

INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF APPEARANCE SCHEMAS AND VERBAL COMMENTARY ON BODY IMAGE AMONG THE PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED

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ABSTRACT

The research aimed to shed light on the influence of appearance schemas and verbal commentary on body image among physically handicapped individuals, and also aimed to challenge deep-seated biases and dismantle societal stereotypes targeting individuals with physical handicaps. In this correlational study, 107 physically handicapped individuals participated. Participants were chosen through convenience sampling from different hospitals in Sialkot and Daska, aged between 18 and 52 years, in 2024. The participants were assessed using the Appearance Schemas Inventory-Revised (Cash & Labarge, 1996; Cash, Melnyk et al., 2004), the Verbal Commentary on Physical Appearance Scale (Sylvia Herbozo & Thompson, 2006), the Body Image State Scale (Thomas et al., 2002), a Demographic form, and a Consent form. Appearance schemas were negatively correlated with verbal commentary and body image. Furthermore, commentary was positively correlated with body image. Linear regression analysis revealed that verbal commentary was a significant predictor of body image. T-test analysis showed that no gender differences were found in appearance schemas, verbal commentary, and body image, but significant differences were found between married and unmarried physically handicapped individuals. ANOVA test showed significant differences in verbal commentary and body image concerning the age of physically handicapped, and significant differences in commentary between employed and unemployed physically handicapped.

I. INTRODUCTION

Language profoundly influences mental and physical health. Kind and empathetic words foster self-worth and connection, while careless remarks can harm confidence. Comments from family, peers, and society, often focused on appearance, shape, and body image, carry both positive and negative effects (Herme & Alyson, 2016). Yet, destructive language remains more common, reinforcing unrealistic beauty ideals internalized from early life (Jung & Lennon, 2003). Society's views and remarks on the appearance of people with disabilities greatly influence their self-esteem and body image. Understanding the complex relationship among appearance schemas, external comments, and body image is essential to promote inclusivity and a positive self-image in this marginalized group. Such insight helps address their challenges and foster a society that embraces and celebrates diversity. In Pakistan, as in many cultures, people with physical disabilities often face social stigma and negative perceptions, impacting their self-esteem and body image. Societal emphasis on physical attractiveness can create pressure to conform to beauty norms. Family and community support play a crucial role—positive acceptance fosters a healthier self-image, while lack of support increases vulnerability to negative judgment (Patka et al., 2013).

The media's representation of people with disabilities strongly impacts public opinion and contributes to shaping appearance schemas. Positive and authentic portrayals can challenge prejudices and foster inclusivity, while limited accessibility and biased depictions may reinforce stigma. Marios et al. (2023) highlighted how media influences and situational dysphoria affect individuals with visible physical disabilities, revealing that those experiencing higher levels of shyness due to their disability reported lower self-esteem and reduced satisfaction with their appearance. In contexts with limited accessibility, individuals with physical disabilities may face challenges that affect self-perception. To navigate negative societal attitudes, they often rely on coping mechanisms such as peer support, counseling, and advocacy groups. These strategies can strengthen resilience and promote healthier body image, while over time, shifting cultural attitudes may foster greater acceptance and inclusivity (Babik & Gardner, 2021).

In addition to this, a study conducted in Karachi, Pakistan, found that males had a higher incidence of dissatisfaction with negative body image associated with females. Conversely, females exhibited a higher occurrence of positive body image dissatisfaction in comparison to males. These findings shed light on the gender differences in body image perceptions in Pakistan (Khan, Khalid, Khan, & Jabeen, 2011). Appearance is closely linked to body image and shaped by cognitive frameworks called appearance schemas—mental structures that organize beliefs and perceptions about physical appearance, influencing self-view, self-esteem, and social interactions (Jung & Lee, 2006). More broadly, schemas are flexible cognitive patterns stored in memory that guide perception, problem-solving, and decision-making while adapting over time (Nickerson, 2024). In relation to body image, these schemas shape self-concept and responses to cultural ideals and personal experiences.

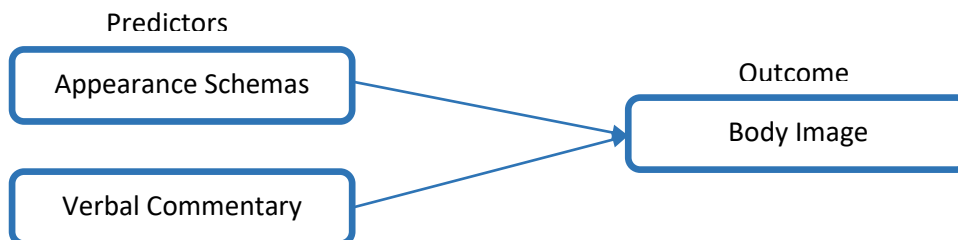
A study by Kimberley (2016) indicated that the schemas of not being physically normal hurt a person's mental and emotional health. People who are suffering from lower limb injury bear negative comments due to their wheelchairs. Throughout their lives, society discriminates against them by using different words and gestures due to which ends their communication with society, and they do not cope with society. Appearance schemas can be categorized as negative or positive. Negative schemas reflect an unhealthy preoccupation with appearance, often marked by harsh self-criticism and dissatisfaction with one's body, which has been linked to lower body satisfaction and increased risk of eating disorder psychopathology (Herme, 2016). In contrast, positive schemas emphasize self-acceptance and recognition of value beyond physical attributes, enabling individuals to appreciate their bodies without excessive judgment (Herme & Alyson, 2016). Appearance-related comments strongly shape self-perception and psychological well-being. Positive remarks enhance body image and self-esteem, while negative ones promote self-objectification and poor mental health (Herbozo & Thompson, 2006; Shumaila et al., 2023).

Positive body image encourages self-acceptance and healthy behaviors, whereas negative body image fuels self-criticism and harmful habits. Tyszkiewicz et al. (2012) found that such comments heighten appearance self-consciousness and perceived unattractiveness, amplifying insecurity. Body image, how individuals perceive and evaluate their appearance, significantly shapes overall self-concept (Slade, 1994). Understanding body image distortion requires examining its causes, consequences, and protective factors (Rhoten, Murphy & Ridner, 2013). Body image reflects how individuals perceive and feel about their appearance, ranging from positive to negative and influenced by both internal traits and external social or cultural factors. Recognizing it as a multifaceted construct is vital, as it directly affects psychological well-being. Priya et al. (2015) found body shame positively correlated with depression, anxiety, and loneliness among adolescents. Likewise, Jean et al. (2020) reported that individuals with disabilities experience judgment and humiliation linked to higher depression and lower self-esteem. Khan et al. (2022) further noted that body image mediates the link between appearance schemas and unintentional aggression, with dissatisfaction and societal pressure fueling insecurity and hostility.

While body image and appearance schemas have been widely studied, research has largely overlooked individuals with physical disabilities. Previous studies (e.g., Khan et al., 2011; Herme, 2016) highlight the effects of appearance-related feedback and internal beliefs on body dissatisfaction, self-esteem, and disordered eating. However, little is known about how these dynamics affect physically disabled individuals, who face unique challenges from stigma, accessibility barriers, and cultural expectations—particularly in Pakistan, where disability often invites greater societal scrutiny and limited representation. This study explores how cognitive appearance

schemas and verbal commentary influence body image among individuals with physical disabilities in Pakistan. By examining the effects of positive and negative feedback on self-perception, it aims to deepen understanding of the psychological factors shaping body image in disability contexts. The research expands existing literature and emphasizes cultural factors that may intensify or buffer appearance-related experiences, contributing to more inclusive psychological frameworks and interventions.

Figure-I: Framework of Proposed Model



This Figure-I illustrates the proposed influence of two independent variables—Appearance Schemas and Verbal Commentary—on the dependent variable, Body Image, among individuals with physical disabilities. Physically handicapped individuals have been largely overlooked in body image research. This study addresses that gap by exploring their unique experiences with appearance schemas and verbal commentary. Since body image significantly affects self-esteem, psychological well-being, and quality of life, understanding its influence in this group provides valuable insight into how appearance perceptions shape their emotions, daily lives, and social interactions.

Objectives

1. To investigate the association between appearance schemas, verbal commentary, and body image among the physically handicapped.
2. To determine the influence of verbal commentary on one’s body image among the physically handicapped.
3. To examine the difference in appearance schemas, verbal commentary, and body image among males and females with physical handicapped.
4. To examine the difference in appearance schemas, verbal commentary, and body image among married and unmarried physically handicapped.
5. To examine the difference in appearance schemas, verbal commentary, and body image among the age groups of the physically handicapped.
6. To examine the difference in appearance schemas, verbal commentary, and body image among employed and unemployed physically handicapped.

Hypotheses

1. There would be a significant relationship between appearance schemas, verbal commentary, and body image among the physically handicapped.
2. There would be a substantial impact of verbal commentary on body image among the physically handicapped.
3. There would be a significant difference in appearance schemas, verbal commentary, and body image among the physically handicapped concerning gender.
4. There would be a significant difference in appearance schemas, verbal commentary, and body image among the physically handicapped concerning marital status.
5. There would be a significant difference in appearance schemas, verbal commentary, and body image among the age groups of the physically handicapped.
6. There would be a significant difference in appearance schemas, verbal commentary, and body image among employed and unemployed physically handicapped.

II. METHOD

Participants

A correlational research design was used, with appearance schemas and verbal commentary as independent variables and body image as the dependent variable. The sample included 107 physically handicapped individuals (58 males, 54.2%; 49 females, 45.8%) aged 18–52 years ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.60$), recruited through convenience sampling from hospitals in Sialkot and Daska. Only participants disabled due to trauma or accidents were included; those with congenital or sensory disabilities were excluded. Most participants were aged 18–37 years. Educationally, 46.7% had completed intermediate, 41.1% a bachelor's, and 12.1% a master's degree. Marital status was nearly even (49.5% married, 50.5% unmarried). Occupationally, 19.6% were employed full-time, 29.0% part-time, 29.9% unemployed, and 21.5% students.

Measures

[1] Appearance Schemas Inventory-Revised (ASIR; Cash & Melnyk, 2004). The Appearance Schemas Inventory-Revised (ASI-R) is a 20-item scale assessing individuals' beliefs about the importance and influence of physical appearance in daily life. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) and divided into two subscales: Self-Evaluative Salience (items 2, 3, 6–9, 13–16, 20; score range 11–55) and Motivational Salience (items 1, 4, 5, 10–12, 17–19; score range 9–45). Higher scores reflect stronger appearance-related beliefs. The ASI-R demonstrates good internal consistency ($\alpha = .82-.91$; Cash et al., 2004). Author permission was obtained before use. [2] Verbal Commentary on Physical Appearance Scale (VCOPAS; Sylvia Herbozo & Thompson, 2006b). The Verbal Commentary on Physical Appearance Scale (VCOPAS) is a 21-item measure assessing the frequency and impact of appearance-related comments. It includes four subscales: Frequency of Negative Comments (items 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17; range 9–45), Frequency of Positive Comments (items 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18; range 9–45), Impact of Negative Comments (items 19–20; range 2–10), and Impact of Positive Comments (item 21; range 2–10). Higher scores indicate greater frequency or impact of appearance-related remarks. The subscales demonstrate strong reliability ($\alpha = .72-.91$) and test-retest consistency ($\alpha = .78-.89$) (Herbozo & Thompson, 2006b, 2013). Author permission was obtained before use. [3] Body Image State Scale (BISS; Cash et al., 2002). The Body Image State Scale (BISS) is a 6-item measure assessing an individual's current body image. Higher scores indicate a more positive body image, while lower scores reflect a negative one. The translated version showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .83$) and adequate model fit (Bardi et al., 2021). Author permission was obtained before use.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling from hospitals in Sialkot and Daska. Informed consent was obtained from hospital authorities and participants, with assurances of confidentiality and voluntary participation. The study's purpose was explained, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time.

III. RESULTS

Table 1: Pearson Product-Moment Correlation among Appearance Schemas, Verbal Commentary, and Body Image (N = 107)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	α	1	2	3
1. Appearance Schemas	60.91	7.44	58.16	.64	--		
2. Verbal Commentary	122.71	11.61	1.15	.72	-.03	--	
3. Body Image	29.01	6.19	24.91	.70	-.01	.28**	--

** $p < .01$

Descriptive statistics of the sample were obtained on the study variables. The data had no missing values, and there were no extreme outliers in the data. The sample comprised 107 participants (58 males, 54.2%; 49 females, 45.8%) recruited through a convenience sampling technique from various hospitals in Sialkot and Daska.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 52 years (M = 3.20, SD = 1.60). The alpha reliability values for the test scores were satisfactory. Correlation analysis revealed that verbal commentary has significant positive relationship with body image.

Table II: Linear Regression Between Verbal Commentary and Body Image

Variables	B	SE	β	t	F
(Constant)	10.6**	6.16		1.73	8.93**
Verbal Commentary	.32**	0.50	.28**	2.98	
R ²	.88				
ΔR ²	.78				

**p < .01

A linear regression revealed that Commentary significantly predicted the outcome variable, t (1, 107) = 8.93, p < .01, with R² = .28, explaining 28% of the variance. Commentary was a significant positive predictor (B = 0.50, SE = 0.17, β = 0.28, t = 2.98, p < .01), indicating that higher Commentary scores corresponded to higher outcome scores.

Table III: One-way analysis of variance for Age Differences in Verbal Commentary and Body Image

Variables	SS	MS	df	F	p	η ²	Post Hoc
Verbal Commentary						0.12	1 < 2 > 3 < 4 > 5 < 6 < 7
B/W Groups	1666.34	277.72	6	2.20	0.04		
Within Groups	12621.67	126.21	100				
Total	14288.01		106				
Body Image						0.11	1 < 2 < 3 < 4 < 5 < 6 > 7
B/W Groups	458.81	76.47	6	2.11	0.05		
Within Groups	3613.14	36.13	100				
Total	4071.96		106				

The one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant difference in verbal commentary among the age groups of physically handicapped individuals (F = 2.20, p = 0.04), where p < 0.05. The one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant difference in body image among the age groups of physically handicapped individuals (F = 2.11, p = 0.05), where p < or = 0.05. Whereas, showed no significant differences in appearance schemas among the age groups of the physically handicapped. The independent-sample t-tests were also conducted to compare gender and marital status related differences on ASIR, VCOPAS, and BISS scores. Results indicated that there were non-significant differences across any of the measures.

IV. DISCUSSION

Appearance schemas represent beliefs about the significance and meaning of appearance (Cash et al., 2003). Verbal commentary refers to spoken remarks about one’s looks, whether positive, negative, or neutral (Nasreen & Fareed, 2023). Body image encompasses perceptions, emotions, and attitudes toward one’s body (Jung & Lennon, 2003). Together, these constructs strongly influence psychological well-being, especially among individuals with physical disabilities. The results indicated a significant relationship between appearance schemas, verbal commentary, and body image among physically handicapped individuals. Correlation analysis showed that appearance schemas were negatively correlated with both verbal commentary and body image, while verbal commentary was positively correlated with body image. This suggests that negative appearance schemas relate to poorer body image, whereas positive commentary enhances it, consistent with Shumaila et al. (2023), who found negative comments linked to reduced psychological well-being.

The results showed that verbal commentary had a significant impact on body image among physically handicapped individuals. Regression analysis revealed that it accounted for 28% of the variance in body image scores, underscoring its psychological influence. This aligns with Smith and Collins (2018), who found that supportive

comments enhance self-perception, while negative remarks contribute to body dissatisfaction and distress. T-test results showed no significant gender differences in appearance schemas, verbal commentary, or body image, indicating that males and females with physical disabilities experience these factors similarly. These findings align with Mith and Johnson (2022), who also found no gender-based differences in similar constructs among disabled populations. Results showed no significant marital differences in appearance schemas or body image but revealed a significant difference in verbal commentary. This suggests that marital status may affect the type or frequency of appearance-related comments. Gracia and Martinez (2010) similarly found marital differences in verbal commentary among individuals with disabilities, linked to varying social roles and expectations.

One-way ANOVA results showed significant age differences in verbal commentary and body image but not in appearance schemas. This suggests that with age, individuals may develop more stable and positive body image perceptions and experience varying types of commentary. Fox and Stevenson (1991) similarly found that older adults hold more accepting body views, while Cash and Pruzinsky (2004) noted that appearance schemas formed early in life remain relatively stable, explaining the non-significant age effect. ANOVA results showed significant differences in verbal commentary across employment statuses but no significant differences in appearance schemas or body image. This suggests that employment may influence the type of social interactions or feedback individuals receive, but does not significantly affect their core appearance beliefs or body image. White and Black (2011) similarly found minimal employment impact on these variables among disabled populations. Bernet et al. (2022) noted that body shame and age influence appearance-based exercise and body image, while McCoy and Banks (2012) observed that societal perceptions vary by disability type; those with emotional or multiple disabilities often face greater stigma, affecting social inclusion. Significant differences in verbal commentary and body image were found across age groups and between employed and unemployed participants. These results suggest that social experiences and contextual factors like age and employment influence how individuals perceive appearance-related feedback. Overall, the study underscores the psychological impact of verbal commentary and the importance of fostering supportive, inclusive environments for physically handicapped individuals.

Implications

This study provides valuable insights for enhancing the physical and psychological well-being of individuals with physical disabilities. It highlights how social and cognitive factors—such as appearance schemas and verbal commentary—shape body image experiences. These findings can guide the development of evidence-based interventions to reduce appearance-related distress and inform policies promoting body positivity, inclusivity, and equal treatment. Clinically, psychologists, counselors, and rehabilitation therapists can apply these insights to design interventions that improve self-perception and communication. Moreover, the results emphasize the importance of supportive language and environments that foster self-acceptance and emotional resilience.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this study indicate that appearance schemas and verbal commentary play a significant role in shaping body image among physically handicapped individuals. The results demonstrate that verbal commentary is a strong positive predictor of body image, highlighting the powerful influence of social feedback on self-perception in this population. While appearance schemas showed limited direct associations, variations in verbal commentary and body image across age and employment status suggest that social and contextual factors meaningfully affect body image experiences. Overall, the study underscores the importance of fostering supportive, respectful communication and inclusive social environments to promote positive body image and psychological wellbeing among individuals with physical disabilities.

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