



Body Image: Development of a Course

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Background. Body image is our mental image of our bodies (Fallon, 1990) and is affected by our dress (Rudd & Lennon, 2000). Rudd and Lennon (2001) provided a theoretical justification for including the study of body image in textiles and clothing subject matter. According to these authors, body image is important to research and teach about because body image is an important part of the self, affects our social construction of appearance, and impacts our feelings of self-esteem. They suggest incorporating body image topics into pre-existing undergraduate courses such as the social psychology of dress or aesthetics of dress. In what follows a recent fortuitous opportunity to develop an entire undergraduate course on body image is described.

Introduction. The first two times the course was offered, it was in response to a call for proposals for themed courses and although the themes were different it was not difficult to make the case that body image was relevant to both themes. Slight variations of the body image course have now been offered three times as an elective under a variable topics course number.

The course was research based and used Cash and Smolak's (2012) review book, as well as others depending on the theme for which the course was approved. Class periods included lecture, discussion, many video clips, a variety of in-class activities (e.g., finding online information related to a body image topic and discussion of what was found), and guest speakers. Course objectives focused on body image as part of self-concept, body aesthetics, body image attitudes, and body image and appearance management behaviors. Due to a departmental focus on information literacy another course objective was to evaluate information and its sources critically.

Assignments. In addition to three exams, students completed ten article assignments related to body image and these often required students to evaluate the expertise of the article's author(s) and assess whether the article was a scholarly or popular press publication. These assignments consisted of reading mostly research articles and answering 3 to 5 questions about the article, author(s), and/or the publication. Another assignment was to write a Letter to a Younger Self about your body image (now and then), which included advice for the younger self (Rudd, Jestratijevec, & Husk, 2017). This was a successful, though in some cases, angst-related assignment. For example, one female student wrote: *"Dear 12 year old me, I am sorry. I am sorry I robbed you of a healthy childhood. Looking back I wish I could turn back time and make the decisions to not fall victim to bulimia."* Many comments were not as angst-related. For example, a male student wrote: *"Dear 15-year-old self, I know you've just begun high school, and let me tell you dude some of the things you find very important or seem concerned about do NOT matter at all."*

Students also completed two Body Image Interviews. They were provided questions to ask and were instructed not to interview a female college student. Based on the responses to the interview questions students wrote their evaluation of the interviewee's body image in a 2-page paper in which they also addressed how interview responses compared with research findings from the textbook (e.g., body image of men, of adolescents). An example from a female student's interview with a male college student: *"His opinion of the cultural ideal of men aligns with the ideal we discussed in class. He does not seem to be as affected by self-serving bias as men are expected to be. He has a high level of body dissatisfaction, but he is not driven to the point of an eating disorder because he still eats well. His drive for muscularity is moderately high, but not extreme because he still does not lift weights very often. The textbook says that body image improves with aging, but so far my interviewee's body image has become worse as he has aged. However, like the textbook says, he compares himself to when he was younger which is the more common comparison role model for men. Also relating to findings in the textbook, health and fitness are important to his body image."*

Research clearly demonstrates that men's and women's body image are quite different, such that women are primarily concerned with weight and shape, while men are primarily concerned with muscles and strength. Such differences are also quite apparent from reading the Letter to a Younger Self project and the Body Image Interview projects.

In the final course project students content analyzed media messages from the fashion and beauty industries. Then they presented their content analysis results and described a program they would develop for a specific population (e.g., children, teen girls) that promotes healthy body image. One team analyzed diet ads in teen and young adult magazines. Their idea for a program was to plan a Body Image Day at the local high school. Activities they planned included Spirit Day (everyone would wear bright colors to support body confidence), photo projects that illustrate body confidence, and showing both male and female students the diet ads and asking them to discuss how the ads might affect female classmates' body image. A final activity was to write a petition to a magazine to ask that more ads be included promoting positive body image.

Changes moving forward. Students often ask questions that are difficult to answer and not related to published research. For example, what does it feel like (subjectively) to have an eating disorder? Does it hurt? Do people with eating disorders feel physical pain? To deal with these and similar questions, it has been helpful to have guest speakers from the health center who have treated clients with eating disorders.

Unfortunately, few students have provided course evaluations. So moving forward, I plan to collect student feedback specifically on guest speakers and on the course projects during class time. Furthermore, the letters to a younger self project and the body image interview projects provide a wealth of information that could be data for a research project. So also I plan to submit these projects for IRB approval to assess learning, as well as, body image memories.

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