



Reflections and Empowerment: Body Image Letters to a Younger Self

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The body is an important means of presenting ourselves to others (Eicher & Evenson, 2015). Equally important is our personal perception of our appearance and how it affects our self-feelings, self-worth, and effort we put into appearance management behaviors (Lennon, Johnson & Rudd, 2017). Many scholars have written about the construct of body image, with general consensus that it is our perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about the body (Grogan, 2008), which in turn lead to behaviors related to the body. Teasing these complex relationships apart with undergraduate students, and empowering them to think objectively and realistically about their own bodies, is challenging. This presentation will describe the goal, scope, and impact of a teaching activity used in a large lecture course on the social psychology of dress.

The context of this teaching activity is a two-week unit on body image which includes the construct of body image and its components, healthy versus risky appearance management behaviors, body image disturbances, and connections between body image and self-esteem. To enable personal understanding, we asked students to consider “lived experiences” in their bodies and their body image. The activity was writing a letter to their younger self of whatever age, giving advice and imparting knowledge they had gained thus far regarding body image. The goal of this activity was to provide a lens to examine personal body image and feelings of pride or anxiety. The scope of the letters allowed us to show how meaningful the construct is to most people. The impact of these letters suggests strong engagement in this content unit.

Undergraduate students (N=237) enrolled in this course over two semesters served as a convenience sample. The letters were assigned after lectures on body image and body image disturbances. Letters were coded and content analyzed by three coders, with an intercoder reliability of 97.8%. Themes were refined after initial coding and included overall satisfaction with body image, specific area of dissatisfaction, social influence, emotional and mental strains/attitudes, restrictive eating behavior, compensatory behavior, and advice they would give.

Out of 237 letter writers, 220 were female, 14 male, and 3 unidentified. Ethnicity was often not specified (213); 19 identified as Asian and 5 as African American. Only 57 students specified the ages of the former selves they were writing to, including high school (ages 14-18, N=31), middle school (ages 12-13, N=18), and elementary school (ages 5-11, N=8).

Body dissatisfaction was universal, as reported by 99% (N=235) of the students. Furthermore, as participants reported, this body dissatisfaction influenced their perceptions, thoughts, and overall feelings of self-worth. Body discontent hampered both personal and professional development (e.g., “your obsession with being thin and beautiful has taken a toll on your self-worth”; “no

amount of new clothing is going to heal your soul”). Specific areas of dissatisfaction included body shape, certain body parts, or weight (N=125), face or skin or skin color (N=43), and hair (N=27). Sample quotes included, “I want boobs! Having bad skin, braces, legs not toned, and stomach not flat”; “I’m surrounded by girls who are smaller”; “Currently you are overweight, well not overweight – just a very big dude. We both know you want to be like the other fit guys around you.”

Social influence was attributed to peers (N=123), but also to media, celebrities and social media (N=99), and to family members (N=15). Quotes included, “I want a body like LeBron James with low body fat”; “I want to be 5.6”, blonde, tanned, look like a Mac ad model with a body of Kim Kardashian.” Higher levels of body discomfort created numerous negative effects (N=123), particularly depression, stress, anxiety, self-isolation and insomnia (e.g., “I suffered depression because of all the societal expectations”.) Restrictive eating was also evident (N=75), including self-reported or diagnosed eating disorders (N=14). Sample quotes were, “I ended up in the hospital because of extreme dieting.”

Compensatory behaviors (N=92) were reported, most often via clothing and cosmetics (N=50), but also with exercise (N=24), avoidance or over-reliance on mirrors (N=11), or consideration of surgery (N=7). Sample comments were, “I woke up every day at 5:30 a.m. to get ready for school, and bought clothes a size down”; “I spent hundreds of dollars on nose job appointments”. Advice given to younger selves focused primarily on self-empowerment and realism, as exemplified by “Don’t let what you believe others think about your weight define who you are”; “Time spent focusing on appearance could have been used for much more meaningful things”; “The cost is your life – size 0 is unhealthy and sick.”

As participants reflected on different reasons for their body dissatisfaction, the majority recognized the dominance of the “thin ideal” within mainstream media and popular culture. Internalization of that ideal was anticipated and found, with no relation to gender, and was noted in social settings of schools, sport clubs or beauty pageants, all of which “normalized” the ideal. Common words used to describe relationships with their bodies were “hate”, “disgust” and “shame”. Nearly 33% of the students revealed restrictive eating behaviors, and over 50% reported problems such as depression, anxiety, stress and isolation. These facts provided a rich basis to discuss healthy behaviors in the class and ways in which students can be empowered to create social change to build positive body image, self-esteem, and resilience. The impact of these letters demonstrated that students felt able to develop body image resilience as a “survival” tool to rely on in order to overcome personal hardship and trauma they have faced.

Eicher, J. & Evenson, S. (2015). *The visible self* (4th ed.). New York: Fairchild Books, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing, Inc.

Grogan, A. (2008). *Body Image: Understanding body dissatisfaction in men, women, and children* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Lennon, S.J., Johnson, K.K.P., & Rudd, N.A. (2017). *Social psychology of dress*. New York: Fairchild Books, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing, Inc.