in the culture are identified as having excessive weight or being obese by medical standards (Reinecke 2012). Additionally, in terms of gathering a deeper understanding of the relationship between excessive weight, gender, and romantic relationship success, most of the literature supports the conclusion that women are more highly susceptible to the strain of social beauty standards promoting thinness. Women feel the stigma of being unattractive more when they happen to be of excess weight, and this can create a more negative body image, and ultimately women who are of excess weight in terms of body image are less likely to have successful relationship experiences.

With these findings in mind, it is important to consider some of the outlying or alternative findings in the research on this topic. One study found that while dating behavior was not necessarily associated with body image, the “belief that thinness was important to girls’ attractiveness to boys” strongly predicted body dissatisfaction for those girls (Paxton et al. 2005). This finding further means that beauty standards predicted negative body image, but not

necessarily ultimately romantic relationship success. This example in the research finding contradicts what much of the other researchers found, yet it is still valuable to look at and consider how and why this might be. One explanation for this finding could be that since the group studied were all adolescents, there was not much dating experience to base the study off, and therefore, there would not be enough reliable information on dating to gather among this group. This literature review also has limitations. For instance, many of these studies have limited age groups, thus impacting generalizability. Understanding limitations like confined age groups of samples can help interpret the findings more accurately and account for possible variances in these findings.

The main research references discussed in this literature review were open to considering possible limitations to their studies which included not having enough unbiased data that was also collected solely through limited surveying methods. For instance, surveys were the main method of collecting data and there were questions about whether this method would have encouraged less than accurate participant responses. The research also did not have varied demographics and identities included in the research, mostly analyzing participants with similar age, race, location, sexual orientation, and body type, which causes question as to whether certain identities being left out of the studies would have changed the results significantly. On top of leaving out a variety of demographics in research participation, the studies also tended to ignore certain relationship categories and outcomes (casual sexual relationships, successful relationships examples) which would've been helpful for a more holistic look at romantic relationships. Additionally, many studies did not account for mental health states and conditions or additional factors that may have influenced participants with excessive weight or romantic relationship success such as employment, maternal status, income, and media influence

(Ambwani and Strauss 2007; Averett et al. 2008; Chen and Brown 2005; Laus et al. 2018; Paxton et al. 2005; Reinecke 2012). With so many potential limitations, there is space for additional research to be undertaken.

The research studies have provided some suggested future research paths that would be helpful to explore this topic even further. Possible avenues for future research can include: the internalization of the beauty ideal; the sources of the messages promoting thinness to women; gender differences within those who have excessive weight; causality between excessive weight and romantic relationship success; mental health effects of stigmas and pressures; relationship characteristics such as commitment and relationship length, relationship quality, sexual orientation and excessive weight stigma; coping strategies used for excessive weight stigma, and how obesity rates rising may alter the stigma overtime (Ambwani and Strauss 2007; Chen and Brown 2005; Laus et al. 2018; Paxton et al. 2005). Finally, with future research and a better understanding of this topic, policy changes can be enacted where necessary.

Some of the research studies, in addition to considering possible future research, also considered possible policy actions that could come out of the already defined knowledge around this topic. Similarly, policy should focus on helping those struggling with eating disorders and similar mental health conditions, and implement “education and intervention efforts” to encourage a “more positive body image and [decrease] weight concerns” (Ambwani and Brown 2007; Chen and Brown 2005; Smith 2012). This literature review establishes a need for deeper understanding and interpretation, ideas for future research to continue learning about excessive weight in relation to romantic relationship success, and “next steps” that can be implemented now.

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