

EXPLORING THE LINK BETWEEN BODY IMAGE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING IN CHILDREN

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Abstract

This research is fueled by concern about the body image in children, specifically negative body image and its impact on their psychological wellbeing. Accordingly, the hypotheses set were "The negative body image among children will be related to decreased psychological well-being" and "Female children are more prone to the perception of negative body image as compared to male children". For this purpose, 800 students, age 8-11, were approached in all the schools of Al-Murtaza Network; while 336 children participated after parental consent. Data was collected through administration of a figure rating scale developed by Collins (1991) and The Sterling's Children Well-Being scale (SCWBS) whereas BMI was acquired from school records, data was computed through applying Pearson Product Moment correlation and t-test for statistical analysis. Results revealed high positive correlation among negative body image and psychological well-being. However, no gender differences were found on the basis of trends in negative body image.

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INTRODUCTION

"We are bound to our bodies like an oyster is to its shell".-Plato

Australian neurologist and psychoanalyst Paul Schilder (1935) had coined the term "body image" in his book "The Image and Appearance of the Human Body". Body image refers to a person's own feelings of attractiveness and aesthetics of their own body, i.e. how a person views his/her body and the overall appearance. It is also a mental picture of one's own self, (Cash, 2011). Concern with appearance is not just an aberration of Modern Western culture. Every period of history has had its own standards of what is and is not beautiful, and every contemporary society has its own distinctive concept of the ideal physical attributes (Striegel-Moore & Franko 2002).

Body image is the perception that a person has of his physical self, but more importantly the thoughts and feelings the person experiences as a

result of that perception. It is important to understand that these feelings can be positive, negative or a combination of both and are influenced by individual and environmental factors (Tiggemann, 2004).

Furthermore, the concept of body image is subjective. The two different dimensions of this concept are perceptual part or how one sees his own body and attitudinal part or how one feels about his perceived bodily appearance (Gardner, 1996). A negative body image can be defined as ranging from mild feelings of unattractiveness to extreme obsessions with physical appearance that may adversely affect the normal psychological functioning (Rossen, 1995). In contrast, people with positive body image have more positive attitude toward life (Blanney, 2009). According to an exploratory research study at Bradley Hospital, it was concluded that adolescents with negative body image concerns are more prone to

depression and anxiety as compared to those who hold a positive attitude toward their body image (Lifespan, 2006). A significant importance is being given to the physical attractiveness in most societies. Social factors are playing vital role that make people construct an image of their bodies as negative or positive i.e., how to look and how not to look (Tiggemann, 2011). Due to the numerous social factors and broad exposure to electronic and social media, children at an early age begin to form their perception of their own bodies i.e., the body image (Smolak & Thompson, 2009). Children tend to comprise thought patterns such as “I think I look bad in photographs”, feelings, “I hate the way I look”, and perception, “I am too fat” in relation to one’s body and appearance (Thompson et al., 1999).

It is important that children should have positive body image of themselves but unfortunately many children at age of 11, and a bit younger, demonstrate negativity regarding their body image (Smolak & Levine, 2001). Another research study concluded that 40 – 50 percent of children (6 – 12 yrs) feel negative about some aspect of their body and shape (Smolak, 2011). The magnitude of negative body image is connected to low self-esteem and decreased over all psychological well-being (Wertheim & Paxtom, 2012). Concerns with body size and shape may begin to form among children as young as age 5 (Smolak, 2011). Six year old girls have demonstrated negativity with their body image in form of wishing to be thinner (Davison, Markey & Britch, 2000; Lowes & Tiggemann, 2003). However, body image concerns become more evident even at the aforementioned young aged children (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). Body image issues are found to be emerging both among males and females as well, so gender is another important factor of interest with regards to the negative and positive formation of body images among children (Cash, 2011).

While exploring the construct of psychological well-being, positive emotional state is derived from the domain of positive psychology. Ground-breaking work by Professor Barbara Frederickson (2006), has now provided an explanation for the role of positive emotion. Her work is known as 'the broaden and build theory of positive

emotion'. Frederickson's thesis is that positive emotion does not simply signal well-being and the absence of negative emotions but has the capacity to encourage well-being. Pertaining to the fact, that holding a positive body image perception about one’s body, has a proneness to positive emotional state. Positive emotional state holds its own significance when related to body image as an active aspect of a human psychology. In contrast, the negative body image holders will show emotional state in a negative direction that will have potential consequences for psychological well-being, (Elfhag & Rossner, 2005; Teixeira et al., 2009). Positive outlook refers to the fact that when you are in tune with, and respond to the needs of your body, your physical and psychological wellbeing improves. A positive body image will lead to a balanced lifestyle with healthier attitudes and practices with food and exercise, (Thompson, Corwin & Sargent, 1997). Positive affect - positive emotions, positive moods and positive attitudes may in fact be the most important factors in the domain of psychological well-being. Basically, psychological well-being endures innumerable aspects that take into account different standards of well-being and measure each one with its own significance. Here with reference to body image and psychological well-being, we basically aim to study the positive emotional state, positive outlook and social desirability factors as the sub-components of psychological well-being and how they relate to the perception of body image among children.

Every single one of us has a body image and we cannot avoid having feelings about how we look; it is part of human nature. We are influenced by how we imagine others might see us. People's overall body image can range from extremely negative to extremely positive; it is normal to like some parts of your body and dislike others. In the society of today, body image has become significantly influenced by the media - TV, the press, the Internet, radio, magazines, etc. Social desirability is probably the most important response bias factor and also one of the most frequently addressed issue in research.

Based on the above literature review, the current research study aims to verify the following hypotheses:

- The negative body image among children is related to decrease psychological well-being.
- Female children are more prone to the perception of negative body image as compared to male children.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research study aimed at finding relation between the variables and is co-relational in design, in context to the primary hypothesis.

Sample

For the purpose of the study, 800 students of age range 8-11 were approached through cluster sampling procedure. The final sample comprised of 336 students who were further segregated with reference to the gender; that is 170 males and 166 females.

Pertaining to the collection of samples, following three branches of Al-Murtaza school had been approached:

- Junior Branch (Classes III-V Boys, Class III Girls)
- Senior Girls Branch (Class IV-VI)
- Senior Boys Branch (Class VI)

Written consent was obtained from parents of the participating children, and verbal assent was obtained from the participating children.

Measurements of Weight Status

In order to determine the BMI (Body Mass Index) of the participants, weight and height measurements were acquired through the medical records of the school, maintained by qualified doctors. Finally, BMI was calculated by the formula; $\text{weight (kg)/height (m)}^2$

Measurement of body image

A figure rating scale developed by Collins (1991), was used to assess the body image. The drawings in scale consist of 7 prepubescent figures ranging from thin (value = 1) to large (value = 7). Although

the scale is designed for prepubescent children; however, research shows that the scale may be utilized for the age range of 8-12 years (Mciza et al, 2005).

Scale Psychometrics: The 3-day test-retest reliability coefficients of the instrument are 0.71 for perceived self-image and 0.59 for ideal self-image for children age 6 to 9. The correlation between perceived self-image size and BMI was 0.37 in the same age group (Collins, 1991).

Measurement of Wellbeing

The Sterling's Children Well-Being Scale (SCWBS) consists of 12 items measuring emotional and psychological wellbeing.

Sub Scales: The scale consists of two sub-components consisting of 6 items each relating to emotional and psychological wellbeing, namely Positive Emotional State and Positive Outlook. The scale additionally includes a social desirability **sub-scale** in order to determine whether any participants scores have a response set. The social desirability sub-scale consists of three items. All items on the scale are rated on a 5- point Likert-based scale.

The age Range for the scale is 8 - 15 years.

Scale Psychometrics: the internal reliability of over 0.8 along with the external validity of 0.7.

Procedure

For the collection of data, the height and weight measurements of the prospective participants (subject to parental permission) were from the school records. Moreover, the questionnaires of wellbeing and body image were administered in groups.

Analysis

The study dealt with quantitative analysis. Pertaining to wellbeing and body image, Correlation was computed to analyze the relationship between the variables whereas t-test for gender difference.

RESULTS

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for psychological well-being measured through SCWBS

Psy. Well-being	N	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Girls	166	53.37	9.7	30	75
Boys	170	43.75	12.8	19	77

The table depicts the gender trends and differences related to psychological well-being.

Table 2

Correlation between negatively perceived body image and decreased psychological wellbeing

variables	N	Mean	Correlation value
Negative body image	336	13.424 (0.2)	0.742
Psychological wellbeing	336	48.557 (0.7)	

Note: Standard deviations appear in parenthesis below means. The table demonstrates strong positive correlation, as was hypothesized that there will be a relationship between psychological wellbeing and perceived negative body image.

Table 3

T-test- difference between males and females for perceived negative body image.

Perceived negative body image	N	Mean	t	df
Female	166	13.343 (3.141)	.171	328
Male	170	13.283 (3.292)		

Note. $p = 0.864$. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below means.

Table 4

Difference for positive emotional state, positive outlook and social desirability with respect to genders

Sub Scales of SCSWB	Males		Females		t	df
	N	Mean	N	Mean		
	166		170			
<i>Positive emotional state</i>		20.68 (4.987)		17.64 (5.441)	5.340**	332.678
<i>Positive outlook</i>		21.78 (4.285)		17.37 (5.227)	8.471**	324.333
<i>Social desirability</i>		21.78 (4.285)		8.66 (3.225)	31.648**	306.460

Note. ** $p \leq 0.01$. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below means

DISCUSSION

Through the current study, it has been signified that among children, negative body image and psychological wellbeing are highly correlated, with a positive trend. In other words, children with negative body image displayed low levels of psychological well-being. The other hypothesis, related to the comparison between the negative body image trends among female and male children showed no significant difference.

According to Natalie Sabik (2012), body image has an impact on both the mental and physical health; and is regarded as an “important component” of them. Hence, a negative trend in body image is associated with low levels of psychological well-being. The area of research, discussing the same relationship, focuses more on women and on the aspect of aging; while little literature discusses the same in children- in terms of direct relationship between psychological wellbeing and body image. However, an indirect approach may lead into deducing the relationship that is explored by the current study.

Self-esteem has been found to be a significant aspect of subjective well-being (Padhy, Rana & Mishra, 2011; Tuominen-Soini, Salmela-Aro & Niemivirta, 2006), while self-esteem is also associated with body image. Annabelle Ryburn (2012) discusses the interaction of self-esteem, psychological well-being and body image. She signifies that low levels of self-esteem result in unease; that sometimes leads a person into finding a means to ease the distress. For instance, altering or making better their body image to “feel better”. In a reverse fashion the importance of outlook, which is infused into their young minds by society and the environment, makes them focus their self-concept entirely around body image. Hence, lowered psychological well-being and affected mental health are the consequence of the exaggerate focus on body image. Similarly, in children, a positive body image is responsible for solid underpinning for higher well-being later in life (Centre for Adolescent Health, 2013)

The second hypothesis was not verified and no significant difference was found among males and females in the trend of negative body image. In

other words, girls and boys showed similar levels of negative body image in totality. In his study, Lenny Vartanian (2012) discusses the formation of body image in males and signifies that males also formulate negative body image and discrepancies are found between their actual and ideal image where they rate themselves as smaller in build than their perceived ideal image and fatter than their BMI. It is further shared that an “illusion” is created in that males formulate negative body image significantly less than the females. However, reality is that men do want to be thinner than they are, but simultaneously they also want to be large and muscular. Both the aspects cancel the effect of wanting to be leaner and thus, the females stand out as having more body-dissatisfaction.

It could be further explored that the sample showed lower levels of psychological well-being among males. However, the high value of standard deviation in the male group neutralizes the effect. Also, significant differences are found in trends of positive emotional state and positive outlook among the male and female children. Hochschild’s normative theory about emotion (1979) supports the idea that males and females display different trends in how they feel and express emotions. While his theory supports the idea that those trends conform to the cultural beliefs; there is another theory by Kemper (1991) that also supports the gender differences in feelings and emotions. However, in his structural theory about emotions, he asserts that it’s not the cultural values, but the person’s individual standing in society that dictates the patterns in feelings of emotions and their expression.

Conclusion

The study verified the hypotheses that there is a positive relationship between negative body image and psychological well-being in children. The study explored a very strong correlation. On the other hand, it was not established that there are gender differences in preference of negative body image. However, through additional findings gender differences were found on the basis of the aspects of psychological well-being i.e. positive emotional state and positive outlook.

Limitation

The limitation of the study remains that the negative body image is dealt with, in terms of discrepancy between the perceived body image and BMI. While the contemporary literature signifies that body image is a multi-dimensional construct, including various aspects of self concept and satisfaction and acceptance towards own body.

Recommendations

Formation of body image is a complex process with several variables at play. However, the influence of family is an important one in leading the children into wanting to be leaner and more presentable. Hence, the current variable studied, must also be explored in light of family influence. Moreover, long term effects of low psychological well-being must also be studied along with its effects on the choice of methods to modify body image.

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