



## Fear of body image in women: comparison of Fars and Turkmen ethnicities

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### Abstract

**Background:** Body image studies confirm a higher level of dissatisfaction among women compared to men, and some evidence shows that ethnicity may have a role in the level of body image fear.

**Methods:** In this cross-sectional study, the data of 372 Fars and Turkmen women visiting health care centers in Gonbad, Iran, were collected via convenience sampling and analyzed by SPSS v. 17. The instruments were a demographic checklist and Littleton's Body Image Concern Inventory.

**Results:** The level of fear of body image between Fars ( $M = 2.022$ ,  $SD = 0.685$ ) and Turkmen ( $M = 2.1408$ ,  $SD = 0.661$ ) ethnicities was not statistically different ( $P\text{-value} = 0.09$ ) based on the  $t$  test. Furthermore, age, education level, and internet usage were significantly related to the variable of fear of body image.

**Conclusion:** The role of ethnicity in the fear of body image is not statistically significant and needs further research.

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### Highlights

#### What is current knowledge?

Body image is a complex construct. For some people, concerns about their appearance are extreme and anxiety-inducing and may change their lives.

#### What is new here?

Ethnicity may not be the most prominent or distinguishing factor in making various images of the body. Some demographic factors can change the relationship between ethnicity and the perception of body image.

### Introduction

Hypothetically, women are dissatisfied with their bodies due to the upward social comparison by which they have a feeling of inadequacy. Studies show that women strive to change their bodies in order to compensate for this deficiency (1). In line with the results of many studies, statistics have shown a dramatic increase in cosmetic surgery among women in the 21st century (2). This indicates that women experience a lot of dissatisfaction with their body size and shape (3). The degree of this dissatisfaction depends on ideal body image, and several studies have shown that beauty and social priority for women are synonymous with having a slim figure (4). Since this ideal is almost unattainable for most women, the idealization of a slender body directly reinforces body dissatisfaction (5). In another study, many women experienced dissatisfaction with their bodies as negative consequences that influenced other important aspects of their lives, including their professional, social, and intimate relationships (6). In addition, the body image can be described as a multifaceted structure that involves a person's perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and actions toward his or her body, especially appearance (7).

According to some researchers (8-10), the term body image consists of several constructs, including satisfaction (dissatisfaction) with weight, satisfaction (dissatisfaction) with the body, body shame, appearance (dis)satisfaction, appearance evaluation, body appreciation, body dysmorphia, and body schema. The factors that contribute to body image dissatisfaction are the sociocultural pressures that make women have a lean body as an ideal body (11). This is largely due to the cultures in which slimness is portrayed in all media (12).

Since the concept of the body depends on the context of cultural and social groups, women with different ethnic and racial backgrounds may differ in the degree of dissatisfaction with their bodies (13). Ethnic identity may protect individuals from thin or ideal internalization, weight concerns, and eating concerns because values and ideals of appearance vary widely among different ethnic groups (14). In the same vein, African-American women are less likely to

suffer from being overweight, and they are probably satisfied with having a larger body than European and American women (15). However, pressures from social media have changed this view and have created an ideal and slimmer figure for women living in non-Western societies that have undergone rapid socioeconomic changes (16). On the other hand, the results of a study demonstrate that women who feel extra pressure to achieve the ideal body image for social approval may have a sense of shame and fear of being seen as imperfect, lowly, and unattractive by others (17).

The role of sex in body image has been confirmed, and especially body image dissatisfaction is significantly higher in women. The research on the factors affecting the levels of dissatisfaction with body image shows that racial differences in women have received more attention, while few studies have focused on ethnic differences and have had contradictory results. Despite the presence of different ethnicities in Iran, the number of studies to assess the fear of body image among different ethnicities is scant. Therefore, we decided to study the fear of body image among Fars and Turkmen women.

### Methods

#### Participants

The study population of this descriptive and analytical cross-sectional study was Fars and Turkmen women living in Gonbad, Iran, in 2020. The sample size ( $N = 372$ ) was determined by Krejcie and Morgan's Table, and the participants were recruited via convenience sampling. It should be noted that the present study was conducted in compliance with all ethical principles and confidentiality.

#### Measures

**Demographic checklist:** It included information such as age, marital status, education, occupation, income level, mother tongue, place of residence (city or village), and the amount of internet usage.

**Littleton's Body Image Concern Inventory:** This inventory was first designed and validated by Littleton et al. (2005). It consists of 19 items on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The score ranges from 19 to 95 (higher scores indicate higher dissatisfaction), with a total reliability of 93%. In Iran, Basaknejad and Ghaffari (2007) reported a 95% validity for this inventory (18), and Heidari et al. (2016) reported a 78% reliability for it (19).

#### Data analysis

To analyze the data, we used descriptive (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test,  $t$  test, and Pearson's correlation coefficient) in SPSS v. 17 software (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA).

### Results

Table 1 shows that the lowest frequency of the respondents was in the range of 20-25 years (2.66%), and the highest one belonged to those over 35 years (38.70 %). Of the total participants, 68.81% were married, and 31.19% were single. The most frequent level of education was a bachelor's degree (55.64%), and the least

frequent was a high school diploma (5.64%). In terms of employment, most participants were homemakers (32.80%), official clerks (30.91%), self-employed (20.16%), or unemployed (16.12 %). Regarding ethnicity, 49.5% of the participants were Fars, and 50.5% of them were Turkmen.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the participants

Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Age (y)	< 20	25	6.72
	20-25	10	2.68
	25-30	113	30.37
	30-35	77	20.69
	> 35	147	39.50
Marital status	Single	116	31.18
	Married	251	67.47
	Others	5	1.34
Education level	Elementary	21	5.64
	High school diploma	94	25.27
	Bachelor's	205	55.11
	Master's	47	12.63
Income	Low	259	69.62
	Moderate	74	19.90
	High	39	10.50
Residence	Rural	25	6.72
	Urban	347	93.28

To check the normality of the data, we used the Kolmogorov-Simonov test, and the results suggested no apparent violation of the assumption ( $P = .112$ ). Therefore, the distribution was normal, and we used parametric tests. As shown in Table 2, the fear of body image was not significantly different between Fars and Turkmen ethnicities. Furthermore, the results of Table 3 show that the variables of age, education level, and internet usage were related to the variable of body image.

**Table 2.** Statistical analysis of body image fear using a t test

Ethnicity	No	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard deviation error	F	t test	P-value
Fars	184	2.0223	0.68584	0.05056	0.417	1.696	0.091
Turkmen	188	2.1408	0.66145	0.04824			

**Table 3.** The relationship between body image fear and demographic variables

Variable	Age	Marital status	Education level	Occupation	Income	Residence	Internet usage	Fear of Body Image
P-value	0.050	0.056	0.049	0.971	0.218	0.773	0.030	1
Pearson	0.304	0.250	0.097	0.002	0.060	0.014	0.106	

## Discussion

In this research, we assessed the relationship between ethnicity and the fear of body image. The results showed that ethnicity does not make a difference in the fear of body image. In other words, there is no difference in the fear of body image between Fars and Turkmen women, yet the results showed that age, education level, and internet usage correlated with the fear of body image.

It has always been assumed that there may be different ideals about body image in different ethnic groups that are passed down from generation to generation. Testing of this hypothesis in different experimental studies has shown different results (20). In agreement with our study, a researcher reported that there was no relationship between women's ethnic identities and their body dissatisfaction (21). However, the results of some research were inconsistent with the findings of the present study (22-25). They indicate that membership in ethnic groups does not change the awareness and acceptance of body image standards. In addition, Ricciardelli et al. (2007), in their study of body image concerns and eating disorders among women in ethnic groups, emphasized that researchers need to keep in mind the existence of diversity between individuals in a particular group, as well as significant differences between ethnic groups (26).

Currently, it is said that ethnic identity can help women not to accept the values that the media (internet, television, magazines, advertising, and video games) offer about the perfect slim body. Meanwhile, the results of some studies suggest that ethnicity may not be the most prominent or distinguishing factor in making various images of the body (27). In agreement with the present study, Rakhkovskaya et al. (2014), in confirming the role of the media, showed that exposure to the environment and the factors that reflect certain ideals of body image can be a risk factor for creating a negative body image (14). According to the theory of social comparison, women consider the ideal media images as a point of comparison to improve the current shape of their bodies (28).

Based on a study, ethnicity-related factors such as the level of culture, self-esteem, or economic and social status can act as a real risk or protective factor. Furthermore, standard measurements of body image may be culturally biased, and they may not take into account the culturally beautiful standards that women have (27). The importance of ethnicity for individuals' social identity may be enhanced by access to the cultural meaning that is inherent in shared habits, shared sense of history, or group norms, which in turn can increase self-esteem

and positive self-assessment (29). In general, the literature and research results in this field are contradictory, and the ability to draw strong conclusions and analyses about the effects of ethnicity is limited.

Despite the growing research on body image, the studies related to body dissatisfaction and socioeconomic status (SES) are limited (30), and one of the commonly used measures is education (31). Thus, in our study, we examined the association between fear of body image and education. In line with our result, Rosenqvist et al (31) and Cheung et al (32) confirmed the relationship between fear of body image and education level.

Consistent with our study, we can mention the result of other research that verifies the relationship between body image and age (33,34). Furthermore, some research highlighted that body dissatisfaction, weight anxiety, attempts to lose or gain weight, and some unhealthy eating patterns may begin in the pre-pubertal period and increase after puberty, especially in women (35). In addition, the effect of aging cannot be fully captured in cross-sectional studies; there has been a call for longitudinal cohort studies of body image to better control the effect of historical changes in body ideals.

In addition to showing contradictory results, some studies that are similar to the present study show that dissatisfaction with body image has been studied more between different cultural groups and races. Although some people are concerned that the emphasis on ethnicity may be socially divisive, others argue that ethnicity can be an important source of graceful characteristics, and they call for empirical studies that are in terms of the role of ethnicity in human development (36). As a result, we suggest that some similar research be conducted on different ethnicities. The present study is limited due to the consideration of women in only 2 ethnic groups (Fars and Turkmen). Therefore, we should be cautious in extending the results to other ethnicities and to males.

## Conclusion

In spite of belonging to an ethnic group, women seem to be influenced more by the prevailing norms of society. These norms always put significant social pressures on women to maintain their youthful features and ideal body image, which undoubtedly affects their perception of their body image and self-criticism. The findings of this study provide valuable insight into body image fear among Fars and Turkmen women; thus, it can be concluded that the role of ethnicity in body image fear is different.

## Limitations

- The data are related to women living in a city located in the north of Iran, which may be different from elsewhere.
- The religious affiliation of the samples is not homogeneous and can have a different effect on the fear of body image.
- Demographic variables such as physical activity and diet were not assessed.

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## Ethical statement

This article is a report of the master's thesis in clinical psychology approved by the Ethics Committee of Islamic Azad University, Bandar-e-Gas Branch, with the dissertation code 4042921223916011398178901. All ethical principles (obtaining informed consent from participants and the confidentiality of information) were observed.

## Conflicts of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

## Author contributions

Study concept and design: Mohammad Taghi Badeleh Shamushaki; Data collection: Elmira Farmanbordar; Data analysis: Elmira Farmanbordar; Drafting of the manuscript: Elmira Farmanbordar, Mohammad Taghi Badeleh Shamushaki; Critical revision of the manuscript: Mohammad Taghi Badeleh Shamushaki

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