

University students' perceptions of an on-campus peer health program for fostering positive body image and self-esteem.

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The hallway booth and activity questionnaires completed by 21 participants displayed positive responses. For the question, "Do you feel that the information at the booth is valuable for university students," 85.7% answered yes. Both male and female students shared similar reasoning by writing how important it is to think and be aware of what you say and do and how it can affect someone's feelings about themselves. General comments at the bottom of the questionnaires were also approving by saying that it was quick, easy and informative.

Abstract

Colleges and universities are considered "breeding grounds" for body image concerns and eating problems. Thus, on-campus programs targeting positive body image in university students are important. Currently, through their Peer Educators, Brock University's Student Health Services runs an annual two-week program to promote positive body image and self-esteem. The purpose of this study was to investigate students' perceptions of each element of this program. The study assessed the students' perceptions through immediate feedback from individuals receiving an affirmation or visiting the information booth, and through focus groups. Immediate feedback questionnaires were completed by 134 student participants filling out in-person questionnaires and 17 participants took part in focus groups. Immediate feedback questionnaires showed that participants believed the affirmations and information booth to be effective. Overall, students recognized the program as important and effective at achieving its goals, but believed there was a need to reach a greater portion of the student population. These results can help direct body image and self-esteem programs at colleges and universities in the future.

Introduction

Body image refers to the feelings, thoughts, and behaviours an individual has in regards to his or her own body (Muth & Cash, 1997). In college students, negative body image is common, and colleges have been called 'breeding grounds' for negative body image (Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002). Thus, programs targeting positive body image for college students are important. Currently, through their Peer Educators, Brock University's Student Health Services runs an annual program to promote positive body image and self-esteem.

The two-week program run by the Peer Educators has several components: distribution of positive affirmations to individuals on campus, banners, posters and hallway booths. Seven different affirmations (See Table 1) were printed on small pieces of paper and given out to students in a variety of locations around campus (e.g., hallways, cafeterias, residences).

Images 1-2: Hallway campaign



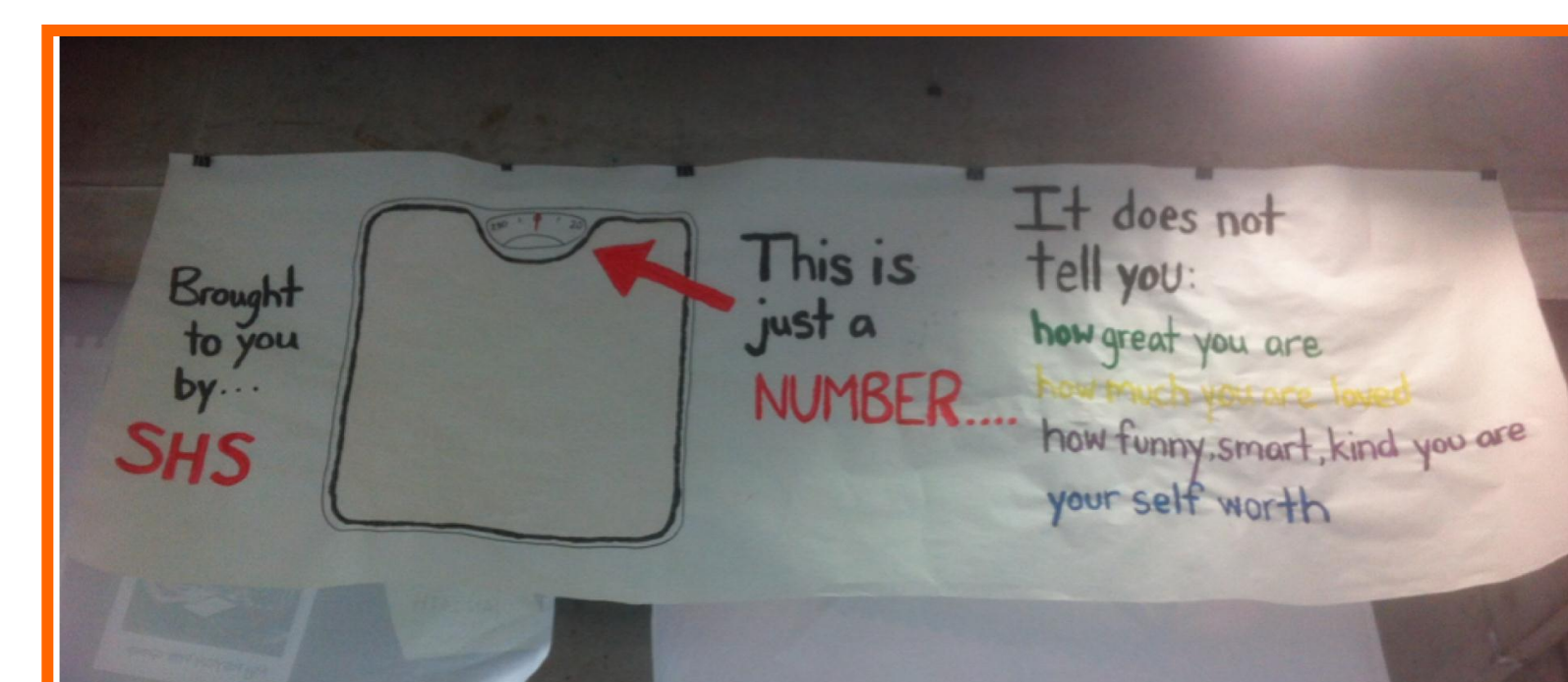
Table 1. Affirmations

1	Your smile makes me smile, it's contagious.
2	Change the way you see – not the way you look.
3	Never forget; you can change the world, so don't let it change you.
4	Be yourself, everyone else is taken.
5	Take good care of your body, it's the only place you have to live.
6	Beauty is in the "I" of the beholder.
7	Just be You(tiful). Love yourself.

On the back of each affirmation: *Pass it on...Brought to you by Student Health Services*

In week one, Peer Educators completed two to three one-hour sessions per day from Tuesday to Friday to distribute an approximated total of 800 affirmations. Each one encourages students to pass the affirmation along to someone else. The second week, there is a hallway campaign (See Images 1-2) where the Peer Educators have a booth and activity set up with information on self-esteem and body image. The focus of the booth information and activity was on the interpersonal influences of self-esteem and body image. The activity included students placing a sticker on a banner that would indicate who they influence most in their life. Through reflection and discussion with the Peer Educator, students were asked how they could help foster positive body image and self-esteem within their family members, friends, partners and the Brock community. Throughout the two-week program, posters and a banner (See Images 2) promoting positive body image and self-esteem among students were put up around the school. To date, there has been no systematic evaluation of the program, and particularly students' responses to it. Therefore, the present study investigated student perceptions of this program.

Images 2: Banner



Methods

The present study assessed the perceptions of specific components in 2 ways: through immediate feedback from individuals, and through focus groups. Immediate feedback was in the form of short questionnaires sought from 113 student participants (See Table 2) receiving positive affirmations and from 21 participants (See Table 3) visiting the hallway booth.

Tables 2-4. Participant Demographics

2. Affirmation Questionnaires	
Total Number of Participants	113
Gender	25 Males, 85 Females and 3 Unidentified
Ages	16-23
Program Year	1-4
Programs	Sociology, Business, Arts, Concurrent Education, Child & Youth Studies, Travel & Tourism, Dramatic Arts, Sports Management, Kinesiology, Humanities, Linguistics, Psychology, Political Science, Economics, Visual Arts, Community Health, Biochemistry, Recreation & Leisure Studies, Therapeutic Recreation, Mathematics, Chemistry, Biomedical Science, English, Accounting, History, Nursing

Upon agreeing to participate, they were given the short questionnaire. They were asked to complete the questionnaire, fold it and place it in the envelope provided by the Peer Educator. For participants visiting the hallway booth, a similar approach was used.

3. Booth Questionnaires

Total Number of Participants	21
Gender	10 Males, 9 Females, 2 Unidentified
Ages	18-26
Program Year	1-5
Programs	Concurrent Education, Nursing, Sociology, Kinesiology, Political Science, Linguistics, Biomedical Sciences, Arts, Psychology, Economics, Biology, Sport Management, Mathematics, Visual Arts

4. Focus Group Demographics

Total Number of Participants	17
Gender	8 Males, 9 Females
Ages	19-24
Program Year	1-5
Programs	Concurrent Education, Psychology, Business Communication, Physical Education, Business Administration, Accounting, Kinesiology

The focus groups were conducted to assess students' perceptions of the program and its specific components. There were a total of 17 participants (See Table 4) in the focus groups. All focus groups were structured by an interview guide that included key questions. Focus groups were led by the principal student investigator. Participants were recruited through posters around campus, social media pages, and word of mouth by Peer Educators. All questions were related to each component of the program that examined participants' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the outcomes of the program.

Results & Discussion

Positive Features

The majority of participants found the affirmations to be a good and effective way to have a positive effect in someone's day. From the 113 questionnaires, 89.4% of participants said that the affirmation had a positive effect in their day, 86% believed it was an appropriate way to foster positive self-esteem and body image among university students, and 92% said that they would pass the affirmation to someone else. Positive comments from female students included that the affirmation brightened their day and made them feel happier. One female said that the affirmations are a "good way to make people feel better about themselves."

Focus group discussions were able to find students' opinions on specific affirmations. For example, Affirmation 1 (Your smile makes me smile...) was a popular choice by students. Most agreed that it was simple and positive. A female student shared that she smiled when she read it and a male said he liked it and said it was great because everyone likes a smile.

The banner was a very accepted component of the program. Both male and female focus group participants had positive comments about the content of the banner. Most agreed that it was a very good message.

Weak Features

Participants found many positive components about the program; however they also raised awareness of some weak features as well. In the questionnaires about the affirmations, a few people said they thought it was a good idea, but that there are better ways to foster self-esteem and body image within university students, such as the female student who said, "there are better ways such as posters, conference, etc. being presented around campus." An entire focus group mixed with males and females believed that it was more geared towards personal health rather than body image and self-esteem. Overall, students still thought that the distribution of affirmations was a great idea, but felt that changes were necessary for less appropriate and inclusive affirmations.

Posters were the least liked component of the program based on responses from the focus groups. A male student shared, "I don't like it at all, using the word strong makes you think of physical strength. The body shapes [silhouettes] would immediately make guys pick themselves out and compare themselves to other males. Showcasing differences is the exact opposite from what you want to see." Both males and females in this particular focus group agreed with this student's opinion.

Appeal	Location	Gender Perceptions
A common theme that was brought up during every component discussion was the importance of appeal. Based on what the students said, it seems that appeal plays an important role in all components of the program. Students will more likely see, read, visit or interact with the program if it appeals to them. Therefore, body image and self-esteem programs need to create visually appealing components in order to reach and draw in the attention of college and university students.	Location was another reoccurring theme throughout all components of the program. Many students commented on the current programs' locations and criticized the fact that it does not cover enough of the campus. The general participant consensus is that the program needs to be more visible by utilizing more and much better locations on campus to be effective. Students believe that by doing this, the program can reach more students. For that reason, programs should work to target as many locations on campus as possible	Results found a fair amount of gender specific perceptions worth sharing. When discussing the distribution of affirmations, the female focus groups believed that it was a component mainly geared towards women. They said that they could not see the male students taking the affirmations seriously. One female participant said, "guys will most likely throw them away and think that they are stupid." This was a very surprising comment considering no male participants said that this particular component was more female centered. Program components need to be carefully developed to include appropriate messaging directed to all students and not selectively on a particular gender.

Conclusion

Overall, most participants agreed that this program is effective in achieving its goal of fostering positive body image and self-esteem among university students, but the exposure is not big enough. Based on their perceptions, programs must be more visible to reach more students on campus. The program should target more locations around the school, but also use more effective areas that will actually get through to the students. Program times should be extended by running more days of the week and for more hours of the day. Participants felt that the use of media would be key to reaching more students. We live in a media driven world where students are constantly on their phones and computers. Incorporating social media services such as Twitter and Facebook into the campaign is highly suggested, as well as creating short videos and displaying them on Web pages and televisions around campus. It is essential that these programs and initiatives be inclusive for everyone. In conclusion, future body image and self-esteem programs should carefully consider how to maximize visibility across campus, incorporate various forms of media and ensure that all components are inclusive.