

MEDIATED PERFECT BODY IMAGES AND WOMEN: UNDERSTANDING ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CREATING PRESSURES ON YOUNG WOMEN FACING HEIGHT, WEIGHT AND COMPLEXION STIGMA

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ABSTRACT

The mediated images of perfect body create concerns for its consumers. Such mediated images set some ideal and unrealistic standards of body features especially about weight, height and complexion that marginalize the individuals. The stigmatization of body features and beauty standards posits certain expectations in society. The social media is crucially becoming responsible for propagating the ideal and perfect body images due to its availability and wide consumption. So, this research study tends to understand the role of social media in creating pressures on young women and also how the lives of women facing weight, height and complexion stigma are being affected due to different kind of pressures. The exploratory research design with in-depth interviews as research method was opted. The research study revealed that women generally face lots of pressures due to mediated perfect body images and they also face body shaming when they are not meeting the expected beauty standards. The women find mediated body images very stereotypical and there are many stigma associated with body images. The practices of body shaming create certain pressures on women from families, peers and social media. Such pressures includes psychological and physical pressures that creates marital issues, low self-esteem, lack of confidence, negative feelings, insecurities, self-complexes, depression, loneliness, anxiety and eating disorders.

Keywords: Mediated body images, Social media, Social pressures, Stigma, Women.

INTRODUCTION

Media is a source which is used to convey ideas, thoughts, images and information to general public (Irving, 2008). Media is a very powerful medium that out-reach and influences the larger public for not only in opinion formation, but media identifies and build identities for individuals. Media projection of women's body image has been in question over the decades. A rich body of literature is available that suggests the role of media in perpetuating ideal and unrealistic women body images as weight stigma, whereas, the media is powerful and has potential to impact the attitude of individuals with reference to body consciousness (Selensky & Robert, 2021; Fardouly, Willburger & Vartanian, 2018; Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008). The traditional media practices were quite different in presenting the women images in magazines and newspaper whereas the current media practices shares ideal and perfect body images with certain beauty standards. Traditionally, media was covering women with all sizes of body figures and shapes but presently woman show ultra slim physique. Presently, both media and society have started to rule out those individual who do not set in the frame of ideal image of beauty (Wynn, 2010). In electronic media, women are presented as Ideal who have slim physique, tall height and with fair complexion. The extreme slim and alluring character depiction of women is associated with appearance satisfaction (Want, Vickers, & Amos, 2009). The advertisements also present the women as a sex object and use women bodies for sexual appeal. Advertisers use to highlight the cuts and curves of females to

make the ads catchy and it's one of the way to get more viewership. Every kind of media portrayed women as a sex object and joy (Dicker 2006). The standards of beauty which media has set for women are unachievable. Beauty standards which media has created for the body image of females are not only unrealistic but just too much sexualized (Johnson et al. 2015). The conventional media practices have compelled the women to be slim, smart, attractive and pretty.

The contemporary media propagates the beauty stigma and ideals of thinness. The media has power to shape the attitudes and beliefs of the audience around weight. Such attitudes of weight stigma contribute to the discourses and social norms (Selensky & Robert, 2021). The consistent exposure to media which promote ideal standards of thinness are likely to create body image disturbances and dissatisfaction (Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008). This stigmatization of women body images is also prevalent on social media that creates pressures on women. Sharing filtered images with perfect appearances on social media is creating the unacceptability of the women whose appearances, height and weight deviates from sociocultural standards of beauty. Whereas, there are opportunities and spaces on social media to counter the stigma of beauty and scale up the awareness level to build narrative on acceptance of women with their own real body images (Puhl, 2022).

Stigma is the social devaluation and depreciation of individuals based on certain body features. People are generally stigmatized with higher body weight (Lydecker et al., 2016). The mass media texts are heavily laden with such stigmatization, which creates systematic inequalities. The stigmatization is associated with body dissatisfaction, disorders in eating, depression, social isolation and economic hardships (Puhl & Suh, 2015; Puhl & Latner, 2007; Puhl & Brownell, 2003; Link & Phelan, 2001). The stigma of beauty standards also exists in Pakistan and people used to accept and appreciate the women with ideal weight, height and complexion.

The literature showed that negative body image leads to body dissatisfaction as a result it changes thoughts about ideal body image and creates different issues. Mass media creates pressure on one's own thought about the body image (Spettigue & Henderson, 2004). Social media exerts pressures on young girls by setting some standards of beauty for women to achieve perfect body. The pressures on women to achieve perfect body come from three different groups of society i-e family, peers and media. The social comparison accelerates the pressures and desires to gain perfect bodies. Women start comparing themselves with their own friends then women experience more pressure to achieve perfect body especially when their body weight is higher than those women or friends around them (Helfer & Warschburger 2013). Social media is a platform for interaction and communication and the features available on different social media outlets provide opportunities to upload images through various filters. It promotes ideal standards of beauty and thus creates pressures on the users. Thus, the primary *objective of study* is to understand how social media is playing a part in creating pressures on young girls facing height, weight and complexion stigma. Further, this study intended to know the kinds of pressures on young women. The study also extends to know how the experiences affect their lives and how they cope with the pressures of perfect body images on social.

Research Questions

1. Whether perfect body images on social media are creating pressures on young women?
2. What kind of pressures young women face from social media exposure to perfect body images?
3. How young women view their own bodies in relation to what they see on social media?
4. How the experiences of young women facing weight, height and complexion stigma affect their lives?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social media is a platform for communication and interaction. Social media is gaining popularity which is creating curiosity for researchers to find out the impact of social media specifically in context of body image (Klein, 2013). Social media has strong influence on its users. Media is a tool which influences the public opinion and builds identities for individuals specifically women. Its influence is so powerful that social media users engage in communication and activities with celebrities and social media stars. These social media celebrities or stars become the leaders or opinion makers for their followers. They have power to portray the message positively or negatively and even these messages have potential enough to represent negativity towards many different issues like body image or body dissatisfaction. There are many instances where the messages that are communicated are received negativity as it relates to body image and body dissatisfaction (Bell, 2016). Young females are particularly addicted to different social media apps and especially they are facing lot of pressures or problem (Mills, Shannon & Hogue 2017). Social media comprises of different social networking sites like Instagram, Youtube, Snapchat, Pinterest. These applications are used for photos and videos sharing with others to see and

comment. Such kind of social networking sites plays vital role in communication through images. Images help in viewing ourselves, shaping our surrounding and to concentrate on body regulating (Tiidenberg & Cruz, 2015).

Body Image can be defined as a person's own views or thoughts about their body sizes and shapes. Every mind has a different concept about "ideal or perfect" body image but its society and media both influence. Society sets some standards of perfect body images. Media has also set some beauty standards for women by portraying them as slim, tall, and fair in complexion. It is only negative body image which leads to body dissatisfactions because of difference between normal and ideal body size ultimately leads to body dissatisfaction. Body dissatisfaction is individual's dismissive perception about their body (Grogan, 2008). A lot of literature highlighted that body dissatisfaction rate is higher in females than males (Feingold & Mazzella, 1998; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004; Mintz & Betz, 1986; Zellner, Harner, & Alder, 1989). The women who are obese or overweight feel more dissatisfaction because media set some beauty standards and these beauty standards based of ideal bodies (slim, tall and fair complexion) and those women who are obese or over weighted, short heighted and having dark complexion are treated inhumanely. Constantly seeing the mediated images of ideal bodies pressurizes girls to be slim (Klein, 2013). More exposure to social networking site creates much pressures on girls as compared to other sources of media (Gioia, Griffiths, & Boursier, 2020; Ridolfi et al., 2011; Van den Berg et al., 2007).

Literature on social media and body images draws that social media promote unrealistic images by setting some standards of beauty that are unattainable although many females know that but they still use to compare themselves with others. There are three major factors that are associated with physical appearance i-e weight, height and skin tone. Overweighed person's images on media are always contradictory because obese people are considered as unattractive or ugly. Both media and society have started to project out those individual who do not set in the frame of ideal image of beauty (Wynn, 2010). Obesity is an emerging issue in both genders, males and females, and there are many causes connected to obesity. The women are more pressurized and stigmatized with reference to body images so body dissatisfaction rate is higher in women than in men (Feingold & Mazzella, 1998; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004; Mintz & Betz, 1986; Zellner, Harner, & Alder, 1989).

There are many stigmas in society associated with complexion, height and weight. People are always attracted towards fair skin toned persons because fair complexion is considered as symbol of beauty and often linked with someone's richness. Dark skinned women and men are rejected everywhere as unattractive and inferior ones (Prashad, 2000). Fair complexion is linked with elite class on the other hand dark skinned is linked with inferior class (Goon & Craven 2003). People with white skin tone get more advantages in every field of life as compared to dark toned person. The significance for whiteness disclosed in the subcontinent film industry as well. Main characters of films (hero and heroines) are usually beautiful with fair complexion whereas dark skinned persons are casted as villains (Maqsood, 2015). The literature highlights the prevalence of stigmas associated with weight, height and complexion in media and society. Identifying the gap in literature on the issue, the present study intends to find out the role of social media in creating pressures on young women with stigmatized body images.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research design with in-depth interviews was applied to the study. The target *population* for this research study included young girls of the age ranged from 18-25 years of Lahore, Pakistan. Snowball *sampling* was done considering the approachability of the subjects. The sample size comprised of 10 subjects and a cue-sheet consisting of ten tentative questions was structured.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Body imaging is more related to psychological aspect rather than physical. Appearance stigmatization is distinct and very serious form of social pressure. Young women consider that the new trends of media for representing women bodies, family, peers and friends playing role in creating social pressures on them. Society is very judgmental with negative remarks regarding women body image. They set some unrealistic standards of beauty and perfection for women that are illogical or stereotypical. Women have negative self-image due to body dissatisfaction, low-confidence and self-esteem, holding back themselves, anxiety for not having perfect body, increased insecurities and complexes which cause mental disorders like depression and anxiety.

Role of social media

Social media is playing a major role in creating social pressures on young girls similarly. Social media is portraying women with perfect body with zero size, heightened and fair complexion. Even the worst thing is that they promote other body type and make plus-sized or tanned complexion girls as not acceptable to society. Majority of the subjects believes that social media's role is significant in highlighting numerous issues but at the same time it has a great effect on the lives of women because it can make or break the person. Social media is playing role in promoting negative body images and eating disorders.

One of the subjects stated:

“Social media do plays a very important role in highlighting numerous of issues. Although taking those social issues awareness in a limelight is not always the solution of the problem, it's necessary for social media to work on some projects for the realization of half of the population to lesser social pressure on the young girls who lack in some natural appearance or not according to their beauty standards or ideal/ perfect body. As I am obese I face a lot of criticism on my pictures by people and I'm facing such criticism just because of social media and it is one of the major source for creating pressures on girls like me because it is only social media who set beauty standards for women so everyone wants us like with perfect body. Still I feel depressed”.

Women's images on social media

There is perfection on social media which includes branded dresses, popular make up looks, everyone on social media is perfect without any flaw. Women look more like idol rather than a human beings who are supposed to have different identity and no human being in real life is that perfect such unrealistic images on social media creates pressures on women because too much perfection is unattainable,

One of the subject stated

“Well, that's a pretty easy question to answer. I don't have to think twice before saying slim, slender and fair. Images of women on social media are quite conflicted to say the least. Some prefer being natural and some are posing with superficial body and features. But I have to agree to, those with heavy makeup, long hair and slender form are more than the ones who stay unbothered. Whenever I open up my search feed, it's filled with women posing in exotic dresses, charming background, with makeup coating their faces, slim waist showing off from the tightly stitched sides of dresses or western wear for that matter and a very good picture quality”.

Internalization of thin ideals

Subjects believed that consciously or unconsciously when they continuously expose to such things like ideal body images it definitely develop internal desires. So exposure to ideal body images on social media enhances the internalization of thin ideals.

One of the subjects stated that

“Yes, it has a profound effect. Scrolling and looking at perfect shapes and body types does give you the realization that you need to improve and make yourself better to blend into the world of beauty”.

Women as Beauty icon

All of the respondents are in opinion that social media showing us a world that isn't practically real and possible for each to reach. The way they're flaunting their edited pictures over the internet does kind of represent women as a beauty icon.

One of the subjects stated that

“Yes, it's far more so true that social media is utilizing those women as a beauty icons as I said earlier that they are fantasizing the world that every person is that way and persuading the ugly people to do some sort of surgery to meet their standards”.

Making Comparisons

Young girls responded that they start comparing themselves to the images they seen on social media because social media set some beauty standards for women and even girls are always conscious of the way they look and everybody loves to look the best. Once they come across these 'perfectionists' they do start comparing and most possibly degrade themselves.

One of the subjects stated

“Yes! Even if one don't wants to. Such images are everywhere. You cannot stop them and you end up comparing yourself with them. I see lot of beautiful girls who aren't satisfy with themselves because they are not looking like the one they see on social media”.

Social Media's Images influencing women's life

Most of the respondents responded that these images influence strongly which they can't deny. It provoke them to buy more makeup products, to be on a diet for losing weight, to wear western, it

Mediated Perfect Body Images and Women

indirectly force us to buy fairness creams, to go for brands instead of local markets. These images aren't just standards; they influence people to replicate their representation along with the objects optimized. One of the subjects quoted

"First of all I am influenced by that images then I came to realize that I am different from them and I have my own identity. She quoted her words as "Of course I am human being too! Initially when I started using social media and expose to such things I started comparing myself to them but after that I realize that I am different from them and every human being is different what I am seeing on the screen isn't me I have my own identity because once I was victim of depression just because of social media images. Social media only destroyed me".

Pressures faced due to Body Image

Social media constantly pressurize women to have ideal bodies. Women find themselves as aloof, rejected and with lots of fears. Women believed that they live in such kind of space where fair skin is preferred over the tan one even though majority has brownish and olive tone. The standard is set to be pretty, fair and slim. But the social pressure is a major cause of these beauty standards. Youngsters these days follow diet plans, cake up their face and feel insecure going out bare face. Ideal representations of women's images on social media create a lot of pressures on them as well. One of the subjects quoted

"Yes! Ideal representation of women's images creates many pressures on girls. I always have been a somewhat short heighted normal weighted girl but when I started put on some weight, people would tell me that I'm getting more healthier day by day which made me anxious. At some point I started having self-hatred and felt self-pity, I didn't want to meet anyone just because I thought I wasn't the perfect girl anymore. This also happened with my height as well".

Parental Pressure

Ideally families should have to work to prevent body image issues but in reality they are doing opposite by reinforcing expectations to female body. Young girls facing lots of criticism from their families in regard to their body size, shape, height, features and skin complexion.

One of the subject stated that

"I remember that since my college time my mother always forced me to follow weight loss exercises or follow diet plans if your weight remains as it is no one would wish to marry you. So I feel all the time depressed and still in depression due to my obesity".

Another subject stated

"The very first, it was my family telling me that I need to grow my height because I was too short. I always stood at the very front of my class's lane as well in assembly. That got me thinking that people would only appreciate you if you're tall enough. At that time I wasn't chubby, my weight was under control but my height was short. My family tried to make me chew pills for my height which I vomited over because I couldn't bear the idea of fill oil going down my throat. Then they hang up rods for me to climb, made me drink glasses of milk, used vitamins, homeopathic and herbal medicines for my height but I couldn't seem to pursue anything at all because I wasn't serious about it. Later on, when my cousins and other people started teasing me due to my short height, I really regretted my decision and asked my parents to do those things again for me and at that time they replied, "your age to grow your height is gone now, no use of doing that stuff".

Peer Pressure

Mostly social comparison occurs within friends circle and when someone compares themselves with others it ultimately creates pressure on other.

One of the subject stated that her family is very supportive but sometimes peers are not. Even she stated

"No matter how strong you are! No matter how supportive your parents are, there are still some peers and relatives who see flaws in you and started giving you advices over "How to look thin, fair and beautiful" I feel lot of pressure from some relatives that work on your weight, eat less, do exercise etc, even though I was just a little overweight person and it is my natural body physique, but still some people pressurize you for this. Regarding my complexion I face same comments from my relatives and peer group that go to parlor and you will look prettier. Even they advise to follow different diet plans and exercises".

Another subject stated

"Friends and relatives usually mention the names of the doctors to move on for the checkup and some kinds of procedures to opt; you will be tall and mocking them by measuring the height with someone who is tall and also telling that your life partner should also be not so heighted otherwise you won't set in the frame and won't make couple goals. They also call me with different names. It makes me mentally disturbed".

Societal Pressure

Society is also playing major role in creating pressures on young women. Body shaming, name-calling, and stereotyping the body images is prevailing. It creates pressures on women that make them psychologically stressed and give challenges to their mental health.

One of the subjects stated

“There are still some people who see flaws in you and started giving you advices over “How to look attractive, fair and beautiful” Regarding my complexion I face same comments that go to parlor and you will look more prettier. Even in front of other it’s totally disgusted and feel bad for myself and such advises crates anxiety and depression”.

Another subject stated

“Whenever a person would come up to tell me that I’ve put on weight, it really disturbs me to a point I’d stop eating. I’d start watching different healthcare videos and would start to see myself more in the mirror. I’d stop wearing much of my clothes just to look thinner”.

Struggling with pressures

The women are learning to live their lives while suffering with pressures. Mostly women tend to ignore all the bad and negative comments by accepting themselves the way they are.

As one of the subject quoted

“There isn’t any solution but there is always a loophole to every matter. To tackle this problem we have to make ourselves psychologically and physically strong enough to kick the ball out of the ground”

Negative experiences of self-body images

Young girls consider that new and emerging social media is widely popular among all family and friends that plays role in creating social pressures on them. Body dissatisfaction is created when women see themselves in comparison with others which is negative self-body image. Social comparison theory, by Leon Festinger, posits that person have natural urge to compare or evaluate themselves in comparison to others. Social comparison as cited in Myers & Crowther 2009 found that comparing oneself to another person on the basis of appearance may lead to dissatisfaction with one’s own appearance. The research findings endorse social comparison theory with reference to body dissatisfaction.

CONCLUSION

There are many pressures on young women in Pakistan. Generally, women face number of pressures due to their body image and body shaming. The stereotypical perceptions, ideologies and certain taboos prevail with reference to idealist body image of women. Women mostly faced pressures from social media, families, peers and the other social circle. This body shaming culture in society may lead to psychological and physical pressures, marital issues, negative feelings regarding themselves, low self-esteem, lesser self-confidence, increase insecurities and complexes, mental health issues like depression, loneliness, anxiety, eating disorders. A few women take help form their families or teachers to cope up with pressures and some learn to live with these pressures by accepting them. Women are facing number of challenges with reference to body imaging and perfect body standards. There are multiple stigmas attached to perfect women body particular height, weight and complexion. The stigmatization of colour, height and weight hinder women to participate in diversifies spaces which ultimately affects their empowerment.

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Mediated Perfect Body Images and Women

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