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Weight-Related Teasing, Coping Strategies and Self-Esteem in Obese University Students

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Abstract

The current study aimed to examine the relationship between weight-based teasing, coping strategies and self-esteem among obese university students. A total of 60 obese university students (Males=30, Females=30) of the age group 17 to 26 years ($M= 21.52$, $SD= 2.24$) were chosen from different universities of Lahore. The measures used in the current study were Body Mass Index (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], [2013](#)), Perception of Teasing Scale (Thompson, Cattarin, Fowler & Fisher, [1995](#)), Coping Orientation to Problem Experienced Questionnaire (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, [1989](#)) and Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, [1965](#)). The findings revealed no significant gender differences in the use of problem focused and emotion focused coping styles. The results also revealed that 70% of the overweight/obese students were living a sedentary life style while 30% of the participants were engaged in taking a properly balanced diet along with exercise. 60% of the students were overweight due to the excessive eating, no physical activity or excessive sleeping. The results also showed that there was a significant positive relationship between perception of teasing and self-esteem and perception of teasing was a strong predictor of self-esteem among obese university students.

Keywords: body mass index (BMI), obesity, peer teasing, sedentary life style

Introduction

Obesity in Pakistan has become a great health concern in the last few years. Taking an unhealthy and a full of fats or oily diet, lack of physical activity and changing lifestyles are the causes which contribute in the development of obesity in the country. Pakistan is listed at 165 out of 194 countries in the list of world's fattest countries published by Forbes, in which 22.2% of individuals above the age of 15 are crossing the optimal level of obesity (Streib, [2007](#)).

There are many etiological factors which may contribute in causing

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obesity including genetic, psychosocial, biological and environmental attributes. People who tend to experience different psychological problems like anxiety, eating disorders or depression may face more problems in controlling the expenditure of food, maintaining healthy body weight or doing an adequate amount of exercise (Collins & Bentz, [2009](#)).

Most of the students report that their peers bully them due to increased weight. According to a national survey, almost 84% of overweight adolescent students were teased, called names and were also teased during physical activities as well. Ignorance, exclusion from collective activities, teasing in the cafeteria, targeted by negative rumors etc. were characteristics observed by two third of participants about their obese or overweight peers. A majority of students also experienced physical or verbal threats (Feyler, [2012](#)).

It has become a prevailing trend to bully, stigmatize and tease the obese person. Persons with obesity are not obese by their choice. Many factors such as genetic, physiological, psychological and environmental factors are contributors in obesity. Modern lifestyle and the usage of innovative technology has made affected persons oblivious to their growing weight. People do not leisure time to manage their body mass. In Pakistan, obesity is becoming a frightening issue.

Surveys and researches show many reasons and impacts of obesity among university students. It is becoming hard for obese students to maintain their self-esteem. Low self-esteem may induce them to various types of addictions including smoking, drugs, gambling, online addiction, sexual promiscuity and alcohol.

They may experience psychological problems including depression, anxiety, loneliness and stress. They may have impaired job and academic performance, dissatisfying and unhealthy relationships with family members and friends, isolation and avoidance of social interaction, academic failure due to a lack of confidence like performing poorly on a single test.

On the other hand, obese students use a bundle kind of coping strategies to protect and maintain good self-esteem. Coping is a readily available kind of behavior to deal with any type of stressor. Research data reveal that student with obesity often use avoidance based coping strategies and problem focused strategies to deal with distressing and teasing comments from others.

Compared to men, women suffer a disproportionate sense of worthlessness

and taunting attributable to overweight and obesity. The evidence for the adverse effects of obesity on women's health is crushing and irrefutable. More and more studies show that it is much tougher for females to protect and uphold high quality self-esteem when they face deteriorating comments from others for their obesity.

According to Puhl and Brownell (2001), obese individuals frequently experience stigmatization, discrimination and biasness due to increased weight which influences negatively their social, emotional and personal well-being. At work they have to experience stigmatization and biasness in numerous aspects of daily professional life. In employment settings, a negative perception exists regarding obese persons such as obese workers are considered less competent and lacking in self-discipline by their colleagues and employers alike and also quite lazy. All these attitudes may have a negative impact on the decisions regarding the status of employment, wages and promotions. In educational settings, a different kind of weight oriented stigmatization may also happen.

Puhl and Brownell (2001) stated that overweight/obese students face many problems ranging from rejection to harassment from school or peers, lower college acceptance, wrongful dismissals from college and biased attitudes from teachers. Research has highlighted this problem and shows that stigmatization towards obese or overweight students begins very early.

According to the findings, a negative approach has been reported in children of pre-school with age between three to five years which links overweight/obese peers with characteristics of mean, stupid, ugly, unhappy and consequently they have few friends. Unluckily, in the health care settings weight stigma also exists such as a negative view of overweight or obese patients has been reported by physicians, medical students, nurses, dietitians and psychologists. Researchers have also revealed that health related professionals who are specialist in the treatment of obesity may hold negative attitude for the obese as well.

To assess the practice of school students regarding their attitude, knowledge and practice of healthy eating an indigenous study was conducted. The students of grade 10th were chosen as sample. Their body weight and the level of obesity were also assessed by calculating their Body Mass Index (BMI). To compute the BMI, the height and weight of each student was calculated after finishing the questionnaire. The findings indicated that 17% of the students were underweight, 65% of them were normal and 18% were

overweight. This study concluded that the prevalence of overweight individuals is on rise and it is very important to take certain steps for handling this health issue which has long term consequences.

A long duration of physical activities should be encouraged. Certain guidelines should be devised for school children as well as for the general population based on their weight status and nutrition (Rizvi et. al., [2003](#)).

A study was carried out to look at the different risk factors related to obesity. It was done at the teaching hospital of DHQ at Dera Ghazi (DG) Khan, Pakistan and used a cross sectional study design. Interviews were taken of the 330 obese participants between 35 to 45 years of age. The results showed that obesity prevailed more in women than men. Most of the participants had a family history and inactive life style with no physical activity which was found to be the major risk factor for obesity (Khan, et al., [2008](#)).

2. Rationale of the Study

According to the [2012](#) estimate of World Health Organization (WHO) 26 % of females and 19% of males of Pakistan are obese. Females are 2 to 3 times more likely to be obese as compared to males. Numerous indigenous and foreign studies have been conducted on obese people to assess their self-esteem, body image, teasing or other areas but the current research focuses on weight related teasing along with self-esteem and coping strategies since it is imperative to draw the attention of educators, counselors and other experts towards understanding the influence of teasing on different aspects (social, personal life, academics etc.) of obese students' lives.

2.1. Hypotheses

- There is a positive relationship between body mass index and perception of teasing among male and female obese university students.
- Perception of teasing is a strong predictor of low self-esteem among male and female obese university students.
- There is a positive relationship between self-esteem and problem focused coping.
- Male obese students use more problem focused coping than female

obese students.

- Emotion focused coping strategies are more used by female students as compared to male students.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

The present study was conducted using co-relational research design.

3.2. Sample

The sample consisted of 60 (Males=30, Females=30) obese university students between 17 to 26 years of age ($M=21.52$, $SD= 2.24$). Purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants and the sample was selected from obese/overweight university students of Lahore.

4. Measures

4.1. Body Mass Index (BMI)

In the current research, metric standardized formula of BMI was used that was calculated by measuring weight in kilograms (kg) and dividing it with height in square meters (kg/m^2). The standard categories of weight measurement linked with BMI posit individuals with less than BMI 18.5 as underweight, with BMI from 18.5 to 24.9 as normal weight, with BMI 25 to 29.9 as overweight, with BMI 30 to 34.9 as obese, with BMI 35 to 39.9 as severely obese and with BMI 40 and above as morbidly obese (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], [2013](#)).

4.2. Demographic Variable Questionnaire

There were two sections of the demographic variable sheet. The first section was related to the age, gender, class/degree, semester, institute, height, weight and socio-economic status of the participants. The second section consisted of open ended questions about the life style, behaviors and eating patterns, reason(s) of increased weight, problems related to academics and health issues due to being overweight, discrimination faced due to heavy weight and the way obese students react and cope with this situation.

4.3. Perception of Teasing Scale (POTS)

This scale was developed by Thompson et al. in [1995](#). The POTS is an 11-item scale that assesses the perception of teasing. It consists of two subscales including competency teasing and general weight teasing. POTS

is a five point rating scale from “Never” to “Very Often”. A high score on the scale indicates that the person is experiencing a high level of teasing regarding his or her increased weight. The alpha for competency is .78 and for general weight is .94.

4.4. Coping Orientation to Problem Experienced Questionnaire (COPE)

COPE was developed by Carver et al. (1989). For the current research, the full version of COPE was used which comprises 60 items with 15 factors that reflect avoidant and active coping strategies. This scale is divided into three major scales including problem focused coping, emotion focused coping and less useful coping. The ratings comprise Likert type 4 point rating scale and range from "I (usually) don't do this at all" to "I (usually) do this a lot". This inventory has fine psychometric properties as its alpha ranges from .45 to .92 and the test-retest reliability ranges from .46 to .86.

4.5. Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale

This scale was developed by Rosenberg (1965). It consists of 10 items which assess a person’s sense of self-worth when that person compares herself or himself with others. A high score in the scale indicates that the person has greater self-esteem. The scoring of items 2,5,6,8 and 9 was reversed and marked as 4=strongly disagree and 1=strongly agree. Internal Consistency of the scale ranges between .77 and .88 and test retest reliability lies between .82 and .85.

5. Procedure

With the permission of the administration of different universities, their obese/overweight students were located and were explained the aims and objectives of the study and their consent for participation in this study was taken. With their consent, their BMI was calculated by recording their height and weight. Sixty participants with BMI 25 and above were included in the study and questionnaires were filled by them. The participants were handed the questionnaire and they were given instructions to fill up the questionnaire expressing their true feelings and were told that there were no right or wrong answers. The questionnaire was administered on the participants individually.

5.1. Ethical Considerations

Certain ethical considerations were taken care of in the study. Permission was taken from the authors for using their scales. Permission

from the competent authority of different universities was taken before collecting data from students. Consent was taken from the participants after explaining to them the aim and nature of the research. Questionnaires were individually administered on participants. Participants were given the complete right to terminate or withdraw from participation at any time. Participants were informed that the given information will not be available to anyone who was not directly involved in the study and complete confidentiality will be maintained. Participants facing any psychological problem were referred to campus counselor.

5.2. Results

After the collection of data from participants, the results were analyzed. Initially, descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, frequencies and percentages were calculated to find out detailed information about the sample. Inter-correlation was carried out to find out the relationship between the perception of teasing consisting of two sub-scales including competency and weight-based teasing, coping strategies comprising three sub-scales involving problem focused, emotion focused and less useful coping and self-esteem. Simple regression analysis was carried out to see the correlation between variables which were correlated with each other and the predictors of self-esteem were marked. Independent sample t-test was carried out to find out gender differences about coping and self-esteem.

A series of statistical analyses were carried out on the basis of different demographic variables including weight, socio-economic status and class of participants, lifestyle and behavior, satisfaction with weight, health related issues due to being overweight, as well as self-esteem, perception of teasing and different coping styles including problem focused, emotion focused and less useful coping styles. The results revealed no significant differences or relationships among these variables which show that in our culture obesity is not related to the particular socio-economic status or lifestyle and there can be many reasons contributing in the growth of obesity related problems peculiar to the circumstances of the obese individual. There is no gender/class/institute related difference in the use of coping styles or self-esteem.

Table 1 is showing the inter-correlations between weight based teasing, coping strategies and self-esteem along two subscales of the perception of

Table 1
Inter-correlations between Weight-based Teasing, Self Esteem and Coping Strategies

Variables	1	CTS	WTS	2	PFC	EFC	LUC	3
1	POTS	.90***	.89***	.06	-.01	.01	.23	.62***
	CTS		.61***	.07	-.01	.03	.21	.55***
	WTS			.04	-.01	-.02	.20	.56***
2	COPE				.91***	.92***	.78***	-.15
	PFC					.79***	.54***	-.21
	EFC						.64***	-.24
	LUC							.14
3 Self Esteem								

Note. POTS= Perception of teasing scale; CTS= Competency teasing scale; WTS= weight based teasing scale; COPE= Coping orientation to problem experienced questionnaire; PFC= Problem focused coping; EFC= Emotion focused coping; LUC= less useful coping. *** $p < .01$.

teasing scale (competency and weight based teasing) and three subscales of COPE (problem focused, emotion focused and less useful coping). Pearson product moment correlation was used for analysis. The results indicated that a significant positive relationship exists between self-esteem and perception of teasing scale $r = .62$, $p < .01$. The COPE scale was only correlated with its subscales of problem focused, emotion focused and less useful coping $r = .91$; $r = .92$; $r = .78$, $p < .01$.

Table 2
Simple Regression Analysis for Predictors of Self Esteem

Variable	B	SE	β	95%CI
Constant	13.20	1.25		10.69-15.71
POTS	.15	.02	-.62***	.10-.20
R ²	.39***			
F	37.33			

Note. *** $p < .001$, POTS= Perception of Teasing Scale

Table 2 shows the predictor of self-esteem, for this purpose simple regression analysis was carried out with enter method to find out the significant

predictor of the self-esteem with respect to perception of teasing. The results indicated that there is a significant negative correlation ($r=-.62$) between perception of teasing and the self-esteem. Regression analysis show that model is overall significant ($F=37.33$, $p<.001$) and high perception of teasing is significant predictor of low self-esteem ($t=10.53$, $p<.001$). The model shows that perception of teasing accounted for 39.2% of the variance in the self-esteem.

Table 3
Correlation between Body Mass Index and Perception of Teasing

Variables	1	2
1 Body mass index	--	.31**
2 Perception of teasing	--	--

Note. * $p < .05$

The table 3 is showing the relationship between body mass index and perception of teasing among obese university students. Pearson product moment correlation was used and the results indicated that there was significant positive relationship between the body mass index and perception of teasing, $r=.31$, $p<.05$.

Table 4
Gender wise Comparison on Emotion Focused Coping (n=60)

Variables	Males		Females		$t(58)$	p	95% CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
EFC	58.66	12.04	60.96	9.51	-.82	.90	-7.90	3.30	0.21

Note. EFC= Emotion Focused Coping

The table 4 is showing the Independent sample t-test which was carried out to assess the mean differences of emotional focused coping between male and female obese students. The results revealed that on average, female participants experience more emotional focused coping ($M= 60.96$, $SE= 2.19$) than of male participants ($M= 58.66$, $SE= 1.73$). This difference was not significant $t(58) = -.82$, $p>.05$; it represents small size effect at the end.

Table 5
Gender wise Comparison on Problem Focused Coping 3(N=60)

Variables	Males		Females		<i>t</i> (57)	<i>p</i>	95% CI		Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	
PFC	50.93	12.7	50.31	12.4	.19	.05	-5.92	7.17	0.04

Note. PFC= Problem Focused Coping

The table 3.8 is showing the Independent sample t-test which was carried out to assess the mean differences of problem focused coping between male and female obese students. The results revealed that on average, male participants uses more problem focused coping ($M= 50.93$, $SE= 2.31$) than of female participants ($M= 50.31$, $SE= 2.30$). This difference was not significant $t(57) = .19$, $p>.05$; it represents small size effect at the end.

5.3. Summary of the Findings

- Findings revealed that 70% of the overweight/obese students were living a sedentary lifestyle including excessive eating of fattish/junk food without any physical activity. The other 30% of the obese participants were engaged in taking proper balanced diet along with exercise.
- Another important finding showed that 60% of the students were overweight due to excessive eating, no physical activity or excessive sleeping.
- There was a significant relationship between the perception of teasing and low self-esteem which suggests that weight related teasing effects the self-esteem of the victim.
- The regression co-efficient was found to be significant and the results indicated that perception of teasing was the predictor of self-esteem.
- No relationship was found between self-esteem and coping strategies and no relationship was found between the perception of teasing and coping strategies as well.

- The t-test revealed minor differences of gender in emotion or problem focused coping but no significant differences were found which suggests that both genders use all coping strategies equally.

5.4. Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that there are multiple factors which play a vital role in the development of the obesity problem. According to the findings, there is a relationship between self-esteem and the perception of teasing which shows that teasing effects the level of self-esteem, that is enhanced teasing may contribute in lowering the level of self-esteem of the individual which further influences their daily life negatively. However, the results did not reveal any differences of gender in using different coping styles among male and female students which shows that both genders use similar coping styles to cope with teasing related to obesity. It also shows that different coping strategies mentioned in the study are missing in our culture.

The results also depicted that the Body Mass Index (BMI) was the only demographic characteristic which was related to weight-based teasing which concludes that the person having an excessive BMI was teased by other people to a greater extent. It is a trend in our culture that overweight people are not being liked and praised as much as smart people and the possible reason for it could be that the media represents a false concept of beauty and smartness which influences the perception of people negatively.

6. Conclusion

The findings of the current study will help to understand the influence of weight related teasing on the self-esteem, academic, social and other aspects of life of the obese university students. It may also help to focus the attention of students towards taking a proper balanced diet and involve themselves in physical activities to keep them healthy and to increase the awareness of the students, university administration, and counselors regarding obesity and its effects on the daily life of obese students. It may also help the campus counselors to develop effective counseling plans for obese students to help them face peer teasing while using different kinds of constructive coping strategies. It can also play a role in boosting up their self-esteem or enhance their confidence level by conducting some sessions or group therapies. Workshops or seminars can be conducted to enhance the awareness of university students regarding obesity, teasing related to obesity and its

diverse psychological effects on different aspects of life of obese students.

6.1. Limitations of the Study

- Due to limited resources, circumstances, unwillingness of the participants and within the limited time period available for research, only a limited sample could be taken and it was not possible to take a large sample.
- Students were taken from a limited number of universities of Lahore and sample could not be collected from the universities of other cities of Pakistan due to which the findings cannot be generalized appropriately.

6.2. Suggestions/Recommendations

- For future studies, it is recommended that a large sample of students must be taken from various universities of different cities so that the findings can be generalized readily.
- Post-counseling sessions of students must be done so that it increases their awareness and helps them to cope with the current situation properly.
- Future qualitative research may be directed towards different personalities and the coping styles used by obese people.
- The future researchers must focus on the psychosocial factors contributing in the problem of the obesity found in Pakistani culture.

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