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## Role of gender in socio-cultural attitude and physical anxiety towards appearance

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### Abstract

The present study was carried out to analyse the role of gender in socio-cultural attitude and physical anxiety towards appearance. Body of research suggests that body image related appearance plays an important role in personality development, self-concept and self-esteem. The physical appearance is influenced by various factors like media, peer group, family, culture, and personality. In the pretext of these influences and cultural context, it was rationalized that the variables have differential impacts on the appearance with special reference to gender. For the present research, 150 participants comprising 75 males and 75 females ranging from 18 to 24 years were administered Socio-Cultural Attitude Towards Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ-4) and the Physical Appearance State and Trait Attitude (PASTAS) scale. To investigate the role of gender, the t-test was performed on the data using SPSS-21. Results indicate that males and females differ significantly on different dimensions of SATAQ for say, Internalization: muscular/athletic, pressure: media, family, and peers as well on the physical appearance related trait anxiety. It is also indicated that females tend to show a significantly higher trait anxiety in comparison to their male counterpart. Females are observed to be more affected by the pressures of media and family while males are affected by the internalization: muscular/ athletic and by peer pressures. The study has an implication in understanding the dynamics of gender and socio-cultural aspects in shaping and modifying the appearance related attitude.

**Keywords:** Socio-cultural attitude; physical anxiety towards appearance; internalization; pressure; gender

### Introduction

Physical appearance plays an important role in personality development, self-concept and self-esteem. Gender differences can be observed in socio-cultural attitude and physical anxiety towards appearance. Gender identity can be identified as being either masculine or feminine (Diamond 2002) [6]. The concept of gender points to masculine and feminine qualities, behavioral patterns, roles, and responsibilities (Bhasin, 2003) [1]. Cross-cultural variations have been observed in boys' and girls' cognitive-behavioural roles in life, across the globe. An average adolescent faces an increased amount of developmental challenges, which includes coping with bodily changes, handling their sexual interests, building and maintaining new kinds of relationships, and shaping their academic and occupational futures. Socio-cultural attitude towards appearance can be defined as an idealisation of an image, that exists in cultures and societies, of beauty or attractive points of a person. Sociocultural standards are learnt from the society, culture and various channels of mass media like television, magazine, movies, internet, and the social media. This drives people to internalize such social standards which forms their socio-cultural attitude.

### Gender and socio-cultural attitude

There are gender specific norms prescribed in different societies, which are normally accepted and followed. These norms created by the society also define how power has to be shared within the society which generally means more power to men as compared to women in patriarchal society (Marcus & Harper, 2014) [21]. The idea of beauty and appearance created by society, becomes a socio-cultural standard. The women who fit these standards become a preference for men (Lennon, Rudd, Sloan, & Kim, 1999) [18].

Due to these standards created by the society, women also want to adhere to these ideals of femininity and appearance. It has been generally observed, among women who believe in traditional attitudes than in women who hold non-traditional attitudes. As inevitable as change is, this has been reported that socio cultural attitudes among societies change with increase in modernisation.

In western society, heightened emphasis on physical attractiveness for females helps create the gender differences in body dissatisfaction (McKinley, 1999) [20]. Media images presents differential beauty standard for girls and boys: a perfect, and thin body for girls whereas a muscular build for boys. However, this standards are generally unattainable. Therefore, body dissatisfaction is caused due to discrepancy between ideal and actual body.

#### Gender and Physical Appearance

In recent times, physical appearance has been gaining increased attention. The mass media has encouraged beauty ideals leading rise in the body dissatisfaction among the majority of people. They are in turn pressurised to follow and adapt such ideals. The attention that media pays to such ideal body types, has built a desire in adolescents to follow along with such expectations, ultimately which affects their physical, cognitive and psychosocial development. In general, society puts an ideal prototype of a muscular body for males however slim and lean body for females. Since achieving these body ideals are tough to adolescents especially girls, that may lead to negative body image, resulting in poor self-esteem, depression, and eating disorders etc.

#### Physical appearance and socio-cultural attitude

A majority of adults experience a certain level of dissatisfaction with their bodies. This dissatisfaction can be followed by starvation, unreasonable diets and weight loss methods, which may take the form of eating disorders. Discontentment with one's body also affects a person's mood and relationships gravely. People who are embarrassed about how they look usually stay far away from getting into relationships and avoid social gatherings (Garner, 1997) [10]. The media, peers and families have an influence in developing attitude related to body image. Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson *et al.*, 1999) [25] explains that the body image is affected by parents, peers, media, internalization of societal standards of appearance and excessive appearance comparison. Those who feel failed to achieve the standards may cause body image dissatisfaction (Cafri *et al.*, 2005; Thompson & Stice, 2001) [3, 4, 27].

#### Physical appearance anxiety

Physical appearance anxiety is the negative perception of physical appearance by one's own self and others, leading to increased levels of stress and anxiety in an individual. Appearance anxiety can be described as an apprehension regarding one's physical appearance and how they are evaluated by others (Davis, Brewer, & Weinstein, 1993) [7].

From a very early age, the media defines beauty for us, and they give out an idea that beauty is always linked with goodness. For example, makers of famous animated books and movies, as well as Disney movies, depict that the prince and the princess have a very particular look that makes them attractive. The female protagonists usually are shown to have eye-catching features like snatched noses, pouty lips and big shiny eyes, with perfect skin texture and a very lean body type. Even after the existence of distinct racial and

ethnic groups which have their own special beauty standards, mostly people around the globe agree on what is physically attractive in the human face. Various studies show that tests conducted on people from various ethnic groups, races and countries show a high correlation when rating some photographs according to attractiveness, ranging from 0.66 to 0.93 (Langlois & Roggman, 1990) [16]. In short, perceivers across cultures and societies interpret some faces to be better looking than others.

Those individuals may experience anxiety, who think that they cannot make positive impression on others (Leary, Kowalski, & Campbell, 1988) [17]. Harter (1983) [12] explained that an individual's self-esteem is directly influenced by the feeling of other individuals about their physical appearance. Physical appearance anxiety includes concerns related to body image and other aspects such as skin colour, shape of facial features, height, weight and muscular build up. In a study carried out on adolescent and young adult females, association between social anxiety level and self-esteem was found to be significant (Ozcan *et al.*, 2013) [22].

In this context, present study drew following hypothesis:

H1: The males and females will differ significantly on the dimension of Internalization: Thin/low body fat.

H2: The males and females will differ significantly on the dimension of Internalization: Muscular/Athletic.

H3: The males and females will differ significantly on the dimension of Pressures by family.

H4: The males and females will differ significantly on the dimension of Pressures by peers.

H5: The males and females will differ significantly on the dimension of Pressures by media.

H6: The males and females will differ significantly on the dimension of State anxiety.

H7: The males and females will differ significantly on the dimension of Trait anxiety.

#### Method

The purpose of the present study was to understand the association between socio-cultural attitude and physical anxiety towards appearance. This study also aimed to understand the role of gender in socio-cultural attitude and physical anxiety towards appearance. The study was conducted via survey method, using the online google forms.

#### Design

The quantitative approach was followed to study the role of gender in socio-cultural attitude and physical anxiety towards appearance.

#### Sample

The sample of the study was comprised of 75 males and 75 females (N=150) in the age range of 18-24 years. All the participants of the study were college going adults.

#### Measures

Two scales were utilised in the present study namely: 'Sociocultural Attitude towards Appearance Questionnaire – 4' (SATAQ-4) and 'Physical Appearance State and Trait Anxiety scale' (PASTAS).

SATAQ-4 was developed by Thompson *et al.* (2011) [26], consists of 22 items. This scale has adequate reliability ranging from 0.82 to 0.95 (Schaefer *et al.*, 2015) [24] and

validity ranging from 0.84 to 0.95 (Barra *et al.*, 2019). This scale has a five- subscales: (i). Internalization: Thin/low body fat subscale assesses the extent to which a respondent ratifies an ideal thin body with low body fat; (ii). Internalization: Muscular/Athletic subscale assesses the extent of rating; respondents endorse an ideal athletic body with muscles; Pressures: Family sub-scale assesses to what magnitude a respondent feels pressures from family to attain a certain appearance; Pressures: Peers subscale assesses to what extent the respondent feels pressure from peers to achieve a certain appearance and Pressures: Media sub scale assesses the extent to which respondents feels pressure from the media to acquire a certain appearance. The score on the scale ranges from 'definitely disagree' (1) to 'definitely agree' (5). Higher scores signify higher intensities of influences and pressures from each factor that individuals experience.

**Table 1:** Mean scores and t-values on the dimensions of socio-cultural attitude towards appearance as a function of gender

Attitude towards appearance Dimensions	Female (75)	Male (75)	t-value
	Mean (S.D.)	Mean (S.D.)	
Internalisation-Thin/Low Body Fat	15.07 (4.23)	14.52 (3.74)	.84
Internalisation-Muscular/Athletic	11.88 (4.03)	16.40 (4.28)	6.66***
Pressures: Family	11.52 (4.25)	9.96 (3.61)	2.42*
Pressures: peers	8.37 (3.87)	9.95 (4.02)	2.44*
Pressures: media	13.65 (4.84)	10.99 (4.98)	3.32**

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 1 indicates that gender difference was significant on four subscales: Internalisation-Muscular/Athletic, Pressures from family, peers and media. However, females scored higher in comparison to males on the subscale of Internalisation-Thin/Low Body Fat, but the difference was not found to be significant.

**Table 2:** Mean scores on the measures of physical appearance related anxiety as a function of gender

Physical Appearance Related Anxiety	Female (75)	Male (75)	t-value
	Mean (S.D.)	Mean (S.D.)	
Trait	35.37 (10.23)	29.73 (9.49)	3.48**
State	13.81 (9.84)	11.03 (10.30)	1.69

\*\* $p < .01$

Table 2 indicates that gender difference was significant on the trait anxiety of PASTAS, whereas difference was not significant for the state anxiety of the PASTAS.

## Discussion

The objective of the present research was to analyse the role of gender in socio-cultural attitude and physical anxiety towards appearance. Socio-cultural attitude towards appearance can be defined as an idealisation of an image, that exists in cultures and societies, of beauty or attractive points of a person. Sociocultural standards are learnt from agents of mass media such as television and newspaper advertisements, movies, etc. and from people around us. This drives people to internalize such social standards which forms their socio-cultural attitude. Physical appearance anxiety is the negative perception of physical appearance by one's own self and others, leading to increased levels of stress and anxiety in an individual. According to Davis, Brewer, Weinstein (1993) [7], appearance anxiety depicts an apprehension about one's physical appearance and how others evaluate it.

Physical appearance state and trait anxiety scale: This scale was developed by Reed, Thompson, Brannick, and Sacco (1991) [23]. It has two subscales- State and Trait. State anxiety is reflected by the psychological and physiological reactions to adverse situations in specific moment. Whereas, trait anxiety is reflected by the traits of personality related to present state anxiety. This scale consists of 15 items in each subscale and the responses are taken on a five-point Likert scale- 1 indicates "never" and 5 represents "always".

## Results

In the present study the role of gender in socio-cultural attitude and physical appearance related anxiety was investigated. The t-test was employed to investigate the gender difference in terms of their socio-cultural attitude and physical appearance related anxiety.

In order to see the socio-cultural attitude of the participants and physical appearance anxiety based on gender, the t-test was performed on the data by using SPSS to find out the difference between males and females on different dimensions of the two scales: SATAQ and PASTAS. The first hypothesis, that there would be a significant difference between males and females on the dimension of Internalization: Thin/low body fat not accepted. However, males and females showed the difference at descriptive level. There was found significant difference on the other four dimensions of SATAQ: Internalisation-Muscular/Athletic, Pressures from family, peers and media. Hence Hypothesis number H2, H3, H4, and H5 were accepted. On the PASTAS, males and females significantly differ on the dimension of trait anxiety, however no significant gender difference was found on the state Anxiety. Hence, hypothesis H6 was not accepted, whereas hypothesis number 7 was accepted.

It shows that males are more affected by the muscular/athletic factor as compared to females. This implies that males are more likely to internalize the idea of looking muscular/athletic and form their socio-cultural attitude towards appearance based. It is supported by a study conducted by Klimek *et al.* (2018) [14], which revealed that women and men feel more pressure to be slim and muscular respectively. It can be understood the reason that why men in the popular magazines are represented as mean and muscular (Frederick, Fessler, & Haselton, 2005) [9]. It has been observed that in comparison to females, males are more likely to take protein supplements and anabolic steroids as well engagement in excessive exercise for muscles building (Cafri, Van den Berg, & Thompson, 2006; Linden, 2002) [6, 19].

The results for the internalization- thin/low body fat indicate that there was no significant difference found between males and females. This may imply that both males and females

experience an equal amount of pressure and internalize an idea of having thin/low body fat. This result could also imply that perhaps a wider research needs to be done in this area of socio-cultural attitude towards appearance in order to gain a more conclusive view of its formation and provide a more generalised idea of their impact on people. Body image related concerns may lead to depression, low self-esteem and eating disorders. The desire for thin ideal has been found evident in childhood stage (Brown & Slaughter, 2011) [2].

On the dimension of pressures from family, a significant difference was found between men and women wherein the results showed that family pressure affected females significantly more than men. If a culture emphasises that women with a particular type of body are beautiful, then parents might expect that body in their daughters to make her more acceptable to the society and project her as an ideal marriageable partner. A study conducted by Helfert and Warschburger (2013) [13], on the contrary finds that gender differences in parental pressure seemed negligible. Parents affect a child's perception of their appearance but the pressure is equally divided among males and females.

The finding of the present study indicates that pressures from peers have a significantly impact on males as compared to females. A study conducted by Devi and Jyotsana (2018) [8] revealed that boys have more body dissatisfaction due to higher peer pressure. They are more likely to be concerned by their physical appearance as a result of peer pressure than females.

The finding on the pressures from the media dimension indicates a significant difference between males and females. Females are more affected by the pressures put on by the media regarding physical appearance. A large part of the socio-cultural attitude formed in women is largely related to how an ideal woman's physical appearance is represented and advertised in the media. A study conducted by Knauss C. *et al.* (2008) [15], revealed that girls were found high on body shame and body surveillance in comparison to boys.

On PASTAS scale, males and females differ significantly on trait anxiety scale. It is indicative that females experience more anxiety at any given time regarding their physical appearance than men. A study revealed that college women, vulnerable to eating disorder had larger differences between their current and ideal body shape and more on social appearance anxiety, than those at less risk of acquiring the eating disorder (Gitimu *et al.*, 2016) [11]. A study conducted by Zimmer-Gembeck *et al.* (2018) [28] showed that girls showed high appearance anxiety related symptoms in comparison to boys. However, the results of the study for the state anxiety found no significant difference between male and female adults. This could imply that both males and females experience an equal amount of state anxiety, i.e. a general amount of physical anxiety towards appearance.

### Conclusion

The present study aimed to analyse the role of gender in socio-cultural attitudes and physical anxiety towards appearance. The results indicate that males and females differ significantly on 4 dimensions of the SATAQ scale-internalisation muscular/athletic, pressure-family, pressure-peers, and pressure media, however significant difference was not found on 'Internalisation thin/low body fat' dimension. There was found significant difference in trait

anxiety scale of the PASTAS. The present study revealed that females were more affected by pressures of family, and media and were more likely to experience trait anxiety, while males were more affected by their peers and were more likely to internalise the muscular/athletic ideal. It can be derived from the present study that gender play important role in shaping the attitude towards physical appearance.

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