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Exploring the perceptions of Chinese adults towards overweight and obesity: a systematic literature review

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The obesity prevalence among the Chinese population has increased more than three-fold over the last twenty years.⁽¹⁾ A cross-sectional study involving 15.8 million Chinese adults revealed that in 2023 one in every two Chinese adults was categorised as overweight or obese.⁽²⁾ Chinese individuals face a higher health risk of developing chronic disease at comparable Body Mass Index levels to Caucasians.⁽³⁾ Thus, it is urgent to address the increasing obesity prevalence in this population. People's perception towards obesity is likely to play an important role in influencing their weight management behaviour.⁽⁴⁾ For Chinese people, the unique Confucianism ideology, collectivist society, and modern mass media information exposure may have a profound influence on how Chinese people develop their perceptions about weight issues. It is therefore valuable to understand Chinese people's obesity-related perceptions as this may inform more culturally appropriate interventions for weight management. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first bilingual systematic review which aimed to synthesise published literature exploring the perceptions of Chinese adults towards overweight and obesity. Four English databases and two Chinese databases (Medline, APA PsycINFO, Social Science Premium Collection, Scopus, Wanfang Chinese Journal Database, and Chinese Electronic Periodical Services) were searched from inception to 17 Jun 2023. Studies were included if they were published in English or Chinese, investigated perceptions towards overweight and obesity, and focused on Chinese adults living in or outside of Mainland China. All retrieved citations were screened by two reviewers independently. A narrative synthesis method was employed. Forty-eight studies (n = 20 in English, n = 21 in simplified Chinese, n = 7 in Traditional Chinese) were included, involving n = 73910 participants. Females were more often researched. Also, the overall sample consisted more younger and more highly educated people, with 22 studies including solely university students. The collective quality or risk of bias of the studies was suboptimal. Three overarching themes emerged from this review: (i) Chinese adults tend to misperceive their weight status, largely stemming from limited awareness of BMI and societal norms idealizing thinness, leading to high dissatisfaction with body weight and high motivation to pursue weight loss. Females perceived a stricter weight ideal than males; (ii) Despite a pronounced motivation for weight management, study participants lacked practical knowledge regarding sustainable strategies. Non-scientific weight-loss methods and unproductive perceptions were prevalent among this population; (iii) Chinese adults perceived dealing with obesity as a lonely journey, influenced by the pervasive negative societal attitude towards obesity and the prevailing mindset emphasizing personal responsibility for weight-related issues. This review provides a comprehensive profile of perceptions towards obesity among Chinese adults over the last two decades and discusses methodology implications and future research directions.

References

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