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Article:	Cultural Influences on Body Image: A Thematic Analysis of Social Media Perception among Young Pakistani Women
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ABSTRACT

Stereotyped body image has been among the many perceptions cultivated by the exposure to various social media platforms. The dearth of qualitative research in general and Pakistani context in particular prompted researchers to explore how individuals perceive their bodies, under cultural influences, in context of social media use. The current focus group discussion involved ten Islamabad-based university going women aged 18-25 through convenience purposive sampling and carried out a thematic analysis under the guidelines from thematic analysis method as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The themes explored; Sociocultural Body Ideals, Social Media Body Perceptions, Social Circle Impact, and Sociocultural Norms and Expectations, reflected upward and downward social comparisons as well as sociocultural influences. By providing valuable insights into sociocultural context, social media usage by young Pakistani women and their consequent perception about body image, this study paves way for future researchers to explore psychological implications of the negative body image perception.

Keywords: Social Media, Body Image, Young Women, Cultural Influences, Thematic Analysis

Introduction

The advent of various social media platforms revolutionized the way people perceive and present themselves to the world. Ahmed et al. (2023) while quoting Walsh (2022) consider Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Snapchat, TikTok, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Reddit and Twitter as digital media platforms that have fostered global communication involving people from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds to give rise to a rich universal social structure. People engage themselves in a myriad of activities in modern digital landscape, share personal experiences, express opinions, and construct their identities. The online milieu offers a unique space of interplay between psychological and social dynamics, where the individuals carefully develop their online identities, and negotiate balancing between aspiration and authenticity (Peng, 2023; Wei, 2023).

Body image an intricate multifaceted phenomenon, characterized by elaborate psychological definitions, involves individual's thoughts, perceptions, and emotions about their physical appearance. Modern-day globalized standards and commodified Western body images, portrayed through social media, societal norms, and various stereotypes and complexes contribute to adoption efforts and acceptance of nearly unattainable body image goals (Aparicio-martinez & Pagliari, 2019; Xie, 2024). Undesirable body image perceptions, prejudiced by socio-cultural factors including societal norms, family and friends are common that lead individuals to extreme anxieties and inferiority complexes about their looks (Caddel, 2021).

Social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat, have become integral parts of many people across the globe (Fryman & Romine, 2021). The prevalent use of social media platforms has significantly altered the way individuals perceive themselves and others. These platforms provide users an opportunity to develop and share updates about their lives, that may include images and videos to showcase their appearance. Body image or appearance perception falls among the most concerning influences among users, particularly the women (Xie, 2024). Social media outlets serve as platform to reinforce and scrutinize societal beauty standards. These spaces influence body image perceptions by presenting idealized images of beauty and perfection on one hand and advocacy for self-acceptance and negate fake or digitally constructed beauty ideals. Social media platforms allow for greater representation of diverse identities and body types, unlike the traditional media that often perpetuates slender beauty ideals (Hassan et al., 2023; Henriques & Patnaik, 2020). Individuals from diverse backgrounds regardless of their sizes and shapes share their experiences, and can challenge mainstream beauty standards, promoting inclusivity.

Social media users often post carefully curated photographs and videos that not only conform to traditional beauty standards, but also sensitize many others about perfect body shapes, symmetrical features, and flawless skin (Sultan, 2023; Ali & Hassan, 2016). However, constant exposure to the idealized body images, advocated and promoted by the influencers and celebrities may give rise to the feelings of dissatisfaction, inferiority complex and inadequacy in context of their own appearance, particularly among young women (Jiotsa et al., 2021). Despite its potential for a positive social change, digital media platforms often exacerbate negative body image perceptions among individuals, especially the women. Various studies have reflected that frequent and constant social media use is associated with greater levels of body dissatisfaction. The consistent barrage of idealized body images may develop a

distorted perception of reality that leads people to compare themselves irrationally to others and struggle for unattainable beauty ideals (Aparicio-martinez & Pagliari, 2019). From "thinspiration" posts that glorify extreme thinness to various editing tools and filters that promote unrealistic beauty ideals, social media presumably perpetuate detrimental attitudes and behaviours about body image (Cohen, 2020). Individuals, particularly, the young women can be vulnerable to such influences for allegedly developing sense of self that may make them more susceptible to social pressures.

Various research studies have examined the relationship between social media usage and perceptions about body image. Hu et al. (2023) explored social media as digital platforms, which facilitate the diversification of user-generated content. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and TikTok have been popular among the youth, and play a substantial role in shaping perceptions and opinions. While some researchers contend that digital content consumption may be selective, acknowledging the positive effects on perceptions about body image, some others argue otherwise, and claim that pursuit of thinness can lead to dissatisfaction among social media users with respect to their body shape, size and colour. McComb and Mills (2021) conducted a study to demonstrate that interaction with peers on social media who appear to be attractive in terms of body shape, size and colour leads to increased perception of negative body image, in contrast to the positive effects while interacting with family members.

Apprehensions and societal standards, having about body image significantly affect the routine life of individuals, and can lead to reduced self-esteem, morbid weight loss activities, anxiety, depression and mood disturbances. Perceived thinness as an ideal is significantly emphasized for young women within the society, contributing to dissatisfaction about body image and significant development of eating disorders including anorexia and bulimia nervosa (Jiotsa et al., 2021). Such a dissatisfaction further gives rise to harmful behaviours including unhealth dieting, use of diet pills and laxatives, and extreme exercising. Various studies conducted in different parts of the world validates that young women experience dissatisfaction about body image, predominantly influenced by sociocultural ideals. Research in the Western demonstrates prevalence of low body image and emphasis on thinness among white populations, and negligence of the same among non-white populations. Mohamed and Idrees (2023) investigated body perception and satisfaction among the Western young women to claim that the ideal of thinness significantly contributes to body image dissatisfaction among them.

The Present Study:

While the existing body of research does touch upon aspects of qualitative exploration into body image and social media, there remains a significant gap, especially in the Pakistani context to understand the experiences of young women from diverse ethnicities within the country. Unlike the prevalent quantitative methodologies that have predominantly focused on platforms like Facebook or Instagram, often utilizing samples of adolescent females, there is a dearth of nuanced qualitative research in Pakistan.

Recognizing the need for a more comprehensive understanding within the local societal framework, the present study aims to address this gap. Specifically, the study seeks to explore how young women in Pakistan perceive their bodies in the context of social media use. The unique cultural dynamics and diverse ethnic backgrounds within Pakistan contribute to a distinctive sociocultural landscape, influencing body image expectations and experiences.

The research questions are designed to shed light on the intricacies of young women's experiences, opinions, and attitudes regarding body dissatisfaction in the context of social media. This study holds the potential to provide valuable insights into the intersection of social media, cultural influences, and body image perceptions, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding within the Pakistani context.

Research Objective:

The aims to

- explore cultural influences on social media body image perceptions among young Pakistani women

Research Questions: The defined the following two research questions:

- RQ1. What is the perception of young Pakistani women about their body image with respect to their social media use?
- RQ2. How do cultural factors influence the body image perceptions of young Pakistani women as shaped and portrayed through social media?

Theoretical Framework:

This study has based its theoretical framework in Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory that posits that people compare themselves with others to appraise their own personalities, abilities, and behaviours as a means to assess their personal and social worth (Crusius et al., 2022). In view of the body image perceptions among the young Pakistani women, this theory provides an understanding of how the exposure to idealized body images through social media influences individuals' self-evaluations. They may engage in upward social comparison with individuals, including celebrities and social media influencers, who are perceived to having idealized body shapes and sizes as per social media portrayals, leading them to low self-esteem, anxiety and depression. Similarly, they may also engage in downward social comparison with the ones whom they perceive as less attractive/fit through social media representations, which may enhance their self-esteem. Since being traditional and orthodox society, cultural values and norms specific to Pakistan are considered crucial in shaping social comparisons. Such influences can act as moderators in context of impact of exposure to social media on body image perception. By basing its theoretical framework in Social Comparison Theory, this study attempts to explore the mechanism through which social media use by the young Pakistani women influences their body image perceptions. This theoretical framework guides the study in understanding how such social comparisons contribute to developing body image perceptions among individuals, offering insights into the connexion of culture, social media, and body image.

Methodology: Focus group discussion has been a widely-used qualitative approach to get an in-depth understanding about any social phenomena. This method gathers data from purposefully-selected participants so that the researchers reach out a detailed understanding of the social phenomenon that they aim to investigate (Nyumba et al., 2018).

Population: The population for the current research comprised young Pakistani women, with varied sociocultural backgrounds.

Sampling Frame and Sampling Size: Since optimal formation of a focus group discussion falls within the range of eight to ten participants, in context of the nature of the study population, 10 young university-going females falling in the age limit of 18-25 years, and belonging to either of the ten Pakistani regions including Sindh (Urban), Sindh (Rural),

Baluchistan, Southern Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pushtun Region), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Hazara Region), Upper Punjab, Central Punjab, Azad Jammu & Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan.

Sampling Strategy: Convenient purposive sampling was used by the researcher, keeping in view the multifaceted nature of the study. Aim of the research was to develop a comprehensive understanding of how young Pakistani women perceive body image through social media portrayals with an influence of socio-cultural values of the Pakistani society. The study involved female students, studying at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, and International Islamic University, Islamabad. It was ensured that the focus group participants comprised at least one participant belonging to each of the defined region, so that influence of the cultural codes of their respective locale are documented.

Research Process: The researchers approached the university-going young Pakistani women based on their personal connection and convenience and invited them to voluntarily participate in the focus group discussion. The objective of the study was explained to 33 potential participants of the study. Once the required number of sample (10) was achieved, the mechanism of focus group discussion and research questions were explained to the participants. Every participant was given a fair chance during four-hour session to talk about social media use, cultural considerations and influences, and body image perceptions among them and their fellows.

Thematic Analysis: This study employed thematic analysis to explore and document how young Pakistani women develop self-evaluations of body image portrayals under the influence of their respective sociocultural values. The thematic analysis is a widely-acknowledged qualitative research analysis technique to find and understand the thematic patterns within the collected data set of responses from the target audience (Dawadi, 2020). It is used to assess qualitative surveys, written documents, in-depth interviews, and the focus group discussions to build an understanding of the underlying meanings in the available data (Lochmiller, 2021; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The thematic analysis facilitates scholars and researchers to apply a flexible systematic for interpretation of the basic designs and connotations within the given information (Nowell et al., 2017). Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed six systematic steps to conduct thematic analysis involving “becoming familiar with the data”; “generating codes”, “generating themes”, “reviewing themes”, “defining and naming themes”, and “locating exemplars”.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Participant	Age (Years)	Geographic Ethnicity	Academic Affiliation
P1	20	Sindh (Rural)	NUML
P2	18	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Hazara Region)	QAU
P3	25	Central Punjab	IIUI
P4	19	Gilgit Baltistan	NUML
P5	22	Upper Punjab (including Pothohar)	IIUI
P6	24	Sindh (Urban)	QAU
P7	21	Baluchistan	NUML
P8	23	Azad Jammu & Kashmir	QAU

P9	20	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pushtun Region)	IIUI
P10	22	Southern Punjab	NUML

Table 1 above reflected demographic data of all ten young university-going females falling in the age limit of 18-25 years, and belonging to either of the ten Pakistani regions including Sindh (Urban), Sindh (Rural), Baluchistan, Southern Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pushtun Region), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Hazara Region), Upper Punjab, Central Punjab, Azad Jammu & Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan.

Table 2: Main Themes and Individual Responses Explored as Sub-themes through Focus Group Discussion

Sr.	Theme	Sub-theme 1	Sub-theme 2	Sub-theme 3
1	Sociocultural Body Ideals	Conventional Stereotypic Norms	Localized Body Perceptions	Online Advocacy Impact
2	Social Media Body Perceptions	Unrealistic Beauty Standards	Empowerment and Resistance	Digital Image Manipulations
3	Social Circle Impact	Familial Peer Influence	Empowering Resilience	Positive Social Media Impact
4	Sociocultural Norms and Expectations	Societal Comparison Impact	Cultural Celebrity Influence	Intersectionality and Societal Challenges

The table 2 above has mentioned the four themes and their subsequent sub-themes identified through thematic analysis of data from the focus group discussion. Here is the brief description of the themes and the main points highlighted under themes:

Theme 1: Sociocultural Body Ideals

The first theme explored out of the focus group discussion was “Sociocultural Body Ideals”. This theme further comprised three subthemes including “Conventional Stereotypic Norms”, “Localized Perceptions” and “Online Advocacy Impact”. Under this theme, the discussion revolved around traditional values and patriarchal structures that dictate stereotypical beauty ideals for women, stressing upon male-defined modesty. The discussion also yielded variance of body image perceptions across different regions and locales in Pakistan, which usually are influenced by regional societal norms and customs, with an impact of the exposure through social media to global cultural influences. It was further explored that social media activism has challenged the entrenched stereotypes and encouraged women in Pakistan to redefine standards of body image and beauty on their own terms, ultimately advocating inclusivity and self-acceptance.

Theme 2: Social Media Body Perceptions

The second theme identified through the discussion was “Social Media Body Perceptions”. This theme too was divided into three subthemes that included “Unrealistic Beauty Standards”, “Empowerment and Resistance”, and “Digital Image Manipulations”. It was emphasized by the discussants that social media, on one hand, perpetuates unrealistic body image and beauty standards, which are often rooted in the Western ideals, leading to the feelings of inadequacy among many young Pakistani women, and serves as source of

empowerment for many other women, on the other hand, to challenge the traditional norms, fostering a sense of empowerment and self-acceptance. The discussion participants, however, were concerned about digitally altered images on various social media platforms that give rise to negative self-perceptions and unrealistic body ideals, stressing upon the need for authenticity and potential harm caused by filters and editing tools.

Theme 3: Social Circle Impact

The third theme acknowledged in the focus group discussion was “Social Circle Impact”. Discussion under this theme revolved around the subthemes including “Familial Peer Influence”, “Empowering Resilience”, and “Positive Social Media Impact”. It was learnt that comments and perceptions by the family, friends, and peers have significant impact on the body image satisfaction among women and contribute to healthy or unhealthy eating behaviours. The discussants emphasized that supportive family, friends and peer can motivate individuals resist societal and media body image and beauty ideals to develop resilience to counter negative social and media influences. It was also discussed that social media platforms can also positively affect body image perceptions, and motivate individuals to adopt healthy lifestyles and promote fitness and wellbeing.

Theme 4: Sociocultural Norms and Expectations

The fourth theme explored out of the focus group discussion was “Sociocultural Norms and Expectations”. This theme further comprised three subthemes including “Societal Comparison Impact”, “Cultural Celebrity Influence”, and “Intersectionality and Societal Challenges”. The discussion explored that cultural norms and societal expectations about body image in Pakistani society contribute to the feelings of comparison and inadequacy among individuals. The discussants also recognized that media and cultural figures play a prominent role in defining beauty ideals within the sociocultural context of Pakistan, and shape perceptions about the idealized body image. It was also explored that factors including socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity intersect with perceptions about body image.

Discussion: Social media platforms, meant for connectivity and expression, also serve as double-edged swords in shaping perceptions about body images. On one hand, the platforms like Facebook, Instagram and TikTok perpetuate idealistic beauty standards, stemming out of Western ideals, which are contradictory to Pakistani sociocultural values and subject to criticism from the religious seminaries and orthodox segments of the society, often leading to perceptions of inadequacy among the young Pakistani women who are unable to conform to the propagated standards. On the other hand, such social media platforms also act as a source of empowerment for women to challenge the traditional norms and stereotypical structures of the society, and rejoice diverse body types.

The Pakistani culture that demands and encourages modesty and humility, women are perceived to be epitomes of virtues, predominantly veiled bodies, dependent on male counterparts for every aspect of their life. They feel pressurized to adhere to stereotypical standards of beauty, established by patriarchal structures. Besides all this, women who are predominantly perceived as sex objects by majority of their male counterparts manifest their choices in various ways, ranging from preferences for fair skin to slim figures in one part of the country to fleshy ones in other parts. However, modest clothing styles are accepted across the country with cities accepting Western wears as routine clothing for women. Furthermore, the pervasive inspiration of advertising and celebrity culture reinforces such ideals that creates

an environment where young Pakistani women feel compelled to attempt for unattainable and unhealthy images of beauty.

It is important to recognize that Pakistan is not a monolithic society, and body image perceptions and attitudes vary across different regions and segments of population. While some adhere strictly to their traditional values and norms like Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan, Interior Sindh and Southern Punjab, and Azad Jammu & Kashmir, particularly in rural areas, others may appear to be open to embracing diverse global cultural representations of beauty. Moreover, the social media activism and advocacy for body positivity and self-acceptance have also started challenging the entrenched stereotypes locally on the patterns of global trends that is encouraging for Pakistani women to redefine the ideals of body image and beauty on their own terms.

To navigate such complexities, the young Pakistani women frequently find themselves negotiating between sociocultural expectations, personal aspirations and religious teachings. The study participants unanimously agreed upon the point that while social media platforms may exert significant influence in shaping women's body image perceptions, ultimately, the self-empowerment and self-acceptance are multifaceted and deeply personal influenced by a myriad of factors inimitable to every individual's lived experiences.

Implications and Recommendations of the Study

1. **Impact of Educational Attainment:** Since higher education leads to greater exposure and awareness on various social issues, the same can have an impact on the body image perceptions of young Pakistani women, leading them to empowerment and critical thinking that can challenge fake beauty standards as well as stereotypes in Pakistani society. Since the focus group involved university-going students, they reflected being empowered by the higher education but at the same time, they showed concerns about women who do not have access to education, or are low-educated and cannot change the community or social media standards of body image and beauty.
2. **Economic Factors:** Women with lower socioeconomic backgrounds may face resource and opportunity limitations that may further victimize them in terms of body image and beauty standards, established by society and the social media alike. On the other hand, the women coming from affluent socioeconomic backgrounds have greater access to resources, opportunities and social media platforms, which facilitate them with self-empowerment and self-expression.
3. **Media Representation:** The women portrayal in mainstream Pakistani media reinforces traditional beauty and body image ideals and patriarchal ideologies. Social media not only perpetuates the same standards but also provides women an opportunity for self-acceptance and challenge the existing societal stereotypes and myths. Addressing the stereotypical representation in media and promotion of diverse portrayals of body images and beauty standards can help reshape societal perceptions.
4. **Health and Wellbeing:** While social pressures emphasize the external appearance and body image, there is growing awareness about the importance of women health, discouragement to the unhealthy dieting habits, and encouragement to debate on physical and psychological health. While social media representations, on one hand, perpetuate inferiority complexes due to ideals of thinness and fair skin, it also

encourages many to accept their existing body shapes and natural skin colours to defy the odds.

5. **Community Networks:** Complexes about body image and skin colours exist more in urban areas and among the moderately educated people more than rural areas and highly educated Pakistani women. Community networks, including NGOs, women's groups, and grassroots organizations, in Pakistani sociocultural context can play a vital role in raising awareness, providing education, and advocacy for self-acceptance.
6. **Intersectionality:** Recognizing the intersectionality of the identities, including gender, ethnicity, and the religious ideologies and values, is necessary for understanding of the nuanced experiences of the young Pakistani women. These strategies can help pointing out the challenges faced by female population in Pakistan and guide for more inclusive policy and intervention development.
7. **Legal Frameworks and Government Policies:** policies and legal frameworks devised by the government and state agencies greatly impact the body image perceptions. Media protocols, policies regarding gender equality, women empowerment and healthcare accessibility to females can help promote inclusivity in society. This may pave way for self-acceptance and discourage prejudices against women.

Conclusion:

Social media platforms exercise a two-edged role in the Pakistani society, molding the body image perceptions among the society members. The platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok endorse the Western beauty ideals that contradict with sociocultural values of the Pakistani society. This causes insecurity among the women, particularly the younger generation. Culture in Pakistan advocates for modesty, but, at the same time, patriarchal norms pressurize women to conform to the unrealistic standards. However, varied preferences across different regions, ranging from the traditional attire to embracing the Western fashion ideals are witnessed in the society. The celebrity and fashion industry-driven culture, however, exaggerate such pressures. Yet, the social media platforms also foster body positivity and challenge existing norms in the society. Pakistani women navigate complex intersections of individual aspiration, social customs, and their religious beliefs. Despite the influence of social media, self-acceptance and empowerment remain profoundly personal endeavors, shaped by varied individual experiences.

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