

## Gender Differences in Diverse Connotations of Body Image: Islamabad-Rawalpindi Milieu

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### Abstract

The present ethnographic study focused on the indigenous youth perception of 'body image' and diverse connotations associated with it. The research has highlighted gender differences observed in the defining of body image. A qualitative methodology of in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions were employed. The sample included late adolescents (aged 18-24) and early adults (24-34) from the area of Islamabad and Rawalpindi (Pakistan). Purposive sampling was applied and thematic analysis was used as qualitative paradigm. The number of respondents comprised of 15 male and 15 females, of which each 5 were gym-goers. According to the findings, the definition of body image by women was stated in the context of body perception and feelings, beautification, and idealized body image which leads to appearance dissatisfaction. It involved body presentation and impression individually and collectively, body type dichotomy and measurements, as well as personality reflected through dressing sense. It was defined by men as being muscular and having proportioned body, impression formation, heightened. It also involved body type dichotomies, ones gait, being slim and not bulky, dressing sense, and behavioral characteristics. Conclusively, being a part of collectivistic culture, emphasis on the expectations and opinions of the society was commonly identified in both gender responses regarding body image perception. For many it was a topic of appearance and impression formation, which further fed two attitudes: appearing good for oneself and for others around them. These feelings were produced under the influence of societal and media portrayal of ideal body image.

**Keywords:** body image, gender, appearance, objectification, social comparison, youth

### Introduction

The objectives of this study are to conceptualize the indigenous definition and perception of body image and to explore gender differences in its meaning. People are repeatedly being told how to look and how not to look by the societal messages prevailing in the postindustrial cultures. Because of the progression and development of beauty industry, the prospects of shaping one's body as well looking after one's appearance to perfectly fit into the ideals that are being promoted are greater than afore (Tiggeman, 2011). It is also seen in different parts of the world, that those who do conform to the ideals get the greater rewards i-e., they get favorable treatment, have better employment chances, perceived as smarter, healthier, happier, and more prosperous and socially fit, whereas those who do not conform to standard ideals are stigmatized (Cash, 2011).

Besides notions of beauty which have a tendency of evolving through history and are culturally specific, the concept of body image is also known for its significance and powerful effects on humans. The issues regarding body image can be traced to the cultural portrayal of men and women as well as though media. Beauty standards set by mass media can be very grave and because of these

standards, people get influenced by the way they feel about general attractiveness and their bodies (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004). As it comes to body image researches, gender differences are well-established i.e., body image concerns are generally more experienced by women and girls as compared to men and boys (Buchanan, Bluestein, Nappa, Woods, & Depatie, 2013; Sweeting & West, 2002). Even though the female body is more given attention by the appearance culture but the focus of society has also intensified on male appearance (Murnen & Don, 2012; Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005). As a result, men and boys are gradually viewing their bodies as projects.

Generally, body image is defined as how one feels and thinks towards one's body (Cash & Smolak, 2011). Attitudinal body image judged by the evaluation of four factors: affect (feelings related with the body), global subjective satisfaction (body evaluation), behaviors (refraining from situations where the body will be visible) and cognitions (investment in looks and attitude about the body) (Thompson & Berg, 2002). The socially constructed nature of the body is revealed by the multitude of meanings that the body is seen to take on in different cultures and over time (Sparkes, 1996; Synnott, 1993). Indeed, as a social object, the body cannot be separated from the self, or 'body as subject'; they are emergent from one another (Waskul & Riet, 2002).

Moreover, the phenomenon of "What Is Beautiful Is Good" continues to be embedded. Under the influence of this phenomenon, individual's evaluation of others gets affected, particularly when judging others competence and positive traits of personality. Those who are attractive get frequently perceived as more accurate and favorable (Lorenzo, Biesanz & Human, 2010). A diverse and rich record of ethnography is being provided by cultural anthropology which shows that how different people value and associate meaning to specific appearances as well as practices related to appearance. Therefore this question that how common or worldwide the thin body pursuit among women is not only the interest of cultural anthropologist, but the local recapitulations of the question why, how it is pursued and how it is represented also get dig deeper (Anderson, 2012).

According to Weedon (1987), on contemporary women, the different demands being imposed from patriarchy and capital make her the focus of a range of contradictory discourses. She is also exposed to their paradox making her pay a great emotional price, and possibly subjected to being vulnerable, uncertain identity and dependence.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The continuous infiltration of cultural and societal messages regarding body image into our daily lives is ever-increasing. This highlights the need to investigate its impacts and how men and women of Pakistani society perceive this ideal yet influential phenomenon diversely. The rapid changes in the societal standards due to excessive exposure of communication mediums and the drastic sprouting of gyms and parlors in the last decade establish a sign that the concern for beautification and body image is on the rise. People are now relying on experts, trainers and their services for the purpose to achieve ideal appearances being portrayed. For this purpose the study will give an 'indigenous' understanding about the concept of body image in present-day and how well it is engrossed by the youth.

The anthropologist Sanday (1994) posits, "Body and society are reciprocal mirrors, each reflecting the consequences of the other's conscious wishes and repressed desires. It is through the body image that human beings become not only self-aware, but socially aware" (p. xi). Hence in a country where the matters of veiling, objectification of women and male dominance run side by side, a question does rise to be answered that what are basically the wishes, standards, or expectations held by Pakistani people and society when appearance and body image is the matter of concern.

In order to gain an in-depth knowledge of an indigenous understanding of body image a qualitative study was carried out. I believe results get generalized in a quantitative study but firsthand knowledge, subjective feelings, underlying reason and justifications, as well as uncovering of trends in opinions and thought can only be sought in detail by qualitative work.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

#### ***Social Comparison Theory***

The initial structure for the theory of social comparison was given by Festinger (1954), and it was observed that it is an innate practice which makes individuals form a judgment of others based on some attribute or feature. It was predicted by social comparison theory that the images that are portrayed by media can be employed by people as a standard for comparison. When indulging in social comparison, individuals mostly make comparisons based on appearance (shape, facial features, and weight), a process in which unlike boys, girls are more engaged (Graziano et al., 1978).

The social comparison theory has assisted in understanding youth involvement in the comparison between their physiques and the bodies of the media models and celebrities. It has also aimed for the comprehension of the body beliefs and standards of physical attractiveness held in our culture and whether they are adopted significantly out of comparison.

#### ***Objectification Theory***

Objectification theory by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) states that a society in which outward manifestation and sexual attractiveness gets highly valued, its individuals may be pushed to define their self-worth by how perfectly they fit into those cultural norms. Individuals feel pressurized to confirm when the media displays extreme slender female images as ideals. Being a part of a culture where women are continuously surrounded with media images as well as social interfaces that primarily focus on women's physical appearance, a self-objectifying propensity among women is greater unlike men (Fredrickson, et al., 1998; Noll & Fredrickson, 1998).

The objectification theory has helped to investigate the influence society has on youth's self-objectification as well as its substantial effect on their way of physical presentation. It was also applied to answer the question that whether self or sexual objectification is targeted more at male or female population by the hands of this society and other means of mediums.

### **Methodology**

In order to achieve a rich data on indigenous definition of body image the respondent's perceptions, views and lived experiences regarding it, a qualitative methodology was chosen. In-depth interview and two focus group discussion was conducted to explore gender differences in the comprehension of body image concepts. On the basis of past knowledge, relevant literature and theories on social comparison and objectification, an interview schedule was developed and conducted to be used in in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis was used as a qualitative paradigm and it is considered to be a process which involves identification of themes and patterns within qualitative data. It was suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) that thematic analysis is the first qualitative method that should be learned as, ‘.. it provides core skills that will be useful for conducting many other kinds of analysis’ (p.78). As a PhD Research Scholar, I did all the data coding myself.

### ***Study Sites and Participants***

With the aim of acquiring a broad range of vision, beliefs, and experiences, participants were recruited from the urban field of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The reason why these urban places are selected is that the cities are characterized by diverse peoples, races, and cultures. The respondents were both male and female and were college and university students. The sampling unit involved the

individuals that are labeled as the *youth* in this study. The age range of sample was late adolescence (18-24) and early adulthood (24-34) as defined by Newman and Newman (2012). According to Wright (1989), it is the period of life in which the adolescents develop images of what their bodies look like. The number of respondents comprised of 15 male and 15 females, of which 5 were gym-goers. Gym-goers were mostly those who went to gym on and off and no specific time limit or membership with gym was taken into account. The interview lasted between 90 minutes to 150 minutes.

Percentage analysis could not be done since the number of participant chosen was lesser in numbers. However the terms “many, more, or majority,” and “some or few,” were used repeatedly to show the intensity of similar and diverse responses. The implication of these terms can be understood in the following way:

‘Many’ = More than or equivalent to 5 respondents, ‘Some’ = Less than or equivalent to 5 respondents, ‘Most gym-goers’= More than 3 or equivalent to and ‘Some gym-goers’= Less than 3 or equivalent to.

### ***Sampling Technique***

Purposive sampling will be applied in this study, since the aim is to focus on particular characteristics of a scattered population concerning researcher’s study questions and concern (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This technique involves identification and selection of those individual or group of individuals that are proficient and knowledgeable with the phenomenon of interest.

The utilization of purposive sample involves the following considerations. Participants who were chosen purposely comprised of gym-goers so that their body image perception can be comprehended as compared to the rest of general sample. Secondly, the chosen sample represents single people only for interviews and focus group discussion. It excluded the married people because effects of pregnancy and after marriage body changes were only meant to be studied on the basis single adolescents’ perception and understanding.

### ***Gender Differences in Defining of Body Image***

According to my study findings, body image by females was stated in the context of diverse body perceptions, physical appearance, beautification, and idealized body image. “*The body perception involves physical perception encompassing your body image, emotional perception which is your feelings towards your body, and psychological perception towards it*” (female, 29). It was also defined in terms of presentation of body, as belonging to a collectivistic culture where emphasis on the opinions and expectations of the society is commonly held, people tend to see themselves and their actions keeping this reservation in mind. A respondent (aged 28) said, “*The way you carry yourself, your style, how you dress you yourself, how you present yourself according to your cultural needs.*” Body image was also defined as physical appearance i.e., “*how you dress up that it may make you feel good and how much you feel presentable by adding little make-up to your face at times*” (aged 27). On the contrary, female ascertained that body image is one worthless thing because it is making people worried; people are not satisfied with their bodies. If your body is deviating from the ideal standards set for it then you are in the queue to be judged by others without any guilt. This anxiety was also triggered by the ideal body image portrayed by compelling media.

Another significant contribution to the definition of body image by females was the ‘body types’. These body types were generally labeled by most interviewers in terms of *smart*<sup>1</sup>, *fat*<sup>2</sup> or *weak*<sup>3</sup> and among most of gym goers’ interviewees (both male and female) the terms toned, shaped,

<sup>1</sup> In shape, having fewer fats, gives healthy look, balanced weight.

<sup>2</sup> Having extra body fats that make you appear bulky/obese/over-weight or out of shape

<sup>3</sup> Gives skinny look, low body fat level, boney structure, ill appearance, under-weight

and sexy were used frequently while defining a perfect body type. One common definition was, “*It should be sexy i.e., having a figure of 36-24-26 (breast-waist-hip ratio) as also promoted through media. It must be toned which means your body should be shaped*”, (female, 30). Other expressed their definition of body types as, “*Body image is your physique i-e., your build or figure in shape, neither obese nor skeletal*” (aged 22) and “*Physique of a person, their structure i-e., neither over muscular nor skeletal*” (aged 19).

On the other hand, men have their own diverse definition of body image. One of the respondents (aged 27) stated, “*Men’s body image is about a muscular body*” and besides having a muscular physique, a proportioned body build was also deemed to be beautiful. For them an average body is not what defines a male body, but rather it should have a muscular build, which for some men gives an attractive look and for others it reflects manliness. A gym-goer (aged 22) stated, “*Body image is a good physique i.e., a body should be in level having a right balance between upper and lower body.*” Men in this culture are not only concerned with the balanced proportions of the body but how that body is carried in various ways. “*Body image involves almost everything such as your way of walking; your accent and one should possess attractive qualities.*” Attractive qualities in a person are always a win-win situation. It’s not about having and grooming physically attractive parts but one can prime their personality by attending to tiny details about their existence i-e., gait, and accent.

Body appeal was another connotation linked with body image i-e., possessing irresistible exterior quality which should never go unnoticed, as respondent said “*It is all about appeal, when someone is giving first impression from their appearance, it is worth watching and it attracts you to itself automatically*” (aged 28). For some males respondents respectively, “*Body image is all about girls, wrestlers, and athletes*” (aged 23) and “*Skinny, fat, muscular, no muscular body type, and all other types of bodies is what body image is about*” (age 24). The findings also suggest that dressing sense was not only the interest of females but males also had dressing concern according to the body type. Respondent stated, “*How a person dresses according to their personality i-e., if I am an athlete I will dress to expose my body because it’s in shape. And if someone is short, they will dress accordingly to make appearance seem taller*” (aged 28).

Lastly, the body of a person hence reflects their living style from sedentary to active one. Male respondents (aged 22) stated respectively, “*A good body image having balance presents a ‘healthy mind’*” and “*Your body makes your personality i-e., a person’s body type will reveal whether his lazy, he is active, or he is strong. If he is fat he will be associated with laziness and if he is active it means he is physically fit.*” Research also shows that overweight people are generally also perceived as more lazy, dishonest, mean, and incompetent in comparison to others (Brewis et al. 2011).

## **Results and Discussion**

Significance and different connotations associated with body image were explored in this study. Body image was perceived to be a subjective and multidimensional construct which includes individual’s self-perceptions about their bodies according to females. Dissatisfaction towards body was also involved in the parameter of body image definition, since ones get dissatisfied because the expectations and stereotypes associated with the body does not get fulfilled. The response, ‘Are you presentable enough for the impression you have on others?’ has caused body appearance to be perfected via different enhancing methods i-e, dressing and cosmetics. Body of a person is highly deemed of in its finest forms of composition. It’s basically a well-balanced body which is equally distributed in measures and undoubtedly gives an appealing appearance and this opinion was held by both genders. Body image got expressed in terms of well-known body calculations too. Besides

having a muscular physique in men, a proportioned body build was also deemed to be beautiful in them. The way a person dresses is one of the parameters to evaluate someone's persona. Findings suggest that dressing was not only the interest of females but males also showed dressing concern according to body type. A person with an average body as compared to the appealing body is thought to remain unnoticeable because it is believed that human eyes have this predisposition to seek beauty and when it's a human, a beautiful body plays its role in rendering this. It's like peace to the eyes; people get contended seeing such bodies roaming around them. The body was considered to be a major channel for measuring someone's personality just by a look at their appearance entailing a person's way of clothing, voice, and way of walking.

### **Limitations and Suggestions**

The chosen sample represents single people only, excluding the married ones because the effects of pregnancy and after marriage body appearance were only meant to be studied according to the perceptions of single adolescents'. This study has offered positive future implication as further research can be carried out by including married people or individuals in middle adulthood period (40-65 age) as well as rural areas where this concept can be explored through indigenous perspective.

### **Conclusion**

Findings of this study uncovered gender thinking patterns and individual differences in perceiving and defining body image in a varying manner. For many, it was a topic of appearance which further fed two attitudes: appearing good for oneself and for others around them. These feelings were produced either under the societal portrayal of ideal body image or subjective feelings towards one body out of self-love. Other frequent constructs such as personality, sense of dressing, the way of walking and talking, physique and balanced body shape or size were also associated with body image definition.

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