



Woman in Development and Politics

Body and Hidden Mirrors: A Qualitative Analysis of Single Young Women's Attitudes toward Body Image

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article type: Research Article Article history: Received: 3 May 2025 Received in revised form: 11 August 2025 Accepted: 8 September 2025 Published online: 23 October 2025 Keywords: <i>Cosmetic Surgery, Self-Acceptance, Self-Confidence, Social Comparison, Stigma of Mockery.</i>	Introduction Body image is a multifaceted concept that encompasses the manner in which individuals perceive, experience, and assess their physical appearance. A variety of psychological, cultural, and social factors influence this perception. Today, the body is not merely a biological entity; it is a fundamental component of personal and social identity in a world characterized by media, consumer culture, and Western beauty standards. It serves as a platform for individuals to articulate their beliefs and acquire social acceptance. In this context, women, particularly young, unmarried women, are subjected to increased pressure to adhere to idealized beauty standards. They frequently find themselves in a precarious position, as they attempt to reconcile their personal acceptance with societal expectations that define attractiveness in limited and frequently unrealistic terms. These gendered norms create psychological tension and can deeply affect their self-worth and emotional well-being. This study seeks to explore how single women understand, evaluate, and emotionally relate to their bodies. It is designed to reveal the social experiences that influence their body image and the meanings they attribute to their physical appearance. The research offers a unique perspective on the social construction of body image and the daily obstacles that women encounter when attempting to negotiate their sense of corporeal self by concentrating on the lived experiences of these women. Methodology This study employed semi-structured interviews to explore the most intimate aspects of women's experiences with their bodies, utilizing a qualitative research approach. Twenty single women from Tabriz, aged 18 to 35, were purposively selected based on demographic criteria, including age, education, employment status, and actual experiences of body dissatisfaction or acceptance. The research location was selected as Tabriz because of its distinctive position as a nexus of tradition and modernity, providing a rich context for analyzing the cultural, media, and ethnic influences on body image. Participants' narratives and experiences were examined through thematic analysis to identify patterns and semantic themes. The initial classification process entailed the identification of core concepts, which was subsequently followed by comparative analysis to extract sub-themes and main themes from the data. The results indicated that women's experiences with their bodies were characterized by a persistent tension and conflict, which was influenced by cultural, media, familial, and prevailing beauty discourses. Findings The narratives of participants revealed a prominent theme of the experience of appearance

pressures imposed by media and society. Young women, particularly those who are single, were inundated with images of idealized bodies, unrealistic beauty standards, and norms that were disseminated through social media, advertisements, television programs, and even daily interactions. These involuntary and continuous comparisons frequently resulted in feelings of inadequacy, dissatisfaction with physical appearance, and a decrease in self-confidence. Some participants, particularly those who had experienced rejection in romantic relationships, familial judgment, or social invisibility, reported intensified dissatisfaction. They occasionally resorted to cosmetic surgeries, stringent dieting, or altering their dressing styles to conform to beauty norms.

In contrast to this trend, another theme emphasized the redefinition of the body as a domain for agency and meaning reconstruction. Some women, particularly those who were in the process of recovering from negative experiences, focused on health, bodily functionality, acceptance of bodily distinctions, and reliance on intrinsic values, thereby distancing themselves from the cycle of comparison and dissatisfaction. These body agents regarded the body as a fundamental component of their personal identity, rather than a means of securing social approval or attracting masculine attention. At this level, the body transitioned from an object of external judgment to a space for introspection and personal control.

Another significant theme was the role of singleness in amplifying bodily sensitivity and social anxiety. Participants acknowledged that their vulnerability to others' criticism was exacerbated by their status as solitary individuals. In a society where marriage is still a fundamental norm for women, unmarried women frequently assessed their bodies not only from an aesthetic standpoint but also as tools for attracting attention and potentially entering new relationships. This perspective resulted in persistent anxiety regarding their bodies, attempts to conform to societal norms, and, in certain instances, feelings of shame and self-blame.

Additionally, the reflection of body image in social identity and self-concept was noteworthy. Many participants stated that body image is an integral component of their social identity, significantly influencing their self-confidence, social engagement, and even their position in daily interactions. In this regard, the body is not merely a biological element, but a symbolic and identity-bearing entity that enables individuals to establish a connection with the world around them. Bourdieu's theory of the body as cultural capital and feminist perspectives on the body as a field of power can be used to interpret these findings.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study can be examined from a theoretical perspective within the frameworks of critical feminism, contemporary reflexivity theories, and sociological perspectives on the body. Bourdieu's theory posits that the body is socialized and reproduced within power domains, serving as symbolic capital. In this perspective, young women internalize beauty standards, modifying their bodies to conform to societal norms, frequently at the expense of suppressing personal desires and compromising their mental health. Foucault's concept of "body surveillance and discipline" further elucidates the manner in which attractiveness and media discourses are employed as instruments for the control of women's bodies. These concepts are particularly apparent in the narratives of participants, particularly in their experiences of incessant observation, judgment, and anxiety that result from body display.

The research also demonstrates that women's experiences with body image are not purely psychological; rather, they are profoundly ingrained in social, cultural, and gendered structures. For example, the body's interconnection with patriarchal discourses that are prevalent in society is emphasized by familial pressures to preserve attractiveness, concerns

regarding delayed marriage, and the emphasis on appearance as a form of feminine capital. However, the narratives of women revealed instances of resistance, value reassessment, and a shift toward body acceptance based on intrinsic criteria, suggesting the potential for individual agency in the face of dominant social forces.

In summary, the concept of body image among single women in Tabriz is a complex phenomenon that is inextricably connected to social, cultural, economic, and psychological factors. The body functions as both a site for the reproduction of social pressures and a space for the reconstruction of meaning and resistance. For women, particularly those who are single, the body becomes a measure of worth, social acceptance, and even cultural legitimacy, significantly impacting their mental health, self-concept, and identity. This study emphasizes the necessity of reevaluating media, pedagogical, and cultural policies that pertain to the representation of women's bodies. It promotes realistic portrayals, the acceptance of bodily diversity, and empowering women to define their bodies independently.

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