

Unfolding the Relationship Between Conformity to Feminine Norms, Body Image Dissatisfaction and Psychological Distress in Adolescent Girls.

Ms. Rajshree Puri¹, Dr. Sneha Sharma²

¹Student (M.A. Psychology), S. S. Jain Subodh (Autonomous) PG College, Rambagh Circle, Jaipur

²Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, S. S. Jain Subodh (Autonomous) PG College, Rambagh Circle, Jaipur

Abstract

“The opposite of courage in our society is not cowardice; it is conformity” -Rollo May.

Conformity to feminine norms is a complex and multifaceted construct that has been the subject of extensive research in the field of psychology. Conformity to feminine norms refers to the process of adhering to societal expectations and standards associated with being female and it's demonstrated in the individual woman's behaviors, feelings, and thoughts. It includes some set of norms for females that can vary across cultures and contexts but often include physical appearance, Domesticity, emotional expression, career choices, family roles, dress and grooming, etc. Conformity to feminine norms leads women to behavioral patterns and lifestyle habits throughout their lives but the “Gender intensification hypothesis” (Hill & Lynch,1983) suggests that adolescents face increased pressure to conform to gender roles from a variety of sources, including parents, peers, educators, and the media. Research also showed that adolescent girls face immense pressure to conform to societal ideals of feminine beauty, which can have significant negative impacts on their body image and psychological well-being (Gustafsson et al., 2011). This research aims to examine the complex interplay between adherence to feminine norms, body image dissatisfaction, and the manifestation of psychological distress in this population .The data was collected from 100 adolescent girls (ages 16-19) in Jaipur (RAJ) through purposive sampling. Demographic details were gathered using a demographic information form, while conformity to feminine norms was assessed using The Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory-45 (Parent & Moradi, 2010). Psychological distress was measured with the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler et al., 2002), and body image dissatisfaction with the Body Image Disturbance Questionnaire (Cash et al., 2004). The scores were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson product movement correlation with the help of SPSS version 26. The findings of the research demonstrate that Conformity To Feminine Norms is positively correlated with Body Image Dissatisfaction and Psychological Distress.

Keywords: Conformity To Feminine Norms, Body Image Dissatisfaction, Psychological Distress, Gender Norms, Cultural.

INTRODUCTION

Gender role norms are a subset of social norms that define the rules and expectations for behavior, thoughts, and emotions based on an individual's gender. The American Psychological Association defines

gender role norms as, ‘the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for boys and men or girls and women’. Lei Yang, and Zhipeng Sun (2022) in their paper, go on to add, “It is also a complex social system that structures the life experience as well as social statuses of all human beings”. Therefore, it is safe to say that gender role norms operate as informal guidelines that shape what is considered appropriate for men and women in society. These norms are deeply ingrained and begin to influence individuals from an early age, playing a significant role in identity formation, socialization, and psychological development.

Conformity to feminine norms:-

Conformity to feminine norms refers to the adherence to societal expectations and behaviors traditionally associated with femininity. These norms dictate how women are expected to act, think, and feel in ways that align with culturally defined standards of femininity. Sara Esteban-Gonzalo, et al., (2020) linked these standards to characteristics such as care of others, thinness, sexual fidelity, modesty, domesticity, passivity, etc. Conforming to these norms often results in the internalization of a gender-based self-concept that reinforces prescribed roles and behaviors.

Conformity to feminine norms can also be seen in context with the Gender Schema Theory which suggests that culturally learned associations with masculinity and femininity influence how individuals evaluate their behaviors and attributes. Socialization by parents, teachers, and media from an early age further ingrains these norms, encouraging girls to value traits like empathy and beauty while discouraging assertiveness or independence. Feminine norms are reinforced through rewards such as compliments for appearance or nurturing behavior and social criticism for deviations, creating a feedback loop that validates conformity. Over time, these norms become integral to self-concept, aligning identity and behavior to avoid societal disapproval and maintain self-esteem. While conformity provides cultural consistency, it can cause strain when individuals face pressure to align with norms that conflict with their authentic selves, such as women balancing assertiveness with warmth in leadership roles. This internalization reinforces stereotypes, limits personal and professional growth, and hinders progress toward gender equality by prioritizing caregiving and appearance over leadership and independence. (Bem, 1981)

Psychological Distress:-

Psychological Distress refers to a state of emotional suffering. In their paper titled “Epidemiology of Psychological Distress”, Drapeau et al. note that the term ‘Psychological Distress’ is often applied to “the undifferentiated combinations of symptoms ranging from depression and general anxiety symptoms to personality traits, functional disabilities, and behavioural problems.” Depression-related symptoms include sadness, hopelessness, and a loss of interest in daily activities, while anxiety symptoms manifest as restlessness, tension, and excessive worry. Research shows that adherence to norms emphasizing thinness, modesty, and appearance is significantly associated with increased anxiety and depression among women. For instance, Iwamoto et al. (2023) found that conformity to feminine ideals such as thinness and appearance heightened psychological distress among college women. Similarly, Steinfeldt et al. (2011) highlighted that the pressure to conform to societal body ideals negatively impacted women's self-esteem and emotional well-being, particularly in athletes who must navigate conflicting ideals of physical competence and thinness.

Body Image Dissatisfaction:-

Body image dissatisfaction (BID) refers to negative self-evaluation of one's body, often resulting from a perceived discrepancy between one's actual body and societal or personal ideals (Cash & Smolak, 2011).

It is associated with psychological distress, low self-esteem, and disordered eating behaviors (Grogan, 2016). Social influences, including media, peers, and cultural standards, play a significant role in shaping body image concerns (Tiggemann, 2012).

Biological influences, such as genetic predispositions or hormonal changes, especially during adolescence, play a role in shaping body image. Sociocultural factors are among the most prominent contributors, with societal ideals promoting unrealistic beauty standards through media, advertising, and social platforms. These pressures encourage individuals to compare themselves with idealized bodies, often leading to dissatisfaction. Interpersonal factors also contribute significantly. Negative comments, teasing, or even well-meaning but critical feedback from peers, family, or friends can reinforce poor body image. Additionally, observing and imitating the dieting or appearance-focused behaviors of close associates can shape one's self-perception. Internalization of societal standards of beauty further amplifies dissatisfaction. Cultural differences also play a role, as perceptions of body image and the ways dissatisfaction manifests can vary.

Review of Literature

Conformity to feminine norms, body image dissatisfaction, and psychological distress has been extensively studied in psychology worldwide, particularly in the context of gender roles, sociocultural influences, and mental health outcomes. But the Indian research is limited in this area. The following section summarized some recent research in this area:-

- **Vibal, J. G., Derit, K. A., Bobadilla, K. R., Palco, R., & Tucio, R. (2024).** - examined the reasons for conformity to feminine norms among female college students. Factors like religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status were found to influence adherence to norms such as thinness, appearance, and sexual fidelity. Higher conformity was observed in domestic and romantic relationship norms.
- **Iwamoto, D.K., Le, T.P., Clinton, L. et al. (2023)** - investigated the effects of conformity to feminine norms on psychological distress among college women. The study found that norms emphasizing modesty, thinness, and appearance heightened distress, while age and a focus on relationships reduced it.
- **Berry, A. T., & Holloway, L. J. M. (2022)** - explored how Black male vs. female college students conform to gender-role norms and the resulting impact on stress and depression. The study revealed that Black female students are more likely to conform to these norms compared to their male counterparts. Both groups experienced stress, but females reported significantly higher levels, emphasizing the unique pressures they face in navigating traditional and modern expectations.
- **Aparicio-García, M. E., Fernández-Castilla, B., Giménez-Páez, M. A., Piris-Cava, E., & Fernández-Quijano, I. (2018)** - studied the link between traditional feminine gender roles and anxiety in women. Higher conformity to norms such as thinness, sexual fidelity, and appearance was associated with increased cognitive anxiety, highlighting how societal pressures exacerbate anxiety symptoms.
- **Kling, J., Gattario, K. H., & Frisén, A. (2017)** - explored how Swedish women perceive and conform to feminine norms within a gender-equal society. Swedish women showed less conformity to norms like sexual fidelity compared to women in other countries. However, societal pressures to adhere to appearance-related norms persist, creating conflicts with the goal of gender equality.
- **Adams, D. F., Behrens, E., Gann, L., & Schoen, E. (2016)** - examined how conformity to feminine

norms influences self-objectification and body image concerns among college women. Regardless of sorority membership, conformity to these norms contributed to heightened body consciousness and negative body image.

- **Murnen, S.K., Don, B.P. (2012)** - discussed the pressures on both genders to conform to unrealistic body ideals, with women facing greater expectations to achieve a "thin and sexy" look. They advocated for societal change, emphasizing the need to reshape gender roles and critique harmful media portrayals to alleviate body image pressures.
- **Steinfeldt, J. A., Zakrajsek, R., Carter, H., & Steinfeldt, M. C. (2011)** - analyzed how gender norms influence body image in female student-athletes. They found that conformity to thinness norms negatively impacted body esteem, while relational traits and risk-taking behaviors were linked to higher esteem. Despite the confidence gained through sports, societal pressure to meet body ideals undermined athletes' body image.

Objective

- To study the relationship among Conformity to Feminine Norms, Body Image Dissatisfaction and Psychological Distress

Hypotheses

- There is a significant and positive correlation between Conformity to Feminine Norms and Body Image Dissatisfaction.
- There is a significant and positive correlation between Conformity to Feminine Norms and Psychological Distress.

Methodology

Sample

Data was collected from 100 girls (N=100) aged between 16 years to 19 years residing in Jaipur (Rajasthan) through purposive sampling. The reason for selecting adolescent girls aged 16 to 19 in the sample because these formative years represent a critical period when the lessons and conditioning imparted by parents and caregivers are actively put into practice, and their influence becomes increasingly evident. Individuals with diagnosed psychopathological conditions or deteriorated mental and physical health are excluded from the research.

Tools

- **Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory-45**

The Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory-45 (CFNI-45) is an abbreviated version of the original CFNI, designed to assess the degree to which individuals adhere to culturally prescribed feminine norms. Developed by Parent and Moradi in 2010. The CFNI-45 comprises 45 items across nine subscales: (a) Nice in Relationships, (b) Thinness, (c) Modesty, (d) Domestic, (e) Care for Children, (f) Romantic Relationship, (g) Sexual Fidelity, (h) Invest in Appearance, and (i) Sweet and Nice. Respondents rate their agreement with each statement on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree). Shrey Rana's (2025) used this scale in Indian cultural setting.

- **Kessler Psychological Distress Scale**

The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), developed by Ron Kessler and Dan Mroczek in 1992. It

is a widely used self-report measure designed to assess non-specific psychological distress over the past four weeks. The scale consists of 10 items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time), yielding a total score between 10 and 50. Higher scores indicate greater levels of psychological distress.

• Body Image Disturbance Questionnaire

The Body Image Disturbance Questionnaire (BIDQ), developed by Cash et al. in 2004, is a self-report instrument designed to assess body image dissatisfaction and its impact on an individual's life. The BIDQ consists of seven items that evaluate concerns about physical appearance, the extent of distress these concerns cause, the degree to which they interfere with daily activities and the individual's avoidance behaviors related to appearance. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater body image disturbance.

Data analysis and Result: This section summarizes the findings. SPSS version 26 is used for data analysis. Table 1 summarized the descriptive statistics (Mean and SD) for the complete sample .

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Conformity to Feminine Norms	100	101.48	8.598
Psychological Distress	100	25.05	4.361
Body Image Dissatisfaction	100	29.19	10.264

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the total sample.

Table 2 summarized the Correlations of Conformity to Feminine Norms with Body Image Dissatisfaction and Psychological Distress for the total sample :-

Correlations				
		Conformity to Norms	Body Image Dissatisfaction	Psychological Distress
Conformity to Norms	Pearson Correlation	1	0.354*	0.200
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.003	0.103
	N	100	100	100
Body Image Dissatisfaction	Pearson Correlation	0.354*	1	0.722*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.003		0
	N	100	100	100
Psychological Distress	Pearson Correlation	0.200	0.722*	1

	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.103	0	
	N	100	100	100
*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)				

Table 2: Correlations of Conformity to Feminine Norms with Body Image Dissatisfaction and Psychological Distress for the total sample.

Table 2 depicts the correlations of Conformity to Feminine Norms to Body Image Dissatisfaction ($r = 0.354$, $p < 0.01$) and Psychological Distress ($r = 0.200$, $p < 0.01$). A strong positive correlation between Body Image Dissatisfaction and Psychological Distress ($r = 0.722$, $p < 0.01$) is also seen. Conformity to Feminine Norms showed a strong correlation with Body Image Dissatisfaction, alongside a weaker but still statistically significant positive correlation with Psychological Distress. Although not the primary focus of the study, the evident relationship between Body Image Dissatisfaction and Psychological Distress highlights the complex, layered, and far-reaching effects that the internalization and adherence to feminine norms have on the mental well-being and everyday experiences of adolescent girls.

Discussion

Conformity to gender norms, especially in adolescent females can lead to a number of maladaptive behaviors and stress, specifically unhealthy eating behaviors and psychological distress. **Conformity to feminine norms** refers to the adherence to societal expectations and behaviors traditionally associated with femininity while Body Image Dissatisfaction refers to a negative perception of one's body, and Psychological Distress is described as a state of emotional suffering.

This study was conducted to assess the impact of internalizing Feminine Norms and their impact on body image and stress among girls aged 16-19 years. A total of 100 adolescent girls were selected through purposive sampling. Demographic data was collected through a demographic form and the research variables were measured with the Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory-45 (CFNI-45; Parent & Moradi, 2010), Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10; Kessler RC et al.) and Body Image Disturbance Questionnaire (BIDQ; Cash, Phillips, Santos, & Hrabosky, 2004).

The first hypothesis narrated that there would be a significant and positive correlation between Conformity to Feminine Norms, and Body Image Dissatisfaction. The result supports this with a strong Pearson Correlation of 0.354 significant at 0.01 level. The result also aligns with previous research done by Jingyi Zhang (2021) highlighting how societal norms and cultural expectations shape women's body image. While some cultures value different body types, most women feel pressure to achieve the figure deemed attractive by their society. This pressure often leads to unhealthy practices, like extreme dieting. The second hypothesis predicted a significant and positive correlation between Conformity to Feminine Norms and Psychological Distress. The result showed a positive correlation of 0.200 significant at 0.01 level. Derek Deeney in his 2024 paper titled "Social Gender Norms and Depression in College Students" found that conformity to feminine gender norms, particularly in the areas of Thinness, Modesty, and Invest in Appearance, was directly correlated with depression. Additionally, the Relational and Domestic subscales showed an indirect correlation with depression. These findings suggest that societal pressures on women's appearance and behavior may contribute to mental health challenges and stress.

Conclusion

The study highlights a significant relationship between adherence to cultural and social feminine norms and their profound impact on both body image and mental health. Adolescent girls, confronted with the complexities of societal and cultural expectations, often experience intense stress in balancing these external pressures with their desire to remain true to their personal beliefs and identities. This struggle not only negatively affects their mental well-being but also leads to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as disordered eating, which further perpetuate a cycle of psychological distress and physical self-dissatisfaction.

Limitation and Suggestions

The study was limited in scope, with data collected from a single demographic region. Given India's vast cultural diversity, the norms related to gender and conformity may vary significantly across different regions. A broader study that includes participants from multiple states and diverse socio-economic backgrounds would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and offer deeper insights into the influence of cultural factors on Feminine conformity and psychological outcomes.

The concept of conformity remains underexplored in patriarchal societies, particularly regarding its influence on various aspects of a girl's life and as an independent variable in psychological research. In the context of stress and body image concerns, it is common to attribute the causes to the pervasive influence of celebrity culture, influencers, and media. However, such explanations often overlook the more subtle yet significant process of socialization that begins at birth, particularly for girls. The deep-rooted indoctrination through familial, cultural, and societal expectations plays a pivotal role in shaping girls' perceptions of self and their conformity to gender norms. This early and ongoing conditioning warrants greater attention in research on gendered experiences and mental health outcomes.

Shireen J Jejeebhoy (2024) in her recent report for the United Nations Population Fund, outlined numerous steps to address this. Enhancing the quality of education is crucial, ensuring that girls are not only enrolled but also supported through regular attendance, engaging curricula, and strong parental backing. Gender-sensitive teaching practices, teacher training on gender equality, and community dialogues can help shift traditional attitudes. Furthermore, creating girl-friendly schools and offering incentives to delay marriage can empower girls to resist restrictive gender norms. Exposure to female role models who defy traditional expectations, such as those in leadership roles or pursuing careers, is vital for reshaping societal attitudes. The success of female Pradhans in India demonstrates the power of leadership roles in challenging gender norms. Media, both traditional and social, plays an essential role in promoting new gender norms and behaviors, particularly through digital platforms that resonate with communities. Interventions that focus on both education and gender norm transformation, particularly those that delay marriage and empower girls, have shown higher benefits in reducing conformity to traditional feminine expectations.

References

1. Adams, D. F., Behrens, E., Gann, L., & Schoen, E. (2016). Gender conformity, self-objectification, and body image for sorority and nonsorority women: A closer look. *Body Image*, 19, 42–48.
2. Aparicio-García, M. E., Fernández-Castilla, B., Giménez-Páez, M. A., Piris-Cava, E., & Fernández-Quijano, I. (2018). Influence of feminine gender norms in symptoms of anxiety in the Spanish context. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 42(3), 260–272.
3. Bailey, K. A., Gammage, K. L., & van Ingen, C. (2020). How do you define body image? Exploring

- conceptual gaps in understanding of body image at an exercise facility. *Body Image*, 33, 240–252.
4. Bern, S. L. (1981). Gender schema theory: A cognitive account of sex typing. *Psychological Review*, 88(4), 354–364.
 5. Berry, A. T., & Holloway, L. J. M. (2022). An exploration of Black college students' conformity to gender-role norms on gender-role stress and depression. *Journal of Black Studies*, 53(1), 45–63.
 6. Deeney, D. (2024). Social gender norms and depression in college students. *Journal of Mental Health Research in Universities*, 12(1), 18–32.
 7. Drapeau, A., Marchand, A., & Beaulieu-Prévost, D. (2019). Epidemiology of psychological distress. *Mental Health in Population Studies*, 12(4), 456–472.
 8. Esteban-Gonzalo, S., Ho, P. S. Y., Aparicio-García, M. E., & Esteban-Gonzalo, L. (2023). Understanding the meaning of conformity to feminine norms in lifestyle habits and health: A cluster analysis. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 30(1), 67–82.
 9. Iwamoto, D. K., Le, T. P., Clinton, L., et al. (2023). Why conform?: The implications of conformity to feminine norms on psychological distress among college women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 47(2), 150–168.
 10. Jejeebhoy, S. J. (2024). Gender norms and the wellbeing of women and girls in India: A review. United Nations Population Fund.
 11. Kling, J., Gattario, K. H., & Frisén, A. (2017). Swedish women's perceptions of and conformity to feminine norms. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 58(5), 393–402.
 12. Kostanski, M., Fisher, A., & Gullone, E. (2004). Current conceptualization of body image dissatisfaction: Have we got it wrong? *Journal of Health Psychology*, 9(4), 559–570.
 13. Murnen, S. K., & Don, B. P. (2012). Body image and gender roles. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 67(3–4), 162–173.
 14. Pritchard, M. E. (2006). Exacting beauty: Theory, assessment, and treatment of body image disturbance. *Journal of Body Image Research*, 4(3), 215–230.
 15. Sauerteig, M. R. (2017). Conformity to gender stereotypes impacting body-esteem, eating, and exercise behaviors in female college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 58(3), 310–326.
 16. Steinfeldt, J. A., Zakrajsek, R., Carter, H., & Steinfeldt, M. C. (2011). Conformity to gender norms among female student-athletes: Implications for body image. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 34(4), 389–406.
 17. Thompson, J. K., Heinberg, L. J., Altabe, M., & Tantleff-Dunn, S. (1999). Predictors of body image dissatisfaction in adult men and women. *Exacting Beauty: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment of Body Image Disturbance*. Miami University, OH: Springer.
 18. Vibal, J. G., Derit, K. A., Bobadilla, K. R., Palco, R., & Tucio, R. (2024). Conformity of female college students on feminine norms. *Asian Journal of Psychology*, 16(4), 245–259.
 19. Yang, L., & Sun, Z. (2022). Structural gender inequality and mental health among Chinese men and women. *Journal of Asian Social Science Studies*, 9(2), 145–162.
 20. Zhang, J. (2021). The effects of conformity on women's body images under different social norms and different cultures. *Journal of Global Gender Studies*, 7(3), 102–118.