

Perception Of Female Students About Their Body Image

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Abstract

The present study was conducted to know the experience of girls to their body image and outlook. The objective was to explore the perception of girls about their body image, level of satisfaction with it, methods that are used to achieve certain body images and the psychological affects and pressure put forth due to prescribed body images. A sample of 60 female students was taken from different departments of University of Karachi. A combination of closed and open ended questionnaire was filled by these female students. Results showed that most of them were experiencing trouble with their body image. They were concerned mostly about their body image and some of them were using different methods of weight loss. Majority agreed that media plays an important role in projecting and promoting to have lower weight and focusing body size. Due to this they feel a pressure that if they could not meet those standards they will be rejected. The study concludes that girls are conscious towards their body image because of their experiences. Therefore they give importance to slim and smart body size and they assume that body image is more important for both boys and girls.

تلخیص مقالہ

زیر نظر تحقیق میں لڑکیوں کے اپنے جسمانی مثالی صورت اور اس سے متعلق مشاہدات کا تجزیہ کیا گیا ہے۔ تحقیق میں یہ جاننے کی کوشش کی گئی ہے کہ لڑکیوں کا جسمانی مثالی تصور کے بارے میں کیا خیال ہے، اس کو حاصل کرنے کے لئے وہ کیا طریقے استعمال کرتی ہیں نیز اس کی وجہ سے کس قسم کے نفسیاتی دباؤ کا شکار ہوتی ہیں۔ اس حوالے سے ۶۰ جواب دہندگان سہولتی نمونہ بندی کے تحت جامعہ کراچی کے مختلف شعبہ جات سے انٹرویو کے لئے منتخب کیا گیا۔ سوالنامہ غایت اور غیر غایت شدہ سوالات پر مبنی تھا تاکہ اس حوالے سے تفصیلی معلومات معلوم کی جاسکیں۔ ان لڑکیوں کی عمر ۱۸ سے ۲۴ سال کے درمیان تھی، تحقیق کے نتیجے میں یہ بات معلوم ہوئی کہ زیادہ تر لڑکیوں کے خیال میں جسمانی مثالی صورت بہت اہمیت کی حامل ہے کیونکہ ان کے خیال میں اگر لڑکے یا لڑکیاں مقرر کردہ جسمانی ساخت اور جسامت پر پورے نہیں اترتے تو اُس کی وجہ سے اُن کو لوگوں کے سامنے شرمندگی اٹھانی پڑتی ہے اور خود اعتمادی کی کمی واقع ہوتی ہے لہذا زیادہ تر خواتین کی جسامت نازک جبکہ مردوں کو کسرتی بدن کا مالک ہونا چاہیے۔

Keywords: Body image.

Introduction

Nowadays the most frequent concern shown in popular culture is about body image. Mostly advertisements target women, to achieve expected appearance according to the latest trends. It is not a new phenomenon or sudden emergence because appearance has been a focus in history as well but the beauty ideals have changed from time to time and culture to culture. Naomi Wolf (1990) explored “The Beauty Myth” that how women have started hating their own bodies because they cannot achieve the so called ideal body image, and because of this they develop a fear of rejection. Another major fear that women have is fear of ageing and to defeat this they use cosmetic surgeries and natural remedies to save their youthful image.

Body image is the subjective picture of one’s own appearance, established both by self-observation and by noting the reactions of others. The body image is constructed by different factors because it is based on personal perceptions about self and experience with others. It is also shaped by social and cultural factors. Fox-Kales, 2011, argue that movies play a major role in idealizing body images. “We learn from the movies what it means to be a man or a woman” (Fox-Kales, 2011, p. 3). Concerns of people about their appearance are not new; they have been changing from time to time. It also varies from one part of the world to the other. However; a lot of people are now following the trends set by the companies selling their items related to it. Braziel & LeBesco (2001, p.20) discuss that, it depends on the fashion trends which changes from time to time “What is out will be in and what’s in will be out”. Feminists, therefore, suggest that there is a need of analyzing and changing the portrayal of women in media. Scientific studies and the most casual viewing yield the same conclusion: Women are shown almost exclusively as housewives or sex objects. A woman is conditioned to view her face as a mask and her body as an object, as things separate from it and more important than her real self constantly in need of alteration, improvement and disguise (Dines & Humes,1995). The construction of beauty ideals is not confined to media only. Sometimes toys can play that role of creating an ideal image. Urla & Swedlund (2008) examines the ways in which Barbie doll has become normalized and idealized by young women and creating an ideal image of skinny, white and twenty years old girl. Starting from the time of its make in 1959, she analyzes its continuous popularity regardless of the studies related to the criticism related to its appearance. To achieve this image women undergo painful surgeries and punish themselves with outrageous diets.

As discussed earlier the body image is concerned with appearance of men and women and expectations from them. Bordo (1990) discuss the body image by taking the example of body size. The concern about weight and body figure is not in case of women only, for women, the ideal body is slim. For men, the ideal is slender and moderately muscular.

Non-conformity to the slender ideal has a variety of negative social consequences. Overweight (for both men and women) is seen as physically unattractive and is also associated with other negative characteristics. On the contrary feminist argue that the pressure on women regarding her image is more as compared to men.

The concepts related to body image are strengthened by generally the words used with it such as happiness, success, youthfulness and social acceptability. If someone, on the contrary, bears the 'other' image is considered being lazy, lacking will power and being out of control. It is also being observed that people, who do not conform to the ideal body image, face prejudice throughout their lifespan. Thomas Cash (1990) argues that overweight people are treated differently from childhood. Children prefer not to play with their overweight peers, and assign negative adjectives to drawings of overweight people. This prejudice continues into adulthood, when overweight people tend to be rated as less active, intelligent, hardworking, successful, athletic and popular than slim people. People who are overweight are likely to find more difficulty renting property, being accepted in 'good' United States colleges and getting jobs, than are their slimmer peers.

Research shows that, stereotyping body size also creates stereotypes of fat and thin women. A study by Tiggemann and Rothblum from college students in 1988, shows that weight qualities were typical of thin men and women and fat men and women. Men and women in America and Australia reported negative stereotypes of fat people. Although fat people were seen as warmer and friendlier, confirming the traditional stereotype of the fat and jolly person, they were also viewed as less happy, more self-indulgent, less self-confident, less self-disciplined, lazier and less attractive than thin people. These differences were more marked for judgments of fat women than fat men. The results indicate negative stereotyping of fat people, especially fat women, in these college students (Tiggemann and Rothblum, 1988).

Another important aspect is that, body weight and health Biological arguments also stress the importance of slenderness for health (and the unhealthiness of overweight). But this was not the case in past. Slenderness has not always been linked with health. Gorgan (1999) quote Bennett and Gurin, 1982, tracing the history of this concept. In the start of the twentieth century, thinness was associated with illness in the United States and in Britain, because of its link with tuberculosis (Bennett and Gurin, 1982). More recently, extreme thinness is coming to be associated with AIDS. Indeed, AIDS is known as 'slim' in some African countries (Sarah, 1999). In South Asian culture there are different phrases related to eating and the concept of healthy food was considered food with heavy gravy and fatty food. There is a strong connection between culture and concepts of appearance. Gorgan predict that the cultural effects of this association between thinness and illness in Western industrialized countries may become apparent over the next decade, but at present thinness does not produce the generally negative stereotypes that are found in poorer nations. Instead, there is a general belief that to be plump is unhealthy, and that

thinness is an indicator of good health. In order to determine the health risks of overweight, it is important to draw a distinction between mild to moderate overweight and obesity. Obesity is almost certainly harmful, and is associated with heart disease, hypertension and diabetes. Obesity is a major cause of morbidity and mortality.

Portrayal of the female body was not slender throughout the history. However; there is general agreement that these days the social pressure to conform to the slender ideal is greater on women than on men. This representation has been traced by some researchers in the West that idealization of slenderness has occurred over the past century. Within Western industrialized cultures, there have been many changes over the years in the body shape and size that is considered attractive and healthy, especially for women. The changes can be mapped from figures shown in the paintings of the middle Ages to the turn of this century, to the thin body types favored by advertisements and fashion magazines. Slimness is idealized to show freedom, youthfulness and a ticket to the 'Jet Set' life in 1960s Britain, and was adopted as the ideal by women of all social classes (Orbach, 1993). Further the concept of body image is strengthened by propagation of beauty pageants making a standard for height and weight (Mazur, 1986). Studies of magazines show that models became thinner and thinner between the 1960s and 1980s (Fallon, 1990).

There are different methods to evaluate perception of people about their body image: The silhouette technique, Body Attitudes Questionnaire, Body Mass Index. The silhouette is one of the most widely used quantitative measures of degree and direction of body dissatisfaction. Using this technique, silhouettes ranging from very thin to very fat are presented to the participant, who is usually asked to choose the silhouette closest to her own body size and that representing her ideal size. The discrepancy between the two figures is seen as an indication of dissatisfaction. Studies using this technique have found that women show a reliable tendency to pick a thinner ideal than their current figure. This effect has been replicated in the United States, Australia and Britain. In the earliest published study using silhouettes, April Fallon and Paul Rozin (1985) asked 227 women studying psychology at the University of Pennsylvania to indicate their 'ideal figure', their 'current figure', and 'the figure that most men would find attractive' Fallon and Rozin conclude that women's perceptions put pressure on them to lose weight. Gail Huon and colleagues (1990), in an Australian study, used photographs of women, varying in size from very thin to very fat instead of the silhouette pictures, and found very similar results to the silhouette work. The 'ideal' photograph chosen was significantly thinner than the picture chosen as the 'actual size'.

The Body Attitudes Questionnaire (Ben-Tovim and Walker, 1991) covers six distinct aspects of body experience: feelings of fatness, self disparagement, strength, salience of weight, feelings of attractiveness, and consciousness of lower-body fat. Dissatisfaction

exists in a context where body image is subjective and socially determined. The social relativity of body satisfaction has been demonstrated by illustrating how satisfaction varies by social group. Data from different social groups have shown that the same body shape may be perceived more or less positively depending on the gender and social group of the person doing the perceiving. A person's body image is not determined by the actual shape and size of that body, but by that person's subjective evaluation of what it means to have that kind of body within their particular culture. Work has shown conclusively that body dissatisfaction is not related in any logical way to actual body size, as determined by Body Mass Index. (Gorgan, 1999, p.179).

In the era of globalization the concerns related to body image has spread all over the world. In Pakistan different researches have been conducted related to this topic. Khan, et.al (2011) conducted a study with university students to assess the impact of media on body image of 784 University students in the context of Pakistan. The study confirmed the tendency of the media to have an overall negative effect on individuals' body image. A striking feature was that negative body image dissatisfaction was found to be more prevalent in males as compared to females. Likewise, positive (body image dissatisfaction) BID scores were more prevalent amongst females. Mehmud and Crittenden (2007) compared body image attitudes in Muslim Pakistani and non-Muslim Caucasian Australian young women. The study found higher levels of unhealthy eating attitudes among Pakistani girls as compared with Caucasians, while the two samples were found comparable on body shape concerns--findings that seem contrary to common expectations in view of the cultural context of Pakistani/Muslim society. However, as the Pakistani sample came from very prestigious English-medium schools, it cannot be viewed as representative of the Pakistani female population. Further, the single measure that was used to assess body image in the study seems insufficient, given that the reliable measurement of body image is considered to require multiple measures. Nevertheless, the reported negative body shape attitudes and quite high ratio of disturbed eating patterns in samples that were previously thought to be less susceptible in adhering to the Western 'thin ideal', is rather alarming. Lack of research on these issues in such non-Western societies may result in under-identification of clinical problems in adolescents and young females and thereby pose a serious health risk for them.

Methodology

The universe of the present study was University of Karachi. A sample of 60 respondents was taken, ageing from 17 to 24 years. Respondents were female students from different departments in University of Karachi through convenience sampling method. A questionnaire based on questions related to body image and its perception including both open and close ended questions was filled by respondents. Initially they took interest in

filling the questionnaire but became slightly conscious about the questions related to their own body image. The data was analyzed by simple frequency tables.

Results

Results showed that majority of respondents were conscious about their body image and they felt it is important to have perfect body image because it create a positive impression on others. A 'slim and smart' body image would not embarrass them in front of others. Some of them linked it to the healthy look and confidence as well. One of them defined it according to the general perception prevailing in the society as ' girls must be smart and beautiful. Boys should be muscular and handsome'. Only two respondents felt appearance is not important.

Table 1
Perception about importance of Body image

Perception about body image	Frequency	Percentage
Important	58	96.6
Un important	2	3
Total	60	100

Average height of the respondents between the range of 5 ft to 5.5 ft and average body weight was between 50 to 55 kg. 63 percent were satisfied with their weight and 37 percent wanted a change. Those who were not satisfied felt they do not look good or people comment on their weight. Few of them also mentioned that their family asks them to lose weight.

In response to a question about benefits of slim and smart body, 25 percent responded that it gives confidence while 53 percent said that they become more acceptable for marriage proposals. 20 percent thought it is easy to choose outfit while others did not feel it was important.

Table 2
Opinion about benefits of slim and smart body

Opinion about benefits of slim and smart body	Frequency	Percentage
Greater chance of acceptance for marriage proposals	32	53
It gives confidence	15	25
It's easy to choose an outfit	9	15
No benefits	4	7
Total	60	100

When they were asked about the overweight appearance 40 percent of them said that people pass comments while 36 percent said it looks bad. Remaining thought that it leads to low self esteem and cause depression. In response to question regarding ideal person in term of body image most of them, 57 percent, named actresses and models, few of them, 14 percent mentioned names of their teachers or a family member while remaining 29 percent didn't name any one.

Although many of them showed concern about their body image, interestingly, only 16 percent tried some home remedies and homeopathic treatments to reduce their weight. It was also interesting to note that 70 percent thought that appearance is important for both boys and girls. In response to a question about skipping meals, 60 percent replied negatively but 40 percent were used to it.

Table 3
Role of media in promotion of body image

Role of media in promotion of body image	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	59	98.4
No	1	1.6
Total	60	100

Almost all of them agreed that media plays an important role in showing body image. Body image is a simple term as a way person perceive or think about his or her body and how it appears to others. The study shows the opinion of female students about desired body shape that conforms to the 'ideal'. Currently the trend is thin shape for women and muscular shape for men. These perceived ideal body shapes are reinforced by the mass media and popular culture icons. Internalization of body ideals that are perpetuated by the media can be a strong influence on body dissatisfaction especially among females. In Pakistan girls started using different methods to attain the 'size zero' because a famous Indian film star was said to have that figure. The same goes for boys, who want to attain the muscular image as portrayed by heroes in Indian film industry. They perceive that for confidence and success it is necessary to become slim and to have an attractive figure.

In conclusion, the reason of exploring this belief is that it is necessary to adopt a healthy life style, doing exercise, taking health diet, controlling excessive fat but the obsession of attaining an 'ideal' figure and using medicines, surgery or other methods, which usually have severe side effects, is dangerous. Moreover, to explore the body image by different age groups and gender bases a detailed study is recommended with wider scope and using a combination of methods about how people see the body image and to what extent it affects on personality development.

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