



Perspectives and Dissatisfaction of Body Image among Rural Obese Adolescents

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Abstract

Body image often link to the consciousness of one's body, however, to date, little is known in Malaysia that utilizes qualitative inquiry to understand the perspectives of body image among obese adolescents especially in rural settings. This study conducted to explore the perspectives of body image among obese adolescents in rural settings. An interpretative phenomenological design used to interview 14 obese adolescents aged 13-17 years old in rural Selangor, Malaysia. The findings showed most of the participants expressed their dissatisfaction with their body image due to their interaction with their surroundings environment, while some showed no worries about being obese.

Keywords: obesity; adolescents; body image, rural

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1.0 Introduction

Obesity has become a concerned or national issues not only in Malaysia but also worldwide. At any rate, 2.8 million people died each year as a consequence of being overweight or obese (WHO, 2013). Much has been read on the adverse effect of being obese to one's health such as heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, and even cancer (Caccavale et al., 2012). A higher rate of illness and death in adulthood has been associated with obesity during childhood and adolescence (Must et al., 1992). It could be suggested that overweight young people may be putting themselves at serious risk of a lifetime health problems, which is more serious than adults who become obese during adulthood.

Obesity, not only had an impact to adolescents health but also the country healthcare costs associated with treating obesity and its complication are increasing and represent a significant threat to the country's economic expenditure (Ajau et al., 2014). In addition, the government also spending a significant amount of money on numerous health campaigns to combat obesity. Although these health campaigns may be shown to have some significant impact, unfortunately, the obesity rates are continued to rise.

Currently, there is a trend that being overweight or obese is seen as normal and no longer being stigmatised. This can be seen in some advertisement that uses overweight and obese people to advocate health practices being shown in Malaysian television (Ajau et al., 2014). It could be suggested that obesity gradually starts to be one of the normal norms among our society.

However, in some circumstances, obesity may cause adolescents to have undesirable body image. As a consequence, they are attempting to manage weight either healthy or unhealthy way in pursuing desirable body image (Dockray, Susman, & Dorn, 2009) and also might face the psychological consequences (Laura, Tilda and Ronald, 2012). Body image dissatisfaction may put teenagers at risk for externalizing and internalizing problem in term of behaviours, social and attentions. Perception of adolescents on their body image somewhat differ from one another. Some of them perceived that they have no worries with their body image while their other counterparts might have a negative feeling towards their bodies. Researchers have suggested that adolescents' body image may be constructed by the socio-cultural factors (Wang et al., 2009).

Body image often link to the consciousness of one's body, however, to date, little is known in Malaysia that utilizes qualitative inquiry to understand the perspectives of body image among obese adolescents especially in rural settings. Gone are the days where obesity normally associated with urban living as obesity is also reported in rural settings. Therefore, this study conducted to explore the perspectives of body image among obese adolescents in rural settings.

2.0 Methodology

The study has been carried out qualitatively using the phenomenological approach to exploring and achieved a deeper understanding of a personal and subjective live experience of obese adolescents on body image (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). A purposive sampling design was used to recruit the participants of the study. Consent form and information sheet was

given to all participants to be signed by their parent/guardian. Once consented, the researcher arranged for an interview date, time and place with each participant according to his/her preferences with consideration of the comfort and safety of the participants and researcher. The inclusive criteria for this study were obese (BMI-for-age above 95th percentile, WHO (1995)) adolescents aged 13-17 years old found in institutions such as secondary schools and associations in the rural area of Selangor. Semi-structured interview guides were used and the interviews were audio-taped. The interviewed was lasted between 30 – 45 minutes and audio-taped. The tape had been listened immediately after the interview to make sense of the data and verifying the need for further interview, if needed. Audio-taped data then transcribed into verbatim by the researcher. The recorded interview was kept safely until the research completed and disposed of after the study is completed. A total of 14 adolescents were recruited for an in-depth interview.

The data had been analyzed based on thematic content analysis. NVivo10 (computer software) was used to facilitate the management of qualitative data. Data analysis had been done simultaneously with ongoing data collection. Began with listening to participants' verbal descriptions and then followed by reading and rereading the verbatim transcriptions or written responses, the researcher had identified and extract significant statement as they become immersed in the data. The translation of the data in English was done if the data is in Malay language. Then, the data were verified by the language expert.

Ethical approval had been obtained from the Research Ethical Committee, Universiti Teknologi MARA prior to data collection.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The analysis found three main themes that emerged from the data, namely, conceptualization of self-body image, aware of being obese and body image dissatisfaction, and having positive self-image.

3.1 Conceptualization of self-body image

The findings found that the participants conceptualized themselves as fat and big rather than an obese person. They conceptualised that body image is more of the body size than physical appearance. As said by these participants, "When I look into a mirror, all I see is I am fat (laugh). I see myself as a big fat guy that has no friend and loves to eat." (boy, age 17 years). "Chubby. Well, I am not too fat, but yeah, fat. My body is not beautiful at all. I wish my body is a well-built body." (boy, age 14 years). However, the participants knew that they did not have an ideal body weight when the sought treatment from their general practitioners. They described, "My body weight is not ideal body weight. I went to the clinic for a check-up and the doctor told me that I was an obese person. The doctor said my ideal body weight was within 42 to 45 kg. But my weight is 90kg." (girl, age 15 years). While the other said "Normal adolescent, their body weight is less than 100kg. Mine was like...120kg. So my body weight is not normal." (boy, 15 years).

Most of the participants had reported that they have no concern about their body not until they reached puberty (when they experienced physical changes in their bodies). As it was

said by these participants, "I started to care so much about my body and how I look like after I reached my puberty, which was during my standard 6. I started to compare myself with my friends' body." (girl, age 14 years). The other said, "I never feel like a fat guy before, but after I reached my puberty, which was in form 3, I started to realize how fat I was." (boy, age 16 years).

3.2 Aware of being obese and body image dissatisfaction

The participants reported that they realised that being obese is abnormal when they became a target of teasing by their peers. This caused them to feel stressed when their friends started to make fun of their body. Hence, this contributes to dissatisfaction with their body and trying to lose some weight. As it was described by this participant, "Whenever the boys saw me, they will start to tease me like 'boo... fat girl. Laziest fat lady. I feel so sad when they treat me like that." (girl age 13 years). And this echoed by other participants, "My friends love to make fun of me. They say I am a fat guy that loves to eat and lazy. Sometimes I'm so mad at myself for having this type of body" (boy, age 14 years).

Besides being teased, most of the participants admitted that they were having problem in finding the right size of clothes to wear. This problem has contributed to the feeling that they are of big size for their age. As they described it as, "For my age, the clothes in the shop are mostly small for me, so I have to go for an adult size to suit my body. This is why I dissatisfied with my body" (girl, age 15 years), and, "All of my clothes need to be tailored because I couldn't find the right size for me, so it really gives a lot of pressure to me." (boy, age 16 years).

Limitation in physical activities also contributes to the feeling of uncomfortable with their body. They state that, "I don't feel comfortable with my body...My movement also restricted. I couldn't walk or run for a long distance. If I stand more than 30 minutes, I will feel tired." (boy, age 13 years). This was echoed by other participants, "I love to play extreme games like a roller coaster. But most of the games like that have a weight limit. So I couldn't play it. It is frustrating you know." (boy, age 17 years).

The participants also felt disappointed about their body when comes to developing a relationship and making public appearance. They said, "I like this one guy, but when I see myself in the mirror, I have to remind myself to forget about him because I don't think I have a chance. Look at me, who love a fat girl?" (girl, age 15 years), and, "I have no confidence in representing myself to the crowd. I feel like they will look at me as someone ugly, fat and lazy." (boy, age 14 years).

As most typical adolescents, the participants also have their body image idol. They became aware with their bodies by comparing themselves with their idol, thus contribute to the feeling of dissatisfaction of their body. As they described it as, "I want to have a body like Ryan Gosling, because he is a tough (muscular) man." (boy, age 17 years), and, "I wanted a body like The Rock where his body was muscular with six pack body. If I have a body like him, I will be so happy." (boy, age 14 years). The other participants (mostly girls) compared their body with their peers. Comparing themselves with peers was more apparent amongst the female. As the participant stated, "I love Amni's (her friend) body shape. She has a very beautiful body shape, not too fat and not too skinny. Looking at her makes me start my diet

so that I could be as beautiful as her." (girl, age 14 years). This followed by another who said, "I want a body like Nad. Her body is so fit. I really admired her. I wish my body were like her, if possible)." (girl, age 14 years).

3.3 Having positive self-image

Although most of the participants feeling dissatisfaction about their body, there is also some sense of acceptance for being obese. As it was said, "When I looked at the mirror, I saw myself as a big fat boy. But I was okay with my body and I felt happy with it. No stress at all. Even when I see skinny people, I do not feel any harm, or I want to be like them. I'm fine being like this. I love my body." (boy, age 15 years). And, "I love my body. I have no problem with being fat. I did my everyday routines with no stress, so I'm happy with it." (boy, age 13 years).

The participants also admitted that there were people who praised them as cute, which makes them feel happy with their body. As they said, "Every time I meet a new person, they will start to say that I was cute. At school, teachers and girls in my class called me 'cute guy', especially during my form 1 and form 2." (boy, age 16 years). And, "Most of the girls said that I'm cute. They said my cheeks were like 'pau' (steamed bun). I took it as a compliment." (girl, age 15 years).

For some participants, being obese also has become the norm in the participants' family. Thus, they feel that it was normal for being obese. As it was described by them, "My parents, my sister, they all are fat. Obese I guess. My brother used to be a fat guy, but since he gets into a secondary school, he became an active student, so he was not that fat anymore. As for me, since I was a baby, I become fat. So since me being like this for a very long time, I don't have any problem. My friends accept me the way I am. So do my family." (boy, age 17 years). And, "All of my family members are big. My mom, my dad, grandpa, grandma are all obese. So I will be more confident and happy when I'm with them. They give me confidence to face people." (girl, age 15 years).

34 Discussion

The findings found that the participants conceptualized themselves as fat and big rather than an obese person. Because adolescents experience significant physical changes in their bodies during puberty, they are likely to experience highly dynamic perceptions of body image. Dissatisfaction of body image occurred when they reached puberty (Ata, Ludden and Lally, 2007) and start to concern about their body and look. Masculinity is typical for the boys as they wanted their body to be more muscular such as having broad shoulders, muscle development and increased strength (Piexoto, 2002). Body image is influenced strongly by self-esteem and self-evaluation, more so than by external evaluation by others. Comparing themselves with peers is more apparent amongst the female. This is consistent with the previous study where the girls were often comparing their body with their friends that of similar age (McCabe et al., 2006; Thomsen, Bower & Barnes, 2004). Idolized their ideal idol is typical of adolescents that they found through mass media. The participants compared themselves with celebrities that they've watched in movies and magazine, which supported that media played a greatest role on body image perception (Stice & Shaw, 1994; Ricciardelli et al.,

2000; Sepulveda & Calado, 2012).

Stereotyping of obese people as being lazy, less smart and less attractive also occurred among the participants. Negative comments can cause the participants to have low self-confidence (Sheffield, Tse & Sofronoff, 2005) especially in developing personal relationship and appear in the public. The participants felt ashamed, embarrassed, disappointed or anxious about the way they look. Feelings of dissatisfaction about one-self thus contribute to unhappiness and negative thought about their physical appearance (Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002). Although there is a negative or dissatisfaction of one's body image, but some are also in the view that they are happy and accept the way they are (Shepherd, 2009) and did not bothered by being obese. Positive body image perception from peers and significance others caused them to feel comfortable and satisfy with themselves (Bearman et al., 2006). It could be suggested that obesity has become the norm for some of the participants if they are coming from an obese family.

4.0 Conclusion

This qualitative approach has provided insight into how being obese affects beliefs, self-perceptions and behaviours; even though the small sample implied that the findings could not be generalized to the entire population of obese adolescents. Prevention of obesity must consider the impact of obesity has on adolescents' lives. It is necessary to engage the obese adolescent personally in weight reduction and focus on the determinants of perceived body image. Results of the present study may assist in offering a realistic point of view of the recent situation and in scheming of future programs for weight control in adolescents especially in rural settings.

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