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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Impact of Colorism on the Self-Esteem & Body Image of Female Young Adults

Asma Sikandar ^a Sehrish khan ^b

Corresponding Author: Asma Sikandar; asma.sikandar@riphah.edu.pk



Abstract: Colorism is a pervasive form of intra-group discrimination. It gives preference to lighter skin tones over darker ones. It has a noteworthy impact on the self-perception of women. The aim of this study was to investigate the impact of colorism on self-esteem and body image among young women in Pakistan. A total of 300 female participants, aged 18 to 26, were recruited through convenience sampling. The data was collected from universities, hostels, and workplaces in both urban and rural regions across Pakistan. Participants completed the In-Group Colorism Scale (Harvey, 2014), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), and the Body Image Disturbance Questionnaire (Cash et al., 2004), all of which demonstrated excellent reliability ($\alpha = .923-.973$). Simple linear regression showed that colorism significantly predicted both self-esteem ($B = 0.028$, $R^2 = 0.44$) and body image disturbance ($B = 0.268$, $R^2 = 0.579$). Results showed that colorism appeared to elevate general self-esteem and intensify dissatisfaction with physical appearance. These findings underscore the need for culturally sensitive interventions that address beauty ideals and challenge colorist beliefs.

Keywords: Colorism, Self-Esteem, Body Image Disturbance, Young Women, Pakistan

Introduction

Colorism is a form of discrimination based on one's skin tone. It is best defined as a systematic preference for lighter skin over darker skin tones. The term was popularized by Dr. Alice Walker in 1983, who described colorism as the prejudicial or preferential treatment given by individuals within the same race but based on different skin tones (Hill, 2002; Monk, 2014). Such preferences and the resultant discrimination are both deeply rooted in societal expectations and standards of beauty and desirability. It is further perpetuated by social and institutional norms (Hunter, 2007).

In South Asian countries such as Pakistan, bias towards a fairer skin tone influences not only one's self-perception, but also their marriage prospects, career opportunities, and societal standards (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). It has a disproportionately greater impact on women than on men. In addition to external disadvantages, colorism has also led to internalized psychological struggles. These deeply rooted struggles impact their self-identity and self-esteem. Issues with self-esteem and identity may also manifest themselves in the form of body image disturbance. In severe cases, it may be termed as body dysmorphia, where individuals become excessively concerned about their perceived flaws in their appearance.

Colorism is deeply rooted in Pakistan. These colorist roots can be traced back to the era of colonial rule in the subcontinent. During the colonial time, lighter skin was associated with power and privilege (Hall, 1995). Such perceptions have persisted even post-independence from the British colonial rule, and have grown into the societal expectations and beauty standards of today (Glenn, 2008).

^a Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

^b Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, COMSATS University Islamabad, Abbottabad Campus, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

Colorism

Individuals are treated differently based on their skin, with a preference for lighter skin tones over darker ones. For Pakistan, colorism originated during the British Raj, where lighter skin tones were associated with the ruling class (Hall, 1995). These colonial perceptions have continued to persist, shaping the attitudes of today's subcontinent towards skin tones and resulting perceived desirability. Those with lighter skin tones are perceived as more desirable in society, employment, and marriage (Nambiar, 2023). Such biases are ingrained starting early in childhood, where lighter skin tones are praised over darker tones. Internalization of such messages leads to the development of self-doubt, low self-esteem, and self-identity issues among those with darker skin tones (Hunter, 2007). Colorism, in Pakistan, is manifested in a diverse set of domains. These domains encompass social and cultural aspects. When considering social beauty standards, colorism plays a major role in influencing how an individual is perceived and treated – based on their skin tone.

When it comes to the social domain in Pakistan, the marriage prospectus shows a particular desire for lighter skin tones. Advertisements, such as those of matrimonial sites, frequently focus on models with lighter skin tones as desirable and those with darker skin tones as undesirable. Shankar & Palaian (2007) found that fair skin increases the “marketability” of an expected bride, often overshadowing other qualities, such as education and professional experience.

Colorism leads to lasting psychosocial consequences, many of which resemble those of chronic stress. It is especially common in women who have experienced colorist discrimination to report self-inferiority and social rejection. In addition to identity issues, such women may develop symptoms similar to body dysmorphia. They may develop an obsessive preoccupation with their skin tone, leading to the use of harmful cosmetic products in order to lighten their skin (Sharif & Siddique, 2020).

Self Esteem

Self-esteem is best defined as an assessment of one's own value. It is influenced by social and cultural conventions. According to Rosenberg (1965), self-esteem is an important psychological construct. The development and foundation of self-esteem begins from early life experiences. It is shaped by both familial and societal feedback. Individuals who receive unconditional positive regard from caregivers and peers are more likely to develop higher self-esteem (Nambiar, 2023).

Anxiety and depression, as well as body image disturbance, are marked by low self-esteem. Those with low self-esteem are more liable to peer pressure and social comparison (Valkenburg et al., 2017). In Pakistan, fair-skinned, slim, and Eurocentric beauty ideals are presented as desirable on social media, television, and advertisements. Women who perceive themselves as not meeting these standards may develop feelings of exclusion and inferiority. This may lead to the development of maladaptive behaviors, such as excessive use of skin-lightening products to gain approval or minimize social rejection (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009).

Body Image

Body image is defined as an individual's subjective perception and feelings about their physical appearance. It comprises one's body shape, size, and skin tone. A healthy body image consists of a positive and realistic perspective of one's body. Unhealthy body image consists of a negative and distorted perspective. In traditional and patriarchal cultures, such as Pakistan, body image is influenced strongly by external factors. These factors consist of social standards, cultural expectations, and media portrayal of ideal beauty (Grogan, 2016). In Pakistan, the idealistic beauty consists dominantly of Eurocentric features – fair skin, slim figure, etc. Women who deviate from these ideals develop dissatisfaction with their appearance. Persistent dissatisfaction and distorted perceptions of one's own body often then lead to psychological distress and feelings of inferiority (Nisa, Ahmed, & Elahi, 2024).

Disturbance in body image occurs when an individual experiences persistent dissatisfaction or distress over perceived flaws in their physical appearance. Body image disturbance can result in maladaptive

behaviors, such as excessive use of skin-lightening products, compulsive grooming, disordered eating, etc (Phillips, 2005). Women who are unable to meet these ideals may socially isolate themselves or experience emotional distress (Sharif & Siddique, 2020).

Colorism & Self-Esteem

The relationship between colorism and self-esteem also intersects with an individual's socioeconomic status. In situations where opportunities are already limited, darker skin tones become yet another barrier for upward mobility. Studies have shown that individuals with lighter skin tones are more likely to have higher incomes, upward mobility, better job opportunities, and improved academic evaluations (Monk, 2014; Keith & Herring, 1991). According to the research conducted by Saeed et al. (2019), candidates with lighter skin tones received 31.5% higher callbacks by companies in the Pakistani labor market. Such repeated rejection over something out of one's control may lead women to question their self-worth.

In an academic setting, colorism often manifests in subtle ways but has a lasting impact. Teachers and fellow students may, based on colorist ideals, unconsciously favor students with lighter skin tones. They may associate fair skin with more desirable features, such as intelligence, sociability, etc. Studies have shown that such implicit biases impact teacher expectations, academic evaluations, and classroom participation (Thompson & Keith, 2001; Hannon, DeFina, & Bruch, 2013). Facing colorism early in childhood will shape the child's self-perception and social identity. It may lead darker-skinned children to internalize these feelings of inadequacy, unable to cope with uncontrollable circumstances.

When an individual develops such a negative self-perception foundation early in their social life, it persists into adulthood, undermining their self-confidence and self-esteem (Nambiar, 2023; Russell et al., 1992).

Colorism & Body Image

Colorism is the preferential treatment of individuals with lighter skin tones over those with darker skin tones, especially within the same ethnic or racial group. It is a concept that shapes how an individual perceives their own skin color and how they are treated by others (Hunter, 2007). In societies such as Pakistan, colorism is a prevalent factor that contributes to body image dissatisfaction. Colorist discrimination can result in long-term emotional and psychological consequences. Such consequences include negative self-esteem and distorted self-perception amongst women (Sharif & Siddique, 2020; Glenn, 2008).

In Pakistan, a major part of ideal beauty standards is the fairness of skin. This standard is further perpetuated through societal expectations, media portrayals, and cultural ideation. Each of these factors equates lighter skin tone with beauty, desirability, and success. Women who are unable to meet these standards develop feelings of inadequacy, body dissatisfaction, and inferiority (Sharif & Siddique, 2020; Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). When such individuals are unable to attain these unattainable ideals, it results in emotional distress, including low self-esteem and worthlessness.

Women who are subjected to colorist ideologies go on to internalize these unattainable beauty standards. This develops into self-objectification, where they assess their own appearance based on societal values rather than their own personal self-worth. Studies show that self-objectification contributes to the development of a distorted self-image. Women see themselves through the lens of external evaluation, and not with intrinsic value (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This phenomenon leads to harmful thinking, as it diminishes an individual's self-esteem and contributes to unhealthy preoccupation with appearance. Women who developed internalized colorism begin to equate lightness with beauty and desirability and begin to internalize the belief that their own darker skin is inferior, undesirable, or even shameful (Stamps et al., 2022). This is done at the expense of one's own psychological well-being.

Women who have internalized colorism may subconsciously utilize similarly demeaning language about darker skin tones. Remarks like "I need to fix my tan before the wedding" may sound otherwise mundane – but in a colorist society, such remarks show deep-seated discomfort with self. This may further reinforce the

generational cycle of colorism if they direct their internalized colorism onto family and peers. Studies show that while this phenomenon is dismissed as being "harmless", it normalizes self-objectification, leading to distorted self-perception and anxiety (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

1. Social Categorization

In Pakistan, women are often categorized based on the tone of their skin. Lighter skin tone is linked to higher social standing, beauty, and desirability. Due to this categorization, two groups are constructed: light-skinned women (ingroup) and darkskinned women (outgroup). In the context of colorism, the women of the ingroup receive positive reinforcement and social advantages, and the women of the outgroup are discriminated against and marginalized.

2. Self Identity

The Social Identity Theory proposes that an individual's self-esteem is tied closely to their social group membership. In the context of colorism, women with darker skin tones (outgroup) may internalize the social biases about their skin tone. This will lead to diminished self-esteem and self-concept. Societal devaluation of their skin tone leads to a negative impact on their self-worth and self-identity. This results in compromised body image, leading to the development of symptoms of body dysmorphia. Women from the outgroup may go on to struggle with coming to terms with their self-image due to the negative bias they face.

3. Social Comparison

According to the Social Identity Theory, individuals compare themselves to others in their social environment. Women with darker skin tones often compare themselves to social beauty standards that are promoted and enforced by family, culture, and media. Such social beauty standards associate fair skin with success and desirability. Such comparisons lead to negative self-evaluation and self-perception. This leads to feelings of inferiority. Women with darker skin tones perceive themselves as the outgroup, leading to lower self-esteem and psychological distress.

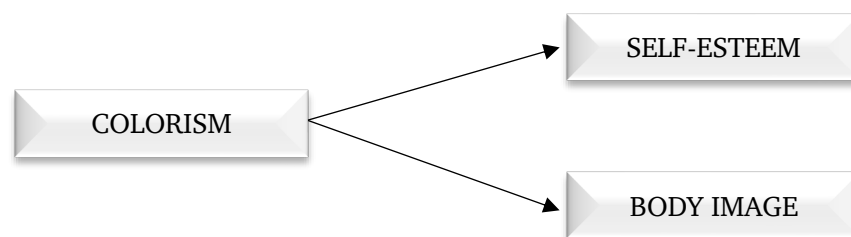
The Social Identity Theory helps in understanding the profound impact colorism has on an individual's self-esteem and body image. Women with darker skin tones (outgroup) often internalize negative stereotypes associated with their skin tone. Such negative stereotypes lead to low self-esteem. Their self-worth becomes tied to unattainable standards. They may feel excluded from the privileges enjoyed by the ingroup. As they struggle to deal with societal rejection and a lack of positive representation in the media, they fall into a cycle of self-doubt, low self-esteem, and body image issues.

Conceptual Framework

The figure shows the conceptual model of the present study. Colorism is the independent variable, while self-esteem and body image are dependent variables. The framework further indicates the direction of the relationship between the variables.

Figure 1

Visual Presentation of the Conceptual Framework of the Present Study



Rationale

Colorism, which means preferring a lighter tone over a darker one. It is a prevalent issue in South Asian societies, especially in Pakistan. This bias specifically impacts the women in Pakistan because beauty, success,

and worth are often associated with lighter skin tone. As a result, women with darker skin tone face hurdles in their personal and professional lives, as well as mental health issues like low self-esteem and negative body image. Colorism can have effects beyond exclusion from society or not being given the same opportunities. For women, the consequences are usually emotional distress, which could include low self-esteem, body image struggles, anxiety, and depression. This mental health problem, however, is exacerbated by the silence and taboo attached to both colorism and mental health in Pakistan. It is common for women to go through colorism without realizing the impact that such experiences have on them, leading to a psychological blockade that can stay a lifetime, reducing their confidence and social interactions, leading to overall deterioration of mental well-being (self-esteem and body image).

In a patriarchal society like Pakistan, women already face significant gender-based challenges. When combined with colorism, these challenges multiply, creating a unique intersection of discrimination. Women with darker skin tones may face limited marriage prospects due to societal preferences for fair brides, workplace discrimination, where physical appearance influences hiring and promotions, and social exclusion or devaluation in family dynamics or peer groups. Although colorism is a common problem, the impact of colorism on women in Pakistan hasn't been studied yet. This research is important because it illuminates a problem that is both pervasive and inadequately studied. Although colorism has been discussed in wider contexts, the meaning specific to Pakistani women, and especially the mental health implications and negative body image of colorism, have been underexplored. Through exploring their stories, this study will reveal how societal expectations, cultural norms, and media representations persist in the replication of colorism as well as how it manifests in its psychological effects. Also, the research aims to empower women to identify, counter internalized biases, and stimulate societal disclosure, reevaluating the beauty standards.

Researching the impact of colorism on the self-esteem of women in Pakistan is not only relevant but urgent. This study contributes to understanding how societal biases shape individual identities and mental health. By shedding light on the psychological toll of colorism, the research seeks to inspire societal reflection, promote mental health awareness, and advocate for a more equitable and inclusive society.

Research Design

The current study aimed to examine the impact of colorism on self-esteem and body image among young female adults. A cross-sectional research design and quantitative approach were employed. Using a convenience sampling technique, self-report measures were administered to the participants to assess colorism, self-esteem, and body image. The study was conducted on young female adults in Pakistan (N = 300) to test the proposed hypotheses.

Objectives

- To examine the impact of colorism on self-esteem among young adult females.
- To assess the impact of colorism on body image among young female adults.

Hypothesis

1. Colorism will negatively predict self-esteem.
2. Colorism will positively predict body image disturbance.

Operational Definitions

Colorism

In this study, the In-Group Colorism Scale is utilized to assess the beliefs and attitudes regarding skin tone and its relationship with self-concept, impression formation, social affiliation, attraction, and upward mobility. The scale consists of 20 items, with responses recorded on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree).

Self-Esteem

In this study, the Rosenberg Self-esteem scale is used with regard to colorism. RSES is a survey that has 10 questionnaire items with a 4-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Overall cutoff score is as follows: 0-30 (low self-esteem = 0-15, normal = 15-25, high self-esteem = 25-30).

Body Image

Body image refers to how an individual perceives and feels about their physical appearance. It encompasses the degree of one's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's body, impacting an individual's self-esteem and emotional well-being. In this study, body image is measured through the Body Image Disturbance Questionnaire (BIDQ). It focuses on the severity of concerns related to physical appearance and their effect on social, occupational, and emotional functioning. This questionnaire consists of 7 items, evaluating the respondent's level of preoccupation with perceived physical flaws and the degree to which these concerns affect their emotional state and daily activities. Responses are based on a 5-point Likert scale, assessing the frequency and severity of body image concerns, ranging from "Not at all" to "Extremely".

Instruments

The present study has utilized the following psychometric instruments to measure the constructs presented.

In-Group Colorism Scale (IGCS)

The In-Group Colorism Scale (Harvey, 2014) consists of 20 items and is used to measure beliefs and attitudes about skin tone within one's own community. Participants respond on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). The scale is divided into five subscales: Self-Concept, Impression Formation, Affiliation, Attraction, and Upward Mobility. Higher scores indicate stronger colorism-related beliefs. It is a self-administered test with good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$).

Rosenberg Self-Esteem (RSE) Scale

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem (RSE) Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) consists of 10 items. It is used to evaluate self-esteem. Participants answer on a 4-point Likert scale. The answers range from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree). Higher scores show greater self-esteem. It is a self-administered test. The scale demonstrates good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$).

Body Image Disturbance Questionnaire (BIDQ)

The Body Image Disturbance Questionnaire (BIDQ) consists of 7 items and is used to assess concerns related to body image. Participants respond on a 5-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Extremely). The scale evaluates the degree of preoccupation, emotional distress, and functional impairment caused by body image concerns. Higher scores reflect greater body image disturbance. It is a self-administered test that shows good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$).

Sample

The sample of the main study comprised female young adults (N = 300). Convenience sampling techniques were used for the purpose of data collection. The sample included female young adults from all over Pakistan, and the age range was 18-25 (M = 1.89 years; SD = 0.973).

Procedure

Prior to starting the study, the original authors of the measures were formally contacted via email to obtain consent. Participants were approached in the university and hostels, as well as workplaces. Online data was also obtained. Written and verbal instructions were given to participants. Furthermore, all ethical obligations, including secrecy and informed consent, were duly fulfilled. The questionnaire booklet (which included an informed consent form, demographic sheet, and three questionnaires, a demographic information sheet) was

given to participants after their consent was obtained. After getting the booklet back, all the participants were thanked for their participation and cooperation.

Results

Table 1

Regression of Coefficients of Colorism on Self-Esteem (N = 300)

Outcome Variable: Self-Esteem			
Variable	B	β	SE
Constant	5.982		1.341
Colorism	0.028	0.663***	0.017
R ²	0.44		
ΔF	233.96		

Note: B= unstandardized Coefficient; β = Standardized Coefficient; S.E= Standard Error; P= Significant value; R= Correlation; R² = Correlation Square, ΔF = F Statistic

Table 1 shows linear regression analysis indicating that GCS is a significant predictor of RSE among female young adults, with a positive association (B = 0.254, p < 0.001). The model accounts for 44% of the variance in RSE (R² = 0.44), reflecting a strong effect. This is also supported by the correlation (R = 0.663). With the model being statistically significant (F statistic = 233.96), GCS acts as a significant predictor of self-esteem in female young adults.

Table 2

Regression of coefficients of Colorism on Body Image (N = 300)

Outcome Variable: Body Image Disturbance			
Variable	B	β	SE
Constant	-2.469		1.070
Colorism	0.268	0.761***	0.013
R ²	0.579		
ΔF	409.31		

Note: B= unstandardized Coefficient; β = Standardized Coefficient; S.E= Standard Error; P= Significant value; R= Correlation; R² = Correlation Square, ΔF = F Statistic

Table 2 shows linear regression analysis indicating that GCS is a significant predictor of BIDQ among female young adults with a positive association (B = 0.268, p < 0.001). The model accounts for 57.9% of the variance in BIDQ (R² = 0.579), indicating a strong effect. This is also reinforced by the correlation (R = 0.761). With the model being statistically significant (F statistic is 409.310), GCS acts as a significant predictor of BIDQ.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study is to examine the psychological consequences of colorism on self-esteem and body image disturbance amongst young women in Pakistan. The data collected from N=300 participants were analyzed through descriptive statistics, correlation, regression, mediation, and group difference (t-test) analyses. The tools utilized were the In-Group Colorism Scale, developed by Harvey (2014) to examine colorism; the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, developed by Rosenberg (1965) to examine self-esteem; and the Body Image Disturbance Questionnaire, developed by Cash et al. (2004) to examine body image disturbances. The study was guided by the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1981). This study aims to better understand the impact of colorism on self-esteem and body image among young women in Pakistan.

Table 1 shows a linear regression analysis applied to colorism and self-esteem. Regression analysis showed that colorism significantly predicted self-esteem ($B = 0.028$, $p < .001$). The model accounts for 44% of the variance in self-esteem ($R^2 = 0.44$), hence a large effect. Results of Table 5 contradict Hypothesis 4, which expected colorism to negatively predict self-esteem.

Table 2 showed a linear regression analysis applied between colorism and body image disturbance. Regression analysis showed that colorism significantly predicted body image disturbance ($B = 0.268$, $p < .001$). The model accounts for 57.9% of the variance in body image disturbance ($R^2 = 0.579$), hence a large effect. Results of 6 support Hypothesis 5, which demonstrates a clear connection between internalized colorist ideals and body image disturbance.

Limitations and Recommendations

- The study was limited to urban young adult women in Pakistan. This reduces the generalizability to other age groups, genders, and regional settings.
- Data was collected through self-report questionnaires, which may be affected by social desirability. Interviews and observational methods may provide a more thorough insight.
- The study utilizes cross-sectional data. This has an impact on the establishment of causal relationships between variables. Further study can utilize case studies or longitudinal data.
- Practical Implications
- This research can provide substantial implications for psychologists, educators, media professionals, and policy-makers.
- Psychologists and therapists can develop culturally responsive interventions. They may target appearance-based trauma and internalized colorism in a more effective manner.
- Schools and NGOs may run literacy campaigns that spread awareness about colorism, challenge narrow beauty standards, and promote diverse representations.

Conclusion

This study confirmed that colorism significantly predicts both self-esteem and body image disturbance among young women in Pakistan. However, contrary to expectations, colorism was positively associated with self-esteem. This suggests that there may be a more nuanced internalization of beauty norms. One possible explanation is that they may view themselves as matching the culturally preferred standard. However, this does not mean that colorism is beneficial — it still reinforces harmful beauty ideals that exclude many women.

On the other hand, women who were married, lived in rural areas, or used skinlightening products were more likely to report higher levels of body image disturbance. This suggests that social and cultural pressures, such as marriage expectations, limited beauty resources, or the desire to fit in, can make women feel more insecure regarding their appearance.

These findings showcase how ingrained colorism is in Pakistani culture and the resultant severe psychological consequences. Colorism influences how women perceive themselves, how satisfied they are with their bodies, and their attempts to achieve unrealistic standards of beauty. All in all, these findings indicate that there is a drastic need for action.

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