

Effect of Fear of Being Fat and Dietary Behaviors on The Body Shape Perception among Middle-Aged Women

Sreelakshmi M^{1*}, Christina Tony²

ABSTRACT

The present study explores the effect of fear of being fat and dietary behavior on the body shape perception among middle-aged women. This is a quantitative study and is administered to 120 participants (60 employed and 60 unemployed women). Convenient sampling technique was used to draw the samples from the population. Instruments such as Goldfarb fear of fat scale (Lori A Goldfarb, 1985), Concern over weight and dieting scale (Dona M Kagan and Rose L Squirres, 1984) and Body shape questionnaire (P J Cooper, M J Taylor, Z Cooper and C G Fairburn, 1987) were used for the collection of data. Karl Pearson correlation and independent t- test were used for the analysis of data. The results indicated a strong positive correlation among the variables: fear of being fat, dietary behaviors, and body shape perception. Additionally, there was no significant difference observed between employed and unemployed individuals in these aspects.

Keywords: *Fear of being fat, dietary behaviors, body shape perception, middle-aged women*

In an era where emphasis on body shape, appearance, and weight perception is pervasive, it is crucial to recognize the challenges faced by the middle-aged population in relation to their physical well-being—an aspect often overlooked. Despite the prevalence of these difficulties, there is a notable scarcity of research studies shedding light on the specific challenges encountered by this demographic. It is imperative to underscore the significance of addressing and understanding the unique struggles experienced by individuals in their middle years concerning body image and overall physical health.

As human bodily functions regress, middle-aged and older women's cartilage shrinks, their muscles atrophy, their capacity to maintain balance, and their ability to control their posture all decline. This results in a noticeable alteration in their body shape. Every component of the bodies of the majority of middle-aged and elderly men and women has altered as a result of acquired elements including physical growth, lifestyle choices, and regular employment. This has led to the formation of unique body shapes like potbelly, hunchbacks, and so forth. This type of shift has a certain universality and is especially noticeable in the bodies of middle-aged and older women. (Hu, Zao 2015).

¹Clinical Psychology Post Graduate

²Head of the department, Christ College, Autonomous, Irinjalakuda

*Corresponding Author

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‘Dietary behavior’ comprises eating, preparing, or acquiring nutritious food, all of which have an impact on one’s capacity to do so. Eating a diet high in fat, salt, sugar, and sugar combined with low levels of fiber and fruits and vegetables can lead to chronic disease. Chronic disease can be prevented with a healthy lifestyle that includes regular exercise, moderation in alcohol consumption, quitting smoking, and a diet high in fruits and vegetables and low in sugar, salt, and saturated fats. The word dietary is an adjective form of the noun ‘diet’. A ‘diet’ refers to the kinds of food a person eats routinely or habitually and ‘behavior’ would refer to the way a person acts. Thus, the terms ‘dietary behavior’ would refer to the way a person acts when it comes to eating different foods as part of their routine.

The term "fear of obesity," which often goes by the name "fear of being fat," is a severe and irrational worry about gaining weight or being overweight. People who experience this phobia frequently have a skewed perception of their bodies and a strong desire to be extremely underweight, even if they are already underweight or at a healthy weight. This concern may cause behaviors such as binge eating, overexercising, or other weight-gain prevention measures, which can have detrimental effects on one's physical and mental health and potentially result in eating disorders like bulimia nervosa or anorexia nervosa.

The term "body shape perception" describes how people view and understand the dimensions of both their own and other people's bodies. It deals with the mental and emotional processes that lead individuals to develop opinions and beliefs regarding their general physical appearance, weight, and body size.

Need and significance of the study

Body related concerns are often brought under the limelight by numerous researchers and practitioners. But then, the focus of this aspect on the middle adulthood or middle-aged population is not done in an effective manner. Middle adulthood is a phase or time period which results in extensive observable and non – observable effects on people. This stage of life is the one that involves the process of accommodating and adapting to a lot of changes including physical, mental, emotional changes and changes in overall wellbeing of an individual.

In general, out of the whole of the middle-aged population, middle aged women take the first place in dealing with adversities during the phase. Women are considered to be fatter as a percent of body weight that men from puberty onward and tend to gain weight and fat during adult life than men, in general. This is often due to the effect of excessive estrogen on the body which results in the production of more amount of fat relative to their muscle mass. (Ersoy, 2005) Middle-aged women often experience changes in their body shape due to multiple factors like that of aging, hormonal changes and metabolic shifts, all of which can lead to a need of increased focus to acknowledge this aspect. It is often noticed that there is an evident research gap in this population when there is ample number of studies among the adolescents and young adults.

Conducting research in this area in this population might help the further upcoming researchers to promote a healthy body image and bring up newer dietary interventions as well. Thus, this study is extremely timely and significant, since it addresses a critical gap in the literature and studies and offers valuable insights which can inform interventions, policies and programs aimed at improving the physical as well as psychological well – being of the middle-aged women.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A research study was conducted by Chow et al (2017) on the topic 'Fear of fat and restrained eating: negative body talk between female friends as a moderator.' Around 130 pairs of female friends were recruited from a Midwestern university in the United States. The results of this study showed that women's fear of fat was significantly related to their own restrained eating behaviors. In contrast, women's fear of fat was not significantly related to their friends' restrained eating behaviors. Negative body talk was significantly related to restrained eating, as reported by both friends and the interaction between negative body talk and women's own fear of fat was found to be significant.

A study was conducted by Ohara K, Kato Y, Mase T. et al (2014) on the topic 'Eating behavior and perception of body shape in Japanese university students.' A total sample of 548 Japanese university students completed a questionnaire which asked for their current physical status (e.g., weight and height), their ideal physical parameters, their perception of their current body shape, their ideal body shape, and their eating behaviors which was measured by the Dutch Eating Behavior Questionnaire (DEBQ). The results of the study showed that the ideal weight and ideal body mass index (BMI) were significantly higher than the current weight and BMI in the males, but significantly lower in the females.

A study was conducted by Woo J E (2014) on the topic 'A survey of overweight, body shape perception and eating attitude of Korean female university students.' The survey and anthropometry for the perception of appearance and eating attitudes were conducted targeting 657 female university students located in Seoul, Busan, Ulsan, Daejeon, Chungcheongnam-do, and Gangwon-do South Korea who were not specializing in physical education. The results of this study indicated that the BMIs of the Korean female university students were lower than those of European and American Caucasian women students, but the dissatisfaction of Korean female university students with their appearances was greater than that of European and American students, indicating that more Korean female university students were suffering from an eating disorder.

Ham and Park (2013) conducted a study on the 'Effect of type of body shape perception on health concern, depression, dietary restriction and exercise practice among university students.' The data was collected from a total sample of about 308 university students and a descriptive design was used in this study. The results showed that 65.6% of the students believe that they are overweight. There are no differences in health concern, depression, and exercise practice among the skinny perception group, satisfaction group, and obesity perception group. However, there was a significant difference in dietary restriction among the three groups. The type of body shape perception was significantly associated with dietary restriction.

A study was conducted by Skrzypczak L (2012) on the topic 'Dietary habits and body image perception among Polish adolescents and young adults – a population-based study.' The study group covered 14,511 adolescents/young adults: 10,081 children attending high schools and secondary schools and 4,428 university students. More than 87% of school children and students admitted that they snacked in between meals every day, and 1/3 mentioned that they ate meals at night. As results, it was found out that, A comprehensive analysis of the study data, including attempts at dieting or gaining weight, indicated that approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of obese respondents had undertaken attempts in the past to reduce their

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body weight. The importance of physical activity and healthy eating habits should be given due attention not only to prevent obesity but also other eating disorders.

Kim B and Kim Y (2010) conducted a research study on the topic 'Dietary behaviors, body satisfaction and factors affecting the weight control interest according to gender of middle school students in Wonju Area.' The sample consisted of a total of 195 boys and 251 girls. The results of this study highlighted that in general, body satisfaction score correlated positively with dietary intake attitude score, but correlated negatively with eating disorders score.

Holmqvist K, Lunde C and Frisén A (2007) conducted a study on 'Dieting behaviors, body shape perceptions, and body satisfaction: Cross – cultural differences in Argentinean and Swedish 13 – year – olds'. The study group consisted of 358 Argentinean (193 girls, 165 boys) and 874 Swedish (474 girls, 400 boys) 13-year-olds. The results of the study showed that Argentinean and Swedish adolescents did not differ on body satisfaction, although girls in both countries displayed greater body dissatisfaction than did boys. The samples also differed in their perceptions of body shape and the effect those perceptions had on their body satisfaction, with Swedish adolescents suffering more from negative body shape perceptions. Cai H, Zheng W and Xiang Y. et al (2007) conducted a study on the topic 'Dietary patterns and their correlated among middle-aged and elderly Chinese men: a report from the Shanghai Men's Health Study.' In the Shanghai Men's Health Study (SMHS) a total of 61 582 men aged subjects with a chronic disease were more likely to have the vegetable-based diet and less likely to have the fruit- or meat-based diets. 40–74 was recruited between 2002 and 2006. The results in this study showed that subjects with a chronic disease were more likely to have the vegetable-based diet and less likely to have the fruit- or meat-based diets.

Emslie and Hunt (2001) conducted research on the topic 'Perceptions of body image among working men and women'. Postal questionnaires were sent across to the employees working in a full time within a British bank in clerical, supervisory and management jobs and to full time clerical, technical and academic employees in a British university. The body mass index of the respondents was also calculated and self-esteem was also found with the help of Rosenberg Self-esteem scale. The findings suggest that concern about women's perceptions of their body image is well founded.

Hill J and Bhatti (1995) conducted research on the topic 'Body shape perception and dieting in preadolescent British Asian girls: Links with Eating Disorders'. Around 55 Asian and 42 Caucasian 9 – year – olds participated in this study. They completed assessments of dietary restraint, body esteem, body satisfaction, and body figure preferences. The study revealed a high priority for thinness in both the Asian and Caucasian girls. Their desire for thinness was present even though the Asian girls had a significantly lower body weight than their Caucasian peers. Both groups of high restraint girls expressed body shape discontent and lower body esteem.

Cash T F, Counts B and Huffine C E (1990) conducted a study on the topic 'Current and vestigial effects of overweight among women: Fear of fat, attitudinal body image, and eating behaviors.' Based on current weight and a structured weight history questionnaire, three groups were constructed: normal-weight subjects without an overweight history (NW; n=24), normal-weight subjects who were formerly overweight (FOW; n=16), and those currently overweight (OW; n=24). The results of this study found that the FOW group

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regarded their bodies as fatter and less affectively satisfying and expressed more weigh-in anxiety than NW participants. Currently normal-weight FOW subjects seldom differed from the currently OW individuals.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives of the study

- To find out if there is any effect of the fear of being fat on the body shape perception of middle-aged population.
- To find out if there is any effect of the dietary behaviors on the body shape perception of middle-aged population.
- To find out if there is any influence of demographic variables (employment status) on the dietary behaviors, fear of being fat and body shape perception of the middle-aged population.

Hypotheses

- **H1:** There is no significant difference in the fear of being fat between the employed and unemployed people.
- **H2:** There is no significant difference in the dietary behaviors between the employed and unemployed people.
- **H3:** There is no significant difference in the body shape perception between the employed and unemployed people.
- **H4:** There is no significant relationship between the fear of being fat and body shape perception.
- **H5:** There is no significant relationship between the dietary behaviors and body shape perception.
- **H6:** There is no significant relationship between the fear of being fat and dietary behaviors.

Sample

The present study consisted of 120 middle – aged women from India. Among them 60 were employed women and 60 were unemployed women with age ranging from 35 – 60. Non-random sampling techniques like purposive and convenience sampling were used to select the sample for the study.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria for middle-aged women

Inclusion criteria

- Women belonging to the age group 35 – 60.
- Women from India.

Exclusion criteria

- Women below the age 35 years and after 60 years.
- Women diagnosed with eating disorders these conditions could significantly affect the variables.
- Women having histories of substance abuse.
- Women who are out of India.
- Women who have other extreme psychological problems.

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Measures

The following tools were used for the study:

- **Personal data sheet:** The personal data sheet was prepared by the researcher to obtain the socio- demographic profile of the respondents.
- **Goldfarb Fear of Fat Scale (GFFS):** The range of the variable ‘Fear of being fat’ among participants were assessed by using the Goldfarb Fear of Fat Scale (GFFS). The scale was developed in 1985 by Lori A Goldfarb. It is a self-report scale with 10 items written in English language.
- **The Concern Over Weight and Dieting Scale (COWD):** The variable ‘dieting behavior’ was assessed through the Concern Over Weight and Dieting Scale (COWD). This scale was developed around 1984 by Dona M Kagan and Rose L Squires. It is a self-report measure which consists of 14 items that measures concerns over weight and dieting.
- **Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-16):** The range of the variable ‘Body shape perception’ was assessed by the scale Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ – 16), which was developed by P J Cooper, M J Taylor, Z Cooper and C G Fairburn in the year 1987. The BSQ – 16 is a 16-item scale which is used to measure concerns and perception about body shape among women.

Procedures

Data for the current research is collected through online methods. In the case of online, google forms were distributed to middle-aged employed and unemployed women as it is an easy way to collect a greater number of data easily. The Google form had a brief explanation regarding the study for the participants to be informed about the objectives and purpose. The questionnaires along with the instructions and personal data sheet, were formed using the Google forms and then the Google form was shared via email or WhatsApp, to be filled according to the guidelines given. The collected information including the demographics was coded appropriately and the data was later analyzed statistically using SPSS version 26 to test the hypotheses of the study.

Statistical analysis: The statistical techniques used here were Pearson Product Moment Correlation and Independent sample t-test using the SPSS software.

Ethical Considerations

- The participants’ confidentiality was highly respected and maintained.
- The dignity of the participants was prioritized and the sensitivity of the statements in the questionnaire were well explained.
- The researcher safeguarded the right to privacy of the participants.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

H1: There is no significant difference in the fear of being fat between the employed and unemployed people.

Table 1: Mean, SD, t value and level of significance obtained by employed and unemployed people in the fear of being fat.

Variable	Sample	Mean	S.D.	t-value	Significance
Fear of being fat	Employed	22.5500	7.12224	.550	.583
Fear of being fat	Unemployed	21.8000	7.80004	.550	.583

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Table 1 shows the mean, standard deviation, t value and level of significance obtained by the employed and unemployed people in fear of being fat. From the table, the mean value obtained by the employed and unemployed participants are 22.5500 and 21.8000 which indicates that there is no significant mean difference between the two groups. Based on this finding, the hypothesis that states ‘there is no significant difference in the fear of being fat between the employed and unemployed people’ is accepted.

The findings clearly state that both the employed and unemployed people show a considerably equal levels of fear of being fat, that is, the construct of employment doesn’t take an active role in affecting the levels of fear of being fat amongst the population. This could happen because of the excessive internalization of the fact that there are various other factors like that of intensive cultural norms and social pressures, personal values and beliefs and economic factors which may affect their levels rather than their employment status. The presence of various other intricate factors might overpower the effect of this aspect.

H2: There is no significant difference in the dietary behaviors between the employed and unemployed people.

Table 2: Mean, SD, t value and level of significance obtained by employed and unemployed people in the dietary behaviors.

Variable	Sample	Mean	S.D.	t-value	Significance
Dietary behaviors	Employed	31.3500	10.41320	.563	.574
Dietary behaviors	Unemployed	30.2833	10.33029	.563	.574

Table 2 shows the mean, standard deviation, t value and level of significance obtained by the employed and unemployed people in Dietary behaviors. From the table, the mean value obtained by the employed and unemployed participants are 31.3500 and 30.2833 which indicates that there is no significant mean difference between the two groups. Based on this finding, the hypothesis that states ‘there is no significant difference in the dietary behaviors between the employed and unemployed people’ is accepted.

The findings clearly state that both the employed and unemployed people show the same levels of dietary behaviors regardless of their work status. This could happen because of multiple reasons like that of having equal level of health consciousness and awareness of the importance of the balanced diet in both employed and unemployed people. Yet another reason would be the similarity in the factors like that of emotional eating, stress and coping mechanisms related to the construct of dietary behaviors. Also, we can also look in to the fact that the particular sample under investigation could not exhibit a variation in personal and demographic factors.

H3: There is no significant difference in the body shape perception between the employed and unemployed people.

Table 3: Mean, SD, t value and level of significance obtained by employed and unemployed people in the Body Shape Perception.

Variable	Sample	Mean	S.D.	t-value	Significance
Body Shape Perception	Employed	34.6167	17.33038	-1.218	.226
Body Shape Perception	Unemployed	38.6167	18.6574	-1.218	.226

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Table 3 shows the mean, standard deviation, t value and level of significance obtained by the employed and unemployed people in Body Shape Perception. From the table, the mean value obtained by the employed and unemployed participants are 34.6167 and 38.6167 which indicates that there is slight mean difference between the two groups. Based on this finding, the hypothesis that states ‘there is no significant difference in the body shape perception between the employed and unemployed people’ is rejected.

The findings given above depict that there is slight difference between the levels of body shape perception in employed and unemployed people. And according to the statistical result, the unemployed sector shows a greater value of body shape perception. This could be because of a variety of reasons within the population. This could result from an increased feeling of insecurities, self – esteem, lack of confidence which can also affect how individuals might perceive their body shape. Increasing levels of unemployment can be associated with higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression, which may also have an excessive impact the body shape perception of the unemployed individuals. The difference in the construct of body shape perception in employment could also result because of the exposure to different social circles and environments.

H4: There is no significant relationship between the fear of being fat and body shape perception.

Table 4: Correlation between the variables fear of being fat and the body shape perception.

		Fear of being Fat	Body Shape Perception
Fear of being Fat	Pearson Correlation	1	.662**
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.000
	N	120	120
Body Shape Perception	Pearson Correlation	.662**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	120	120

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 4 shows the correlation between the variables fear of being fat and body shape perception. The values shows that there is high positive correlation between the two variables with high significance ($r = .662$, $p < 0.01$), which means that the positive correlation between the variables indicate an increase in fear of being fat leads to an increase in body shape perception. Hence, the hypothesis which states that “there is no significant relationship between fear of being fat and body shape perception” is rejected.

The basic concept of the fear of being fat often involves the aspect of having negative attitudes ourselves due to an excessively high weight or obesity. These negative attitudes are often not just consciously displayed, but they also often occur within us and unconsciously tries to affect us due to a variety of factors. (Baser et al.,) Body shape perception, in relation to this, can be understood as an individual’s perception of his/her own body shape in their minds. Thus, it is much clearly understood about the fact that the increased negative attitudes in oneself about our own weight could directly relate to increased perception of our own body shape. Other aspects like that of social comparison, societal pressures and media influence could justify the increase.

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H5: There is no significant relationship between the dietary behaviors and body shape perception.

Table 5: Correlation between the variables dietary behaviors and the body shape perception.

		Dietary behaviors	Body Shape Perception
Dietary behaviors	Pearson Correlation	1	.629**
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.000
	N	120	120
Body Shape Perception	Pearson Correlation	.629**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	120	120

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 5 shows the correlation between the variables dietary behaviors and body shape perception. The values shows that there is high positive correlation between the two variables with high significance ($r = .629$, $p < 0.01$), which means that the positive correlation between the variables indicate an increase in dietary behaviors leads to an increase in body shape perception. Hence, the hypothesis which states that “there is no significant relationship between dietary behaviors and body shape perception” is rejected.

Engaging in health supportive and dietary behaviors have often resulted in enhanced well-being and physical and mental health of the population. Dietary behaviors often signify the eating habits and food choices that individuals make on an everyday basis. Previous studies have also supported the aspect that body perception often showed a significant association with the dietary weight management behaviors. (Song et al.,2022) Engaging in effective dietary behaviors like portion control, meal planning, healthy food choices, dietary supplements, mindful eating, redesigning the cooking methods etc., would directly or indirectly influence the way in which we see ourselves and the degree to which we find ourselves healthy from inside out.

H6: There is no significant relationship between the fear of being fat and dietary behaviors.

Table 6: Correlation between the variables dietary behaviors and the body shape perception.

		Fear of being Fat	Dietary behaviors
Fear of being Fat	Pearson Correlation	1	.602**
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.000
	N	120	120
Dietary behaviors	Pearson Correlation	.602**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	120	120

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 6 shows the correlation between the variables dietary behaviors and fear of being fat. The values shows that there is high positive correlation between the two variables with high significance ($r = .602$, $p < 0.01$), which means that the positive correlation between the variables indicate an increase in fear of being fat leads to an increase in dietary behaviors.

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Hence, the hypothesis which states that “there is no significant relationship between dietary behaviors and fear of being fat” is rejected.

The above given results show an increase in the tendency of the middle-aged women to engage in dietary behaviors as their fear of being fat also increases. This could be basically explained because of the intrinsic motivation in the individuals which is driven by their extensive fear of gaining fat that paves their way to lead a healthier life by incorporating healthy eating habits and dietary practices. There has been growing evidence that fear of fat can lead to heightened negative emotions like self-disgust which drives the patients to excessively engage in behaviors like dietary behaviors. (Woods et al.,2022) The fear might often drive them to engage in various behaviors like that of engaging in restrictive eating and opting for health food choices.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

There has often been considerable evidence and research findings when it comes to concepts relating to body and its concerns including body image, body shape and various other aspects. However, this study was conducted to find out the effect of fear of being fat and dietary behaviors on the body shape perception among middle aged women, which is seen as a scarce topic in the existing researches.

The sample for the present study consisted of 120 women (60 employed and 60 unemployed) from different places of India. The sample consisted of women who were aged between 35 – 60 years. Goldfarb fear of fat scale, Concern over weight and dieting scale and Body shape questionnaire was used for the purpose. The collected data were analyzed using appropriate statistical technique such as independent sample t- test and Pearson correlation coefficient.

Implications

Studies are always considered as the evidence of the growing predictions about different constructs. The difficulties faced by middle-aged women are often gone unnoticed and one such aspect becomes their bodily concerns, more precisely, their body shape perception. Middle adulthood is a phase where individuals go through extensive changes in all ways. Thus, highlighting this particular aspect would be of prime importance. The implications of this study could be broadly considered under two prime aspects which could be, psychological and clinical dimensions. Under the psychological dimension the most important factor would be to understand the body image concerns. Since this particular study is extremely linked to symptoms of eating disorders, we can also further use the findings in identifying the several risk factors related to eating disorders. And finally, a study like this will also help us understand ways to improve our self-esteem and body satisfaction.

Under the clinical dimension, the study can pave a way towards becoming a small part in the development of tailored interventions for this population, which is quite scarcely available. Along with focusing on the physical health, since factors like that of fear, lowered self-concept, dissatisfaction etc., are also linked several mental health strategies and programmes can also be initiated.

On the whole, this study might increasingly lead the pathway towards multiple positive developments, thus helping to fruitfully challenge the societal standards. This will, in turn,

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lead the way to the development of healthier body image and self-concept which boosts several aspects of ourselves.

Limitations

One of the major limitations of the study would be the lack of technological awareness of the participants while the collection of data, since all of them fall under the age group 35 – 60 years. This resulted in a slight difficulty in the participants to fill in the forms. Yet another limitation is the intense difficulty to procure enough sample required for the study. Another aspect could be the lack of promptness in the participants to fill in the questionnaires, due to the large number of items present in all the questionnaires combined. Since the questionnaire involves a lot of items about the participants' personal evaluation about their body, it could provoke their insecurities and they may be sensitive about the questions being presented to them. And finally, since this study is quantitative in nature, the explanation is laid out only in terms of numerical values and no detailed and narrative explanations are provided, which sometimes brings out the chance to miss out certain minute details.

Scope for further research

- The future studies on the same construct could be done including multiple demographic factors.
- The study can include various other factors like that physical health, family structure, and other physical and psychological aspects that helps us to broaden the findings.
- This study fails to bring out the differences in these constructs on gender. So, focus on the aspect of gender differences on these variables could also be done in future studies.

CONCLUSION

The findings from the study reveal that there is a positive correlation between all the three variables; fear of being fat, dietary behaviors and body shape perception among middle-aged women. However, there is no much significant difference in these variables among the employed and unemployed people.

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Conflict of Interest

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