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# BODY IMAGE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To find out the relationship between body image and psychological distress among university students.

**Methodology:** This cross-sectional study was conducted on 250 participants enrolled from universities of Islamabad with age range of 18 to 25 years. Two scales; Body Image Concern Inventory (BICI) and Kessler's Psychological Distress Scale (K-10) were used to measure the variables. Data was entered and analyzed by SPSS version 21.

**Results:** The findings indicated that there was significant positive correlation ( $r=0.63^{**}$ ) between body image concern and psychological distress. Further, male students showed higher concern as compared to female students ( $t(248) = 2.45, p < .01$ ). Regression analysis indicated the value of  $R^2$  that was 40 % of the total variability in psychological distress that was explained by body image concern.

**Conclusion:** The study concluded a significant positive correlation between body image concern and psychological distress. In addition, male students were more concerning than the female students.

**Key Words:** Body image; Psychological distress; University student.

## INTRODUCTION

A general perception persists in Pakistani society that a specific type of a person is considered as an 'ideal'. This is the main reason of low body satisfaction and it leads to psychological distress among university students. Due to such perception, sensitive individuals feel pressurized by the society and that is why they want to achieve an 'ideal body' for improving their well-being and overcoming their level of distress.<sup>1</sup> In 1930s' the term body image was first introduced and the main description was that the body of an individual not only affects his health, but also contributes to his well-being.<sup>2</sup> Body image has two components, i.e., perceptual and attitudinal. First one relates to the precision of estimation he makes about the body size in relation to actual size. The second one has four components; gratification, affect, cognition and behavior.<sup>3</sup> Many psychological theories have taken the concept of body image into consideration. Adler views the concept of body image as lack of organ. He has highlighted this organ inferiority as a baseline for developing the general feelings of subservience about oneself.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, feminist theorist has highlighted gender and social beliefs that put women at risk for developing concerns regarding body image. According to "objectification theory", women perceive their body in context to the social and cultural norms and try to fit in the

ideal self.<sup>5</sup> Psychological distress is characterized as feeling of pessimism, hopelessness, loss of interest, problem in falling sleep and suicidal thoughts. In medical model, the explication of psychological distress is same as physical illness, which also requires medical treatment.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, psychoanalytic model of psychological distress explains the pathology of unusual and disturbed behavior by emphasizing the role of defense mechanisms and unconscious process.<sup>6</sup>

Generally, it is reported that discrepancy between current and ideal body leads to the negative body image. Various findings show that body related dissatisfaction is linked with different forms of psychopathology such as stress, depression, anxiety and eating disorders.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it is reported that the daily functioning and academic performance of university students become impaired because they have increased concerns about society judgment, self-body evaluation, and consciousness. This also affects their well-being.<sup>8</sup> Most of the literature in the past researches indicates that females are more prone to negative body image issues, as it is explained by the feminist theorists that society objectify female body and use it as a gazing object. It is evident in researches that specifically in western culture, media negatively shaped the body image by showing the 'ideal' images. Both men and women develop the concerns to fit in the definition of

perfect body.<sup>9</sup> Recent researches on body image show that it is no more a female problem, whereas the standards set by the society affect the men too. It is shown that 46 % men and 74.4 % women with normal body mass index (BMI) reported that they spend significant time in checking their body features; this consciousness about their body is considered as a risk factor for body image dissatisfaction and psychological distress.<sup>10</sup>

Previous literature indicates that students have many concerns regarding their appearance and outlook. When they feel that they are not meeting the standards, they develop a negative schema easily that leads to distress. There are various key factors which include social comparison, role of media, and ideal body standards. Psychological factors include individual's perceptions, feelings and thoughts about their body and biological factors such as age and gender which effect the patterns of thinking, feelings, and behavior. In the context of Pakistan, there is a need to overcome this gap within the context of psychological distress in relationship to the body image. This study was aimed to find out the relationship between body image and psychological distress among university students

## METHODOLOGY

This cross-sectional study included students enrolled in the 2018 academic session. A sample of 250 participants was drawn from age group ranging from 18 to 25 years. The participants were students selected from universities of Islamabad. The inclusion criteria for the current study was to approach the different universities students who were able to read and understand English language whereas exclusion criteria were sample limited to a specific age range and the presence of comorbidities that could bias the results. Approval for data collection was obtained from national university of modern languages (NUML). Following the completion

of the consent form, the participants were given two standardized questionnaires; Body Image Concern Inventory (BICI)<sup>11</sup> and Kessler's Psychological Distress Scale (K-10)<sup>12</sup>. In the present study cronbach's alpha values of the two scales were .91 and .85 respectively. To aid in their comprehension, each questionnaire was simplified. Data collection took place face to face. To accomplish the objectives and test the proposed hypothesis, various statistical techniques were employed using SPSS version 21.

## RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for body image and psychological distress are shown in table 1. For the data trend estimation, descriptive analysis was done. Mean, SD, and skewness values of scales indicated the normal distribution of data. Alpha values for the scales were .91 and .85 respectively.

Table 2 indicates the positive correlation between body image and psychological distress. As body image concern increases psychological distress also increases.

Table 3 shows the mean, standard deviation, and t values among men (n=124) and women (n=126) on body image concern inventory and psychological distress scale. Results signify the gender related significant mean difference on body image concern scale (p= 0.01).

In table 4 the value of R2 shows that 40% of the total variability in psychological distress is explained by body image. Body image plays a significant role in predicting the psychological distress.

## DISCUSSION

The assumption of the study was that body image and psychological-distress were positively correlated. Results of the study revealed the same findings that body image

positively correlated with psychological distress. Previous studies found that humans are constantly being judged by their body that is why judgement made about their body is extremely important and definite factor in determining psychological progress.<sup>13</sup> In this context another study investigated the relationship between body image and psychological distress. Elevated level of negative emotions and psychological distress exhibited the increased concerns of ideal body.<sup>14</sup>

Another purpose of this study was to explore the gender related difference regarding body image and psychological distress. Regarding gender differences, the present study explored that men have higher body image concerns than women as shown in table 3. In literature, there is a scarcity of studies conceptualizing the factors that cause negative body image in men. In previous literature, one study approached men and investigated their perception regarding their body image concern and views of outside world about their body shape. Results indicated that 85% men, not satisfied with their body image, were adversely affected and got involved in negative ways to obtain perfect body shape.<sup>15</sup> It was found that men had greater tendency to remain silent about their body pessimism. They are usually less frequent on the lookout for treatments or maintaining the follow-ups due to shame and embarrassment.<sup>16</sup>

This study also highlighted the effect of body image on psychological distress. Findings showed body image as the significant predictor of psychological distress as shown in table 4. The results are congruent with the previous studies which showed that individuals having higher BMI suffered from body image concerns which further increased the risk of psychological distress.<sup>17</sup>

The present study was cross sectional in nature and this may lead to misinterpretation of findings. Evaluation of research findings is

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for body image and psychological distress scale (N=250)

Scales	Items N	M	SD	α	Score Range		Skewness	Kurtosis
					Potential	Actual		
BICI	19	46.8	16.28	.91	19-95	19-91	0.58	0.34
PD	10	28.8	8.49	.85	10-50	11-48	0.07	-.90

Note. BICI= Body Image Concern Inventory; PD = Psychological distress

Table 2: Correlations of body image and psychological distress (N=250)

	Psychological distress
Body Image	.63**

\*\*correlation was significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3: Mean, standard deviation, and t-values of men and women participants on Body image Concern inventory and Psychological distress scale (N= 250)

Scales	Men (n=124)		Men (n=124)		t (248)	p	95 % CI		
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	Cohen's d
BICI	49.32	17.17	44.31	15.02	2.45	0.01	0.99	9.02	.51
PD	28.4	8.37	29.1	8.62	-0.74	0.46	-2.91	1.32	.08

Note CI=confidence interval; LL=lower limit; UL=upper limit

Table 4: Simple linear regression of body image as predictors of psychological distress (N=250)

Variables	B	SE B	β	t	P
Body image	0.33	0.26	0.63	12.91	0.00
R, = .63	R2, = .40	F (166.82)**			

critical to assist clinicians in making clinical decisions and adhering to evidence-based practice principles. Longitudinal study should be conducted for better understanding of the constructs. Due to time constraint, the study only covered one cultural aspect and age group.

This study is important in creating awareness in university students through workshops, seminars, and presentations. By delivering therapies and counselling, individuals may be helped to understand that emotional characteristics, character and uniqueness are just as indicative of beauty as physical appearance.

### CONCLUSION

Body image concern in individuals leads to psychological distress. There were statistically significant variations between male and female participants on body image.

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#### Author's Contribution

ZR conceived the idea, drafting of manuscript, collected and interpreted data and finalized the draft. NA did correction in the proposal, literature search, data collection, interpretation and overall supervision of the project. MS correction of the proposal, literature search, data collection, interpretation and overall supervision of the project. Authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

#### Conflict of Interest

Authors declared no conflict of interest

#### Grant Support and Financial Disclosure

None

#### Data Sharing Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.