



RESEARCH PAPER

Physical Appearance Comparison and Life Satisfaction among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to explore the relationship between Physical Appearance Comparison and Life Satisfaction among Young Adults. Comparison is often called a 'thief of joy', and appearance-related comparison has shown aversive effects. The quality of life becomes significantly influenced by the perception of one's appearance. This research used a quantitative, correlational survey design with 503 participants aged 18 to 40 years. The key instruments included: Informed Consent Form, Demographic Form, Physical Appearance Comparison Scale 3 (Schaefer & Thompson, 2018; $\alpha = 0.85$), and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985; $\alpha = 0.82$). It was hypothesized that there would be a significant relationship between Physical Appearance Comparison and Life Satisfaction among young adults. The results indicated a significant inverse relationship between the two variables, supporting the hypothesis. The research implies that awareness of these variables highlights the need for positive, multi-level interventions to reduce appearance comparisons and promote life satisfaction.

KEYWORDS Physical Appearance Comparison, Life Satisfaction, Young Adults

Introduction

Physical appearance has become an emerging and crucial component in shaping a person's identity, where identification is a complex process of recognizing and confirming the identity of an individual, object, or being. It is influenced by various factors, including traits, clothing, and physical cues such as color, transparency, gloss, and roughness (Grundhöfer et al., 2013). While appearance is generally one part of the identification process, in some cases, it becomes the sole means. It plays a substantial role in social interactions and is often among the first personality traits noticed by others (Okoro et al., 2021; Kavalam & Joy, 2022).

Comparison is often called a 'thief of joy' (Schlechter, Meyer, et al., 2023). Various comparison dimensions have been highlighted in past research, including appearance-related comparison, which has shown aversive effects. Components of aversive appearance-related comparison include social comparison (Festinger, 1954), temporal comparison (Albert, 1977), counterfactual comparison (Schlechter et al., 2023), and criteria-based comparisons (Higgins, 1996; Lewin, 1951). Social comparison involves comparing one's appearance to others, shaping behavior, judgement, motivation, and affect (Baldwin & Mussweiler, 2018). Schlechter and Morina (2023) categorize these into upward (others seen as better), lateral (same as others), or downward (better than others). Criteria-based comparison involves standards for appearance based on norms or ideals (Schlechter & Morina, 2023).

According to Dougherty and Krawczyk (2018), appearance-related dimensional comparison involves evaluating one's current appearance against others' attributes. It can be a trait variable, reflecting a stable tendency to compare physical features like body shape or size, or a state variable, representing temporary comparisons triggered by short-term exposure to idealized media images (Myers & Crowther, 2009).

Additionally, Tiggemann and Slater (2013), appearance comparison is defined as the process of evaluating one's physical appearance to others such as celebrities, peers, and idealized portrayals in the media (Nawaz et al., 2023). This comparison extends to various physical characteristics like attractiveness, muscularity, color of the skin, weight, and body type. People might compare themselves to others based on their looks in social media posts as well as real-world encounters (Nawaz et al., 2023). When people feel threatened by the motives, i.e: when people are dissatisfied with their appearance, they tend to engage in certain behaviors to change their physical appearance. These behaviors to alter physical appearance are termed as 'appearance enhancement behaviors' (Walker & Murray, 2012). These enhancement behaviors include cosmetic surgeries (Minoosepehr et al., 2014), body contouring procedures, weight loss behaviors and physical exercises (Sarwer & Polonsky, 2016).

The quality of life becomes significantly influenced by the perception of one's appearance. People with body image issues often face poor quality of life, low self-esteem and daily functioning of life including physical, emotional, social and other aspects of mental health. The facial aesthetic and reconstructive surgeries improve the subjective quality of life, as it was observed in one of the studies that after taking aesthetic facial measures, the self-esteem, self-confidence, physical, emotional and social functioning and overall quality of life was better than before (Yıldız & Şelimen, 2014).

Life satisfaction is "the extent to which a person finds life rich, meaningful, full, or of high quality" (APA). Ruut Veenhoven (2014) defines it as "the extent to which a person optimistically evaluates the overall quality of his/her life as a whole." Priyansha & Sahai (2020) describe it as "one's assessment of life overall, as opposed to the sentiments and feelings that are knowledgeable about the occasion." Diener et al. (1999) explain it as the cognitive part of subjective well-being, involving one's desire to change life, satisfaction with the past and future, and how others view their life.

The current research is unique in exploring Physical Appearance Comparison beyond media influence, focusing on young adults in Pakistani society. It addresses cultural pressures, particularly the impact of appearance-based evaluations during the '*rishta*' process, and fills a gap by examining the link between appearance comparison and life satisfaction in this population for the first time.

The theoretical foundations of this research originate in two theories: Self Discrepancy theory and Social Comparison theory. Self-discrepancy theory talks about how various kinds of discrepancies between representations of the self can lead to emotional distress. It sets two psychological dimensions: self-domains and standpoints on the self. Three types of domains of the self have been proposed in this theory (a) the actual self (b) ideal self (c) the ought self, while two standpoints on the self includes either one's own standpoint on the self or some significant other's standpoint on the self (Higgins, 1987). Hence, for the present research, this theory provides a comprehensive theoretical background. When people compare their current physical appearance i.e: actual self with others such as actors/actress, peers etc, they tend to consider them as their ideals (ideal self) or perceives that those physical characteristics that they see in

other, they should also possess them, i.e: their ought self. This creates a discrepancy between their current appearance and ideal appearance, which creates negative emotions in them such as anxiety, envy, jealousy, low self esteem, dissatisfaction with their body and life (Higgins, 1987). Whereas, Social Comparison theory posits that human beings have an innate ability to compare and evaluate their own abilities, achievements and opinions to others in their environment (Festinger, 1954).

Literature Review

Appearance comparisons can be done through different mediums, such as in person, magazines, television, and social media (Ferguson et al., 2013). The terms 'Proximal' and 'Distal' are used to describe the distance between two objects. Comparisons done within real world scenarios, for example, with peers (Leahey & Crowther, 2008; Schaefer & Thompson, 2018), in general public, meeting with a new person, at work place or school/college, while shopping, at a party, gym, or at a restaurant (Schaefer & Thompson, 2018) are considered as proximal targets. However, when these comparisons are done on celebrities on television, models in magazines, actors or actresses in movies, billboard or in advertisements, public figures like athletes, idealized portrayal images and images on different dating or social networking applications and characters in videogames is referred to as distal targets (Schaefer & Thompson, 2014).

Physical appearance comparison is said to be linked with poor body image. When people compare their appearance to others, the perceived differences between their ideal self and the target can trigger emotions like anxiety, disappointment, envy, hope, or satisfaction (Coelho et al., 2023). Frequent appearance comparisons has a positive correlation with increased body dissatisfaction and eating related issues (Myers & Crowther, 2009; Senín-Calderón et al., 2020; Taniguchi & Hubbard, 2019; Coelho et al., 2023), low self esteem (Nazar, 2023), and body mass index (Taniguchi & Hubbard, 2019). Negative influences of social comparison are found more while making comparison with peers rather than television or social media exposure (Ferguson et al., 2013). In today's society, the idealized portrayals particularly through traditional or social media, are associated with negative outcomes, including increased body dissatisfaction (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Morrison et al., 2004; Myers & Crowther, 2009), desire for thinness, weight control behaviors (WCBs), and symptoms of abnormal eating patterns (Morrison et al., 2004; Myers & Crowther, 2009).

Self-worth contingency and the tendency to compare one's appearance on social media are positively correlated with each other (Prieler et al., 2021). Thus, to enhance this level of satisfaction, people use certain behaviors referred to as 'appearance enhancement behaviors' (Davis & Arnocky, 2020). Such behaviors include activities like appearance checking (exploring information about size, shape, weight, or overall appearance), appearance fixing (masking, covering up or improving perceived appearance flaws), and appearance avoidance i.e: engaging in actions to hide information about one's appearance (Walker & Murray, 2012). These behaviors are influenced by sociocultural factors, such as peers, family, and the media, to attract potential partners (Davis & Arnocky, 2020) as well as evolutionary factors related to competition over physical appearance (Johnson et al., 2014).

People often tend to evaluate their own physical appearance against more attractive role models, referred to as upward physical appearance comparison like fashion models or television and movie celebrities. Over the past century, there has been

an increased trend towards thinner physiques among Miss America contestants and models in women's magazines (Silverstein et al., 1986, Wiseman et al., 1992). Upward comparisons being more common than downward or lateral comparisons (Coelho et al., 2023). Upward social comparison and self-esteem mediates the relationship between social media usage and an individual's subjective well-being (Wang et al., 2017).

Appearance satisfaction is considered an important factor in life satisfaction. A study in Seoul explored relationships between appearance interest, satisfaction, and life satisfaction in adolescent girls, finding a significant impact of appearance satisfaction on life satisfaction—those satisfied showed greater life satisfaction (Lee, 2009). Social comparison on social media is also a significant predictor of life satisfaction (Sim & Prihadi, 2020). Studies indicate that body image (BI) and orofacial appearance (OA) significantly affect life satisfaction, with dissatisfied individuals experiencing lower levels (Campos et al., 2022).

Young adults with age of around 20-25 years old reported decreased real and ideal self-concept discrepancy and lower levels of life satisfaction as compared to 60-75 years older adults (Czaja, 1975). young adulthood is a transition phase of life between adolescence and full- fledged adulthood. It is the distinct period between 18- 40 years of age according to Erik Erikson's theory of Psychosocial development. Young adulthood is a period of huge changes and growth and navigating this challenging time builds a ground for a healthy and happy life later on (Handa et al., 2023). Life satisfaction may contribute to heightened self esteem when young adults are aware of their strengths and capabilities, whereas, reduced life satisfaction may lead to lower self-esteem, especially among individuals who undermine their strengths (Szczeńniak et al., 2021).

The current research is unique in exploring Physical Appearance Comparison beyond media influence, focusing on young adults in Pakistani society. It addresses cultural pressures, particularly the impact of appearance-based evaluations during the '*rishta*' process, and fills a gap by examining the link between appearance comparison and life satisfaction in this population for the first time.

Methodology

The present research is based on quantitative, correlational survey design. Moreover, Convenience Sampling was used for data collection. The sample consisted of 503 participants including young adults, from 18-40 years, according to Erik Erikson's theory. The inclusion criteria of minimum qualification is Matriculation, as the survey instruments were supposed to be administered in English. Moreover, both male and female young adults are included.

Physical Appearance Comparison Scale- 3 was used to measure Physical Appearance Comparison. This scale is designed to measure how individuals (a) compare various dimensions of their physical appearance such as weight/shape, muscularity and overall appearance (b) compare both distant (distal) and nearby (proximal) targets, (c) the direction of these comparisons i.e: upward or downward and (d) emotional effect/response by making such comparisons. The final version of the scale comprises of 27 items with 3 main subscales: Frequency, Direction and Effect across three domains: Proximal, Distal, and Muscularity. The main item responses of Frequency subscales include 5 responses ranging from (Never to Almost Always). Direction subscale items, includes 5 response choices (Much Better to Much Worse). Similarly, the Effect subscale items also includes 5 response categories ranging from Very Positive to Very Negative.

The scale has a good internal consistency with Cronbach alpha of 0.85 and has a good construct validity (Schaefer & Thompson, 2018).

Life Satisfaction was measured through the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, 1985). This 5-item scale is intended to assess individuals' overall cognitive evaluations of their life satisfaction, focusing on the overall assessment rather than positive or negative emotions. Respondents express their level of agreement or disagreement with each of the 5 statements on a 7-point scale, ranging from "7" (strongly agree) to "1" (strongly disagree). This scale has a good internal consistency, with an alpha of 0.87 and excellent test-retest reliability, with a correlation of 0.82 and concurrent validity (Diener et.al., 1985).

First, the authors of the scales were approached via email to acquire permission and access for their use in this research. A survey form was then designed in a Word document, including the informed consent form, demographic form, and the questionnaires: Physical Appearance Comparison Scale-3 and Satisfaction with Life Scale. Participants were recruited from various universities, professions, and the general public within the age range of 18–40 years. Data was collected in person from 503 participants. Informed consent was obtained, with participants assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw without harm. Measures were used with permission, no deception was involved, and researcher contact was provided for queries.

Following the completion of data collection phase, the data was entered manually and analyzed through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS-21) by using Frequency distributions, Pearson correlations, and independent t-tests.

Results and Discussion

The present research aimed to explore the relationship between Physical Appearance Comparison and Life Satisfaction among young adults. The results were analyzed by using Pearson correlations between the nine individual subscales i.e: (Proximal Frequency, Proximal Direction, Proximal, Effect, Distal Frequency, Distal Direction, Distal Direction, Distal Effect, Muscularity Frequency, Muscularity Direction, Muscularity Effect) and Life satisfaction, and the three main subscales: Total Frequency, Direction, Effect and Life Satisfaction. Table 1 the frequency and percentages of demographic variables, while Table 2 demonstrates the descriptive statistics of the nine subscales of Physical Appearance Comparison Scale 3 and Satisfaction with Life Scale.

Moreover, Tables 3-6 shows the correlation between the subscales of Physical Appearance Comparison Scale and Satisfaction with Life Scale, which demonstrates a significant inverse relationship between all the subscales of Physical Appearance Comparison and Life Satisfaction. This suggests that the higher frequency, direction and emotional effect of physical appearance comparison, the lower is the life satisfaction and vice versa. The more frequently people compare their physical appearance to others either to proximal targets (peers), distal targets (on media) or compare their muscularity in both targets, the more dissatisfied they become with their life.

Table 1
Frequency and Percentages of the Demographic Variables (N=503)

Demographic Variables	f	%
Gender		
Males	252	50.1

Females	251	49.9
Age		
18-25 years	366	72.8
26-33 years	95	18.9
34-40 years	42	8.3
Birth Order		
First born	166	33.0
Middle born	214	42.5
Last born	111	22.1
Only Child	12	2.4
Family Structure		
Nuclear	314	62.4
Joint	188	37.4
Educational Level		
Matric/ O'levels	11	2.2
Intermediate/ A'levels	44	8.7
Undergraduate	250	49.7
Graduate	134	26.6
Post Graduate	64	12.7
Employment Status		
Student	296	58.8
Employed	164	32.6
Unemployed	27	5.4
Other	16	3.2
Marital Status		
Single	380	75.5
Married	115	22.9
Seperated	5	1.0
Divorced	2	0.4
Widowed	1	0.2
Socioeconomic Status		
Lower Class	3	0.6
Lower Middle	30	6.0
Middle	300	59.6
Upper Middle	145	28.8
Upper Class	24	4.8
Body Mass Index (BMI)		
Underweight (< 18.5)	71	17.6
Healthy (18.5-24.9)	259	64.3
Overweight (25-29.9)	57	14.1
Obese (>30)	16	4.0

Table 2
Descriptive and Reliability Statistics for Physical Appearance Comparison Scale 3
(Subscales) and Satisfaction With Life Scale (N=503)

Scales	Items	M	SD	α	SK	K	Ranges	
							Min	Max
Proximal Frequency	3	6.81	3.77	0.50	6.14	83.92	3.00	61.00
Proximal Direction	3	5.91	3.20	0.82	0.50	-.65	1.00	15.00
Proximal Effect	3	6.18	3.19	0.82	.43	-.76	1.00	15.00
Distal Frequency	3	5.93	2.85	0.77	.80	.02	3.00	15.00
Distal Direction	3	6.33	3.24	0.78	.29	-.92	1.00	15.00
Distal Effect	3	6.11	3.06	0.81	.37	-.76	1.00	13.00
Muscularity	3	5.74	3.08	0.61	3.09	26.20	3.00	39.00
Frequency								
Muscularity	3	5.86	3.04	0.77	.48	-.59	1.00	15.00
Direction								
Muscularity Effect	3	5.70	2.84	0.77	.45	-.48	1.00	15.00

Satisfaction With Life Scale	5	23.31	6.12	0.74	-.42	-.20	6.00	35.00
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Note: M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, a= Cronbach's alpha, SK= Skewness, K= Kurtosis

Table 3
Pearson Correlation among Physical Appearance Comparison Scale 3 (Proximal) subscales and Satisfaction With Life Scale

Variables	Satisfaction With Life Scale	Proximal Frequency	Proximal Direction	Proximal Effect
Satisfaction With Life Scale	-	-.146**	-.318**	-.325**
Proximal Frequency	-	-	.486**	.475**
Proximal Direction	-	-	-	.884**
Proximal Effect	-	-	-	-

Note. $p \leq 0.01$

Table 4
Pearson Correlation among Physical Appearance Comparison Scale 3 (Distal) subscales and Satisfaction With Life Scale

Variables	Satisfaction With Life Scale	Distal Frequency	Distal Direction	Distal Effect
Satisfaction With Life Scale	-	-.072	-.214**	-.242**
Distal Frequency	-	-	.668**	.623**
Distal Direction	-	-	-	.866**
Distal Effect	-	-	-	-

Note. $p \leq 0.01$

Table 5
Pearson Correlation among Physical Appearance Comparison Scale 3 (Muscularity) subscales and Satisfaction With Life Scale

Variables	Satisfaction With Life Scale	Muscularity Frequency	Muscularity Direction	Muscularity Effect
Satisfaction With Life Scale	-	-.104*	-.171**	-.191**
Muscularity Frequency	-	-	.530**	.503**
Muscularity Direction	-	-	-	.877**
Muscularity Effect	-	-	-	-

Note. $p \leq 0.01$, $p \leq 0.05$

Table 6
Pearson Correlation among Physical Appearance Comparison Scale 3 (overall/total) subscales and Satisfaction With Life Scale

Variables	Satisfaction With Life Scale	Total Frequency	Total Direction	Total Effect
Satisfaction With Life Scale	-	-.145**	-.240**	-.255**
Total Frequency	-	-	.736**	.717**
Total Direction	-	-	-	.942**
Total Effect	-	-	-	-

Note. $p \leq 0.01$

The significant inverse relationship between Physical Appearance Comparison and Life Satisfaction implies that the hypothesis is proved. These findings align with previous research. For instance, Fardouly et al. (2021) explored women's tendency to compare their appearance in daily life with both proximal and distal targets—close friends, acquaintances, strangers, influencers, and models. Participants rated these

targets as less, more, or equally attractive, and judged their attainability. Women more often compared themselves to acquaintances and strangers (proximal targets), viewing them as more attractive (upward comparison), rather than to models or close peers. However, comparison to models was deemed more dangerous due to perceived unattainability. Upward comparison to all targets led to low mood, body image issues, and increased efforts toward physical activity or dieting. Brown and Tiggemann (2016) also found that celebrity and peer photos on Instagram contributed to body dissatisfaction and decreased mood. Everything in the surroundings focuses on physical attractiveness—be it a commercial, magazines, social media, or movies. Even highly attractive models are retouched to look “perfect” in an unattainable way. Easily applicable filters are now in everyone’s hand, removing imperfections in selfies and leading to comparisons with others or ideals. In past decades, common people were highly influenced by celebrities and wanted to become like them (Chan & Zhang, 2007; Fraser & Brown, 2002; Bahatheg, 2022). Now, recent studies show a more progressive trend called ‘Snapchat Dysmorphia’, where people want to look like their filtered selfies and seek plastic surgery due to dissatisfaction with their appearance (Ramphul & Mejias, 2018). This supports how the increasing trend of physical appearance comparison leads to life dissatisfaction. Third, as far as link between the effect i.e: emotional response by comparing to others and life satisfaction is concerned, the existing literature provides an extensive acute emotional impact after comparing. It could be both positive or negative. A study explored the relationship between narcissism and social comparison. It showed that people with narcissistic characteristics tend to experience more negative affect of social comparison. While positive affect is associated with downward comparison and negative affect such as increased hostility isareinked with upward comparison (Bogart et al., 2004). Moreover, a positive relationship between body esteem and life satisfaction among college students (Priyansha & Sahai, 2020) and young adults (Lalthanpuui & Rema, 2023) has been found.

Conclusion

Physical appearance is crucial in shaping a person’s identity. Everything around us—commercials, magazines, social media, or movies—focuses on physical attractiveness. People have become more prone to engaging in Physical Appearance Comparison, which directly or indirectly impacts Life Satisfaction. This research explored the relationship between Physical Appearance Comparison and Life Satisfaction among young adults and found a significant but inverse relationship. The findings imply a need for positive interventions—body acceptance workshops, tailored therapies, and positive psychology practices—to reduce harmful comparisons, while urging influencers and media to promote authenticity, diversity, and inclusive beauty standards. These efforts can also support educational programs that help individuals challenge unrealistic ideals and foster healthier self-perceptions.

Recommendations

Future research should use a larger, more diverse sample—equally representing university and non-university participants—to improve generalizability. Studies should also include adolescents, emerging adults, and older adults. Experimental research is encouraged to assess the effectiveness of interventions such as media literacy programs, CBT, and self-compassion training in reducing appearance-based comparisons and enhancing life satisfaction. Qualitative studies can explore the underlying reasons for such comparisons, while longitudinal designs can examine their long-term impact on psychological well-being.

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