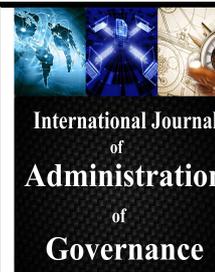




IWNest PUBLISHER

## International Journal of Administration and Governance

(ISSN 2077-4486)

Journal home page: <http://www.iwnest.com/AACE/>

International Journal  
of  
**Administration  
of  
Governance**

### Exploring the Relations between Body Image and Self-Esteem among Two Muslim College Students in Malaysia

Aishah Hanim Abd Karim

Department of Psychology and Counseling, Kulliyah of Education, International Islamic University of Malaysia, 53100 Gombak, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article history:

Received 10 October 2015

Accepted 30 November 2015

Available online 31 December 2015

##### Keywords:

body image, self-esteem, physical appearance, facial beauty, college students

#### ABSTRACT

**Background:** The number of obese and overweight individuals in Malaysia has increased. Likewise, many people have becoming more interested in buying slimming and beauty products in order to become fairer and slimmer within a short period of time. The informants of the study involved two students of International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM). They were selected by using purposeful sampling. The study applied a qualitative method, which involved case studies and semi-structured interviews. Data gained were transcribed, analyzed, coded and categorized into similar themes. **Objective:** The objective of the study is to explore the college students' definition of body image and self-esteem and their coping strategies in order to survive with their existing body images. **Findings:** The findings of the study included the college students' views and understanding of body image and self-esteem, strategies in coping with their existing body image, and positive and negative personal experiences encountered due to body image. **Conclusion:** In conclusion, this study highlighted college students' understanding of both body image and self-esteem. It also discussed the coping strategies used to survive with their existing body image. Some personal experiences were also shared.

© 2015 IWNest Publisher All rights reserved.

**To Cite This Article:** Aishah Hanim Abd Karim., Exploring the relations between body image and self-esteem among two Muslim college students in Malaysia. *Int. J. Adm. Gov.*, 1(14), 21-26, 2015

#### INTRODUCTION

Recently, there are increasing numbers of people who are obese and overweight. The issue of obesity has become a serious matter now in Malaysia. According to Professor Dr. Mohd Ismail Noor, who is the President of the Malaysian Society for the Study of Obesity, the situation has become more urgent because there are more overweight children now [1]. He also mentioned that no one cares and recognize that obesity is a disease. Some parents thought having "chubby children" is a reflection that these children are well-fed and cared for, but they do not realize that they are more likely to be overweight during puberty and this would continue throughout their lifetime. Obesity is the underlying factor for chronic diseases such as diabetes. Malaysia is ranked sixth in the Asia-Pacific region for obesity and tops the list in South-East Asia for both obesity and diabetes.

The Deputy Health Minister, Datur Seri Dr. Hilmi Yahaya said that there are approximately three million obese Malaysians and the number is increasing. Moreover, there are approximately five million individuals who suffer from varying degrees of diabetes. According to the President of Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM), Dr. Tee E. Siong, although obesity is not listed as a cause of mortality, it should be considered as a disease in Malaysia when "communicating to the public." He states that obesity is a major risk factor to many non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke and certain types of cancers. The main reason why he called obesity a disease is so that the public could become more aware of the dangers of the condition. However, he knows that in calling obesity a disease, he certainly do not want it to have negative implications. For instance, the obese children and adults should not be discriminated against [1].

Research on the complex relationship between self-image, body image, body weight and eating practices has been carried out against the background of a rising concern among adolescent, specifically girls, about diet, weight and physical appearance. According to the studies from the 1960s, adolescents of that era dieted or exercised to reach their "ideal" weight. However, in 1980s, the adolescents of that era more likely to be supplementing such measures with induced vomiting, fasting and the use of diuretics, laxatives and appetite suppressants. These behaviours are disturbing and may cause severe eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa

**Corresponding Author:** Aishah Hanim Binti Abd Karim, Department of Psychology and Counseling, Kulliyah of Education, International Islamic University, 53100 Gombak, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.  
E-mail: aishah.ahak@gmail.com

and bulimia. Usually, the individuals who suffer from these eating disorders would have low self-esteem and unrealistic body image.

Furthermore, past studies in the United States show that girls from schools catering to higher income families were more concerned about their weight compared to their peers from schools in lower income families. Thus, the incidence of anorexia nervosa appeared to be highest among the white, middle-class to upper-class families. A century ago, in the western societies, plump bodies were the model to be emulated and women were worried about being too thin [2]. However, for the past thirty years ago, in Canada and other western countries, the idealized model for women has been slim. Slim was promoted not only as beautiful, healthy and sexy, but self-disciplined and good. Attractive people were perceived to be kind, interesting, outgoing, and to possess a variety of socially desirable character traits. The impact of this stereotyping could be painful and damaging to self-esteem.

Nowadays, there are many individuals who are interested in buying slimming and beauty products that contain collagen, stem cells and whitening elements. These products were bought mostly by the younger generations, mainly between the ages of eighteen to twenty-six years old. The products can easily be bought online. Unfortunately, not all products are effective. Some of the products did not get approvals from the Ministry of Health or Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP). For example, in April 2014, the Ministry of Health announced two products namely Collagen Slim and Beautiful Slim Body, which was not registered and approved by the ministry. The ministry announced that these products contain poisonous and harmful chemical element called *sibutramine* [3].

Allah has created men in the best shape and kind. Based on the translation [4], "Such is He, the Knower of all things, hidden and open, the Exalted (in power), the Merciful. He who has made everything which He has created Most Good: He began the creation of man with (nothing more than) clay. And made his progeny from a quintessence of the nature of a fluid despised. But He fashioned him in due proportion, and breathed into him something of His spirit. And He gave you (the faculties of) hearing and sight and feeling (and understanding) Little thanks do ye give!" (Surah As-sajadah, verse 6-9). This evidence showed that Allah has created men perfectly.

However, today, not many people are satisfied with their physical appearance. They are not satisfied with the way they look. They want to become more beautiful and slimmer. They think that the easiest and quickest way of becoming prettier and slimmer is by consuming slimming and beauty products. The society has put great importance on people's physical appearance. "We all are surrounded by pictures of other people who look "perfect": on billboards, in newspapers and magazines, on TV and in the movies, and on the internet" [5, p.69]. Moreover, perfect looks are highly valued because they symbolized success, happiness, being loved and admired by others. Therefore, many people strive to look perfect and become concerned about their physical appearance, worrying that they may not look perfect.

The aims of the study are to understand the young adults' definition of body image and self-esteem and their coping strategies in order to survive with their existing body images. The central research question is - What is body image on the self-esteem of selected obese students in International Islamic University of Malaysia?

*The four research questions are:*

- (1) What is the students' understanding of body image?
- (2) What is the students' understanding of self-esteem?
- (3) How do students cope with their existing body image?
- (4) What are some suggestions or experiences that the students can share with others?

*Theoretical Framework:*

The underlying framework of this study is based on Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory. The hierarchy of needs ranged from lower-level needs for survival and safety that must be met first to higher-level needs for self-actualization (refer Figure 1). Self-actualization is Maslow's term for self-fulfillment, which refers to the realization of personal potential.

The four lower-level are called needs as survival, safety, belonging, and self-esteem [6]. These are also known as the deficiency needs, which must be satisfied first. When these needs are satisfied, the motivation for fulfilling them decreased. Moreover, Maslow labels the highest-level needs as intellectual achievement, aesthetic appreciation, and self-actualization. These needs are also known as the being needs. When they are met, a person's motivation does not cease. Instead, it increases to seek further fulfillment [7].

In contrast, from the Islamic perspective, humans need both physical and spiritual aspect. All the needs mentioned in the first hierarchy such as food and water is related to *nafs*. However, the spiritual self also motivate use to behave in certain ways. For instance, the drives of the soul are often in the opposite direction and contradict to the drives of the *nafs*. They are in a constant state of struggle, whereby the soul should gain dominance over the physical self. This is known as *jihad al-nafs* [8]. For example, as Muslims, we would fast

and willingly give up all food, drink, smoke and sex from sunrise to sunset. This behaviour contradicts to what Maslow's theory states, which is if we are hungry, we would act to satisfy that hunger. Since hunger and thirst are part of the primary needs, not eating and drinking would serve as one of the most powerful ways of allowing the spiritual self to become dominant [8].

It is normal to always ensure our safety. The soul does not oppose the *nafs* with regard to this [8]. However, when there is a need to engage in a war, Muslims would willingly place themselves in danger. Moreover, in terms of the sense of belongingness, some Muslim women face difficulties wearing full face-veils in certain secular countries. However, they would still practice the religious' teachings although it would mean that they could not have the sense of acceptance or belongingness in the community they live in.



**Fig. 1:** Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

#### *Literature Review:*

##### *Body Image and Self-Esteem:*

A study was done to determine the relationship between social physique anxiety (SPA), body image dissatisfaction (BID), self-esteem (SE), and body fat ratio (BFR) in female exercisers and non-exercisers [9]. From the study, it was found that female college students who exercise were more satisfied with their physical appearance and had lower social physique anxiety (SPA) and higher self-esteem (SE). The results also showed that body image satisfaction (BIS) and self-esteem were the key components of female psychological health. Another study was done to examine the importance of self-perceptions of weight or body shape and muscularity in both male and female college students [10]. The results of the study showed that greater contingent self-esteem was more strongly associated with greater weight or body shape concerns among females compared to males. It also showed that greater contingent self-esteem was associated with a stronger drive for muscularity among males.

A study revealed that men exhibited more positive body images than women [11]. They were generally satisfied with their physical appearance. Self-esteem was not as intertwined with their body image as it was for women. In addition, women still exhibited more negative body image, specifically body surveillance and self-ideal discrepancy although they exercised regularly. All women, whether or not they exercise regularly, still struggled with body image concerns. Thus, regular exercise did not correlate with higher self-esteem in the sample of women.

##### *Facial Beauty and Body Image:*

There are evidenced that faces captured attention more than do most common objects. However, certain facial information such as expressions of anger and fear evokes attention more easily than do neutral faces. Sui and Liu [12] did a study to examine whether the same characteristics were found in attention for facial beauty. From the study, it was found that the participants' voluntary allocation of covert attention to the target induced by the central cue was more attenuated by an attractive face rather than a less attractive one. Wiederman and Hurst [13] did a study to investigate potential relationships between women's heterosexual dating and sexual experience, sexual esteem, physical attractiveness, body size and body image. The study suggested that "perceptions of less experience may be based on reality, but they provide no indication that the heavier women had more negative sexual attitudes or self-views as sexual partner" [13]. The finding also highlighted the importance of women's body weight and facial attractiveness in sexual desirability to men before marriage. Another interesting finding of the study is that women with relatively high sexual esteem were not objectively thinner or rated as more attractive, yet they believed themselves to be more attractive. Thus, it appeared that sexual esteem for women is at least partially based on the sense of confidence in an individual's physical attractiveness [13].

##### *Physical Appearance and Body Image:*

According to O'Brien, Latner, Ebnetter and Hunter [14] alongside the increasing rates of overweight and obesity in the population is a somewhat counterintuitive increase in prejudice and discrimination toward people

who are perceived as being fat. They aimed to first test whether prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviours against obese people were related, and to examine whether other personal ideologies were also related to obesity discrimination [14]. From the study, it was found that physical appearance investment is related to obesity discrimination. The study suggested that discrimination against people with obesity may be partly due to the beholder's physical appearance investment rather than known skills and accomplishments of the obese target. The results of the study indicated that the relationship between disgust and anti-fat prejudice may be related to negative cognitions about the physical appearance of fat people, especially those who were medically defined as morbidly obese. In other words, the physical appearance of fat individuals may evoke a feeling of disgust perhaps because it contravenes societal norms and personal orientation around beauty. Thus, this disgust would result in negative attributions and thoughts about fat people.

#### *Methodology:*

##### *Informants:*

This study involved two informants – a female informant, who is in her first year of undergraduate, and a male informant, who is in his second year of postgraduate studies. Both of them are students of International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) that is located in Gombak. The research conducted with the first informant took place outside the computer laboratory, whereas the research conducted with the second informant took place in a resource centre. Both settings took place at different times and days.

##### *The Interviews:*

Interviews in the form of semi-structured dialogues were conducted with each informant. The interviews began with asking the informants their definition of body image. Probing questions such as the following were also asked: “Why do you think so?” and “Can you give some examples?” Then, the interviewer asked open-ended questions regarding self-esteem, coping strategies, and personal experiences encountered due to body image. The individual interviews lasted between 15 and 20 minutes. Prior to the interview, the students were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw from the interview at any time, and that they were free not to answer the questions if they felt uncomfortable. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

##### *Analysis and Presentation:*

The transcripts were read several times in searching for thematic patterns. All statements about (a) definition of body image, (b) definition of self-esteem, (c) strategies to cope with existing body image, and (d) personal experiences were categorized into four groups of statements. Then, the statements in each group were analyzed to explore the definition of body image, definition of self-esteem and coping strategies used in dealing with body image.

#### *Discussion:*

##### *Definition of Body Image:*

The informants relate their body image with physical appearance and body structure. They believed that body image was quite similar to physical appearance. When asked about the differences between body image and physical appearance, Informant 1 stated that physical appearance was more related to how a person dressed herself. In other words, it depends on the clothes that a person wears. Interestingly, Informant 2 believed that there were no differences between body image and physical appearance. Both of them were attire-related and also related to self-image. Hence, from the study, it was found that physical appearance was related to the way an individual dress, whereas the body image was related to how an individual perceived himself. In other words, body image was how a person sees himself.

Both informants agreed that body image were equally important to males and females. Informant 1 tried to relate body image with physical health. She stated that when it comes to health, it would be important regardless of any gender issues. Both males and females should be concerned of their physical health, which shall lead to a positive body image. This finding was inconsistent with Lowery *et al.* [11] whom revealed that men exhibited more positive body images than women. Informant 2 added that body image was more crucial for single males and females. They would put more effort in creating positive body image compared to married males and females.

“Okeh, aa..for this situation, I think aa body image is equally important to both genders..emm..yeah very important.. Especially for those who are not yet married..” (Informant 2)

Facial beauty was also important as it was served as the first impression and that first impression counts. The study revealed that there was a balanced perspective on both body image and facial beauty. In other words, both body image and facial beauty were equally important.

##### *Definition of Self-Esteem:*

Both informants indicated that self-esteem was related to self-confidence.

“Self-esteem *adalah* aa related with our confidence..*kena keyakinan diri*..alright? Emm..whether ..if you have strong self-esteem means that it help you success or to gain what you want to achieve..right?” (Informant 2)

Self-esteem was important as it helped to gain success and achieve personal targets. It was also very important in socialization and not having self-esteem would lead to shyness and depression. Less stressful settings would assist individuals to possess high self-esteem. In contrast, if the situation was stressful, the individual would not be able to balance the situation, which caused them to have low self-esteem. Informant 1 mentioned that she felt embarrassed to speak in front of men. Hence, this feeling would affect her self-esteem.

“*Saya okay tapi saya malu kalau depan jantina lain..lelaki la..*” (Informant 1)

There were internal and external factors that might contribute to having high self-esteem. Such internal factors include possessing knowledge and work hard towards a goal, whereas external factors include an individual’s environment, the way he or she socializes and obeying Allah’s order.

The role of body image can be negative. In other words, if the body image was bad, then it would lead to having negative self-esteem. Body image can also be situational. For instance, it can be significant if a person goes to an event that is full of crowd. Hence, the person would take extra efforts in making sure his or her physical appearance is acceptable by the society. Informant 1 believed that body image was more important than facial beauty.

“*Ada, tapi saya rasa..aa..body image lagi penting la daripada facial beauty* “ (Informant 1)

Informant 2 believed that people’s judgment on a person’s facial beauty may affect his or her self-esteem.

“Sometimes if people low self-confidence..low self-esteem because they worried people surrounding talk about oo this not very beautiful how can he she or he become promoter..” (Informant 2)

This finding was consistent with the study conducted by Sui & Liu [12] who found that people were easily attracted to those with attractive facial characteristics. Both informants mentioned that their ideal body image were based on being healthy and fit. They mentioned that ideal body image can be achieved by planning a meal plan, getting involved in physical activities such as going to the gym, and religious practice such as fasting on Mondays and Thursdays.

#### *Coping with Existing Body Image:*

Both informants were not satisfied with their current existing image. Informant 2 mentioned that it is difficult to maintain weight.

“Usually for me maintain body image is not really easy” (Informant 2)

The amount of money spent in a month in order to achieve the informants’ ideal body image varied. It depends on the product consumption. The products that Informant 2 have tried in order to achieve an ideal body image include nutritional and slimming products such as Herbalife and *Pati Halia* Lotion.

Down, depressed, frustrated, and worried were some of the feelings felt by the informants if they were not able to achieve their ideal body image. These feelings were related to worrisome. Wasting money was also another feeling. According to Informant 2, he felt as if he was wasting his own money as the product was not effective. He also felt worried if the products brought negative side effects.

Other people’s testimonials, marital status, and health consciousness were some of the motivation that motivated the informants to survive with their current body image. According to Informant 2, he needed to always be motivated and survived with his body image as he was still single and he was also aware of his health conditions. Being reminded, understood and getting social support were the kinds of support that the informants received. According to Informant 1, her friends would remind her on her diet if she started to neglect them. Her family members also understood her intention of reducing weight. Thus, her mother would cook nutritious food when she was at home. Moreover, Informant 2 mentioned that he has a best friend who would accompany him to the gym.

#### *Personal Experiences in Dealing with Body Image:*

Some of the experiences encountered by the informants were related to positive and negative emotions. For instance, according to Informant 2, he started to become obese after he failed one subject during his undergraduate years. He was so depressed that he started to eat every time he felt stress. However, in terms of positive emotions, he felt encouraged to reduce his weight whenever he saw other obese people who were able to do so. Furthermore, according to Informant 1, her experiences were more related to the improvement of health and dealing with sarcastic questions. She mentioned that she did not only manage to reduce weight, but also boosted her energy level and overcome certain problems such as period pain.

“*Aa sebab lepas lose weight tu..kiranya..sebenarnya bukan lose weight sebenarnya sebab pemakanan yang sihat..so improve energy..improve others..senggugut takde pastu aa kulit muka dulu lagi lebih teruk dari sekarang, dah improved pastu emm positif lagi bila.. ye la orang, orang cakap dah kurus..macam tu kan..kalau dulu tembam gila..*” (Informant 1)

Some suggestions or thoughts shared by the informants were to always maintain healthy diets, get physical check-up done on a regular basis, be discipline in reducing weight as well as regular exercise.

#### *Conclusion:*

In conclusion, the present study achieves the main purpose of exploring the relations between body image and self-esteem from the IIUM students' perspectives. The emergence of themes provide insights into the definition of body image, differences between body image and physical appearance, importance of body image among genders, effect of facial beauty on body image, definition of self-esteem, importance of self-esteem, reasons of having high self-esteem, factors that contribute to having high self-esteem, role of body image in boosting self-esteem, effect of facial beauty on self-esteem, ideal body image, plan to achieve ideal body image, ways to cope with existing body image, products tried to achieve ideal body image, feelings if did not manage to achieve ideal body image, support from family members and friends, and positive and negative experiences encountered.

For future research, it is recommended to increase the number of informants in order to obtain more information and increase the possibility of reaching the saturation point. It is also recommended to include marriage informants in order to expand the views of both body image and self-esteem, from their perspectives, and to include the informants' family members and friends so that a wholesome perspective of body image and self-esteem could be gained.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Edwards, A., 2013. Obesity a big problem now in Malaysia. The Star. Retrieved 27 May, 2014, from <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2013/11/17/Obesity-a-big-problem-now-About-three-million-Malaysians-are-obese-says-deputy-minister.aspx/>
- [2] Fallon, A., 1990. Culture in the Mirror: Sociocultural Determinants of Body Image. In: Thomas F. Cash and Thomas Pruzinsky (eds). *Body - Images: Development, Deviance and Change*. The Guilford Press; NY, 80 - 109.
- [3] Dua produk pelangsing diharamkan, 2014. In Kosmo online. Retrieved 29 May, 2014, from [http://www.kosmo.com.my/kosmo/content.asp?y=2014&dt=0408&pub=Kosmo&sec=Negara&pg=ne\\_07.htm](http://www.kosmo.com.my/kosmo/content.asp?y=2014&dt=0408&pub=Kosmo&sec=Negara&pg=ne_07.htm)
- [4] Ali, Abdullah Yusuf, 2001. *The meaning of the Holy Qur-an*. (9<sup>th</sup> edn.). Maryland, USA: Amana Publications.
- [5] Yang, H. and J. Stoeber, 2012. The physical appearance perfectionism scale: Development and preliminary validation. *Journal of Psychopathology Behavioral Assessment*, 34: 69–83.
- [6] Maslow, A.H., 1968. *Toward a psychology of being*. Michigan: Van Nostrand.
- [7] Woolfolk, A., 2001. *Educational psychology*. Needham Heights: Allyn and Bacon.
- [8] Maslow's hierarchy of needs. 2014. Retrieved from <http://tmr123.wordpress.com/2010/04/05/maslows-hierarchy-of-needs-an-islamic-perspective/>.
- [9] Mehmet, K., T.A. Serdar, C. Meliha, C. Fatih, 2010. Body image satisfaction and dissatisfaction, social physique anxiety, self-esteem, and body fat ratio in female exercisers and nonexercisers. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 38(4): 561-569.
- [10] Grossbard, J.R., C.M. Lee, C. Neighbors, M.E. Larimer, 2009. Body image concerns and contingent self-esteem in male and female college students. *Sex Roles*, 60: 198-207.
- [11] Lowery, S.E., E.H. Blanks, S.E.R. Kurpius, S. Sollenberger, M.F. Nicpon, C. Befort, L. Huser, 2005. Body image, self-esteem, and health-related behaviors among male and female first year college student. *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(6): 612 – 623.
- [12] Sui, J., C.H. Liu, 2009. Can beauty be ignored? Effects of facial attractiveness on covert attention. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 16(2): 276 – 281.
- [13] Wiederman, M.W., S.R. Hurst, 1998. Body size, physical attractiveness, and body image among young adult women: Relationships to sexual experience and sexual esteem. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 35(3): 272 – 281.
- [14] O'Brien, K.S., J.D. Latner, D. Ebnetter, J.A. Hunter, 2013. Obesity discrimination: the role of physical appearance, personal ideology, and anti-fat prejudice. *International Journal of Obesity*, 37: 455 – 460.