

Role of Casteism and Body Image in Predicting Marriage Prospects of Young Pakistani Adults

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the relationship between their demographic characteristics, perceived body image, casteism and prospects of marriage among university students. The respondents were asked questions about gender, educational status, monthly family income, employment status, living area, family type, casteism and perceived body image. An online cross-sectional survey was conducted with the students' studying at Pakistan's higher education institutes and universities. Findings indicate that most of the respondents were doing graduation (54.4 per cent) or post-graduation (42.7 per cent). Three-fourths of the respondents were unemployed. Majority of the respondents were female (59.6 per cent) and belonged to urban areas of the country. In addition, the study population had almost equal representation of each economic class. Independent sample t-test and one-way ANOVA were performed to see the effect of socio-demographic variables on marriage prospects of the respondents. Findings indicate that males had more prospects of marriage as compared to females. Correlational analysis indicated casteism had a statistically significant and positive relationship with marriage prospects ($r=.353$, $p<.01$) and body image ($r=.125$, $p<.05$). Moreover, body image had a statistically significant and positive relationship with marriage prospects ($r=.197$, $p<.01$). Furthermore, linear regression showed that casteism is a stronger predictor of prospects of marriage than body image. Based on the findings of this study, we can conclude that three factors i.e. caste, body image and economic status are important in predicting the marriage prospects among young adults. However caste came out as strong predictor as compared to body image. In a traditional Pakistani society, caste is not just a historical phenomenon but it contains deep cultural and socio-economic and socio-psychological ramifications.

Keywords: Casteism, Body Image, Marriage Prospects, Youth, Pakistan

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Introduction

Marriage unions play an important role in positioning and establishing a person within a particular society (Agha, 2016; Chowdhry, 2004). It is an essential institution for sustaining family bonds and defining the boundaries of social relationships and caste group (Jauregui & McGuinness, 2003). In almost all societies around the globe, such unions are not entirely based on the sexual needs to two adult human beings. Mate selection is shaped by the complex socio-cultural processes, particular to social history of every society. Not only a mate selection is culturally defined process, the expectations from the partners are also defined by broader cultural ethos of each society (D'Lima et. al., 2020).

Globally, social scientists have identified that mate selection involves many socio-psychological and physical traits such as good companion, honest, considerate, affectionate, dependable, intelligent, kind, understanding, interesting to talk to and loyal along with physique, skin colour, body shape and size (Arif & Fatima, 2015; Bakhshi & Baker, 2011; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Frei & Shaver, 2002; Khalid & Hassan, 2019; Pujols et al, 2010). However, these factors are not exhaustive. Selection of a suitable marriage partner also involves other factors as well, such as social and economic status of both families, occupation or job of the prospective partner, religiousness and morality (Khalid & Hassan, 2019). Historically, in traditional collective Societies such as Pakistan, marriage has been viewed not as union of two adult male and female, it is viewed as union of two families. Parents of both bride and groom decide their prospective marriage partners. Such arrange marriages are characterized by public ceremony such as *Nikah* which is attended by families and friends of both bride and groom so that this marriage union could attain social approval (Ghazal et al., 2022). Such arrange marriages are a defining characteristic of patriarchal society (Samuel, 2010) and sometimes there is no prior contact between prospective spouses (Allendorf & Pandian, 2016). In such arrange marriages, the *biradari* (Caste), social and economic status (class), religion; sect and language are important factors that play a role (Arif & Fatima, 2015; Blau, 1984; Ghazal et. al., 2022; Shahzad, 2017). In subcontinent, particularly both in India and Pakistan, marriage outside one's caste has been a social taboo and culturally forbidden act (D'Lima et. al., 2020). Caste norms are used to exert social control, and they have an impact on many important choices, including choosing a partner for both men and women (Fricke et al., 1986; Samuel, 2010).

In the Pakistani context, most marriages are restricted to in-groups, even if people desire to marry outside of their kinship network or caste group (Ahmad, 2015). Such ritual is usually named as casteism. Caste is often taken into consideration while making decisions about marriage. Particularly in Pakistan's rural areas where more than 60 per cent of the population resides, the majority of marriages are strictly intra-caste. Casteism is the practice of granting benefits or disadvantages to people or groups based on their membership in a certain caste. Caste discrimination and caste

bias are both parts of casteism (Barman, 2020). It is an organized form of ethnocentrism that includes caste prejudice, caste awareness, and a sense of belonging to a certain caste group. Casteism is promoted when people are treated differently based on their caste affiliation, which leads to caste-based discrimination (Bhushan & Sinha, 1995; Kikon, 2022). Based on the casteism belief, parents of young people in Pakistan look for marriage prospects for their children within their caste groups since it is believed that intra-caste marriages maintain the purity of blood (Usman & Amjad, 2020). Even before considering things like educational status, economic background, and physical looks of the prospective partners, most parents, particularly the so-called upper castes, prefer applying the caste filter (Chabba, 2020). Thus, casteism remains a major predictor of marriage prospects among youth in the country (Safdar et al., 2022). Casteism divides the society into larger number of hereditary groups that are distinct from each other and are characterized by strong group cohesiveness (Smauel, 2010).

Numerous studies have been conducted previously regarding body image and its relationship with unconsummated marriage (Hosseini et al., 2017), sexual satisfaction (Pujols et al., 2010), post-marriage sexual enjoyment (Hill, 2020), and marital intimacy (Mehdizadegan & Renani, 2013). However, no studies have been conducted to look into the effects of body image and casteism on marriage prospects simultaneously. Specifically, this study reports which socio-psychological factors (e.g. casteism and body image) and personal characteristics best predict marriage prospects among young Pakistani adult. Based on the above theoretical considerations, following are the objectives of the study:

- To find out the relationship between demographic characteristics of the respondents and their prospects of marriage.
- To examine the relationship between body image, casteism, and prospects of marriage of the respondents.

Research Question

Which socio-cultural factors (Socio-demographic, casteism, and body image) best predict the prospects of marriage among young adults?

Review of Literature

In the previous two decades, economic liberalization, influx of multinational companies, economic growth, girl education, increased women autonomy, legal rights of women to inherit property, legal choice for marriage, expansion of mass media including the social media, advent of modern information and communication technologies and rise of middle class has significantly affected the socio-cultural fabric of south Asian nations including Pakistan (Maqsood, 2022). Consequently, modest changes in the marriage trends from arranged marriage to marriage of choice and divorce rates have been observed (Arif & Fatima, 2015). Expansion of marriage

markets and broadening of social network opportunities have changed the marriage patterns in Pakistan. To some extent, such changes also reduced the concerns about marriage within the caste or *biradari* (Ahmad et. al., 2015; Jones, 2015; Littlewood, 2004; Yeung et al., 2018). However, such new notions of intimacy, conjugality and romantic love are not yet totally freed from the broader socio-cultural standards (Arif & Fatima, 2015; Chowdhry, 2010; Dattoo, 2010; Islam et al., 2017; Maqsood, 2014; Maqsood, 2022; Rafiq, 2016; Siddiqua, 2011).

Modernization has brought about new challenges as well. Portrayal of men's and women's bodies in mass media advertisements and social media platforms has created new norms and standards of beautiful and acceptable bodies. Overemphasis on thin and smart bodies by TV commercials and advertisements has created new concerns for both males and females. The flaunting of ideal female bodies by media sensations has created new norms of marriage and intimacy (Latif et. al., 2011; Maqsood, 2022). Now, along with other socio-psychological considerations such as class, social status, and religion, the perception of body shape of both male and female has also assumed importance regarding marriage selection, not only for themselves but also for their parents as well. Such perceptions about an ideal body, named as body image, are shaped by many variables such as peer evaluations, cultural ideals, social pressures, health lobbyists, and the beauty industry. Broadly speaking, body image can be defined as the perceptions of individuals about their own bodies and ideal human bodies in a particular society (Shoraka et. al., 2019).

Like casteism, the conception of body image is also well acknowledged for its dominant and significant effects on people when it comes to marriage, since a better body image can predict better marriage prospects (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011; Bove & Sobal, 2011; Iram & Muazzam, 2016). Body image refers to a person's observations and feelings regarding his or her body and overall physical appearance (Cash & Henry, 1995). Further, it can be viewed as an estimation of a person's physique and an assessment of how appealing his/her body is in relation to culturally accepted standards of beauty (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011). However, social sciences literature provides ample evidence that the social position of the individuals (e.g, caste, occupation, social class, etc) plays a crucial role in shaping the future prospects of the individuals, particularly in developing nations (Iversen et al., 2019).

Methodology

Study design and participants

An online cross-sectional survey was conducted from June 2022 to August 2022. Participants for this study were selected from Pakistan's higher education institutes and universities. Participants were sent an email with a link (<https://forms.gle/w6sn4Gr5aMyZmxNH9>) to the survey. The same e-link was shared on many public and private universities' social media pages. The study participation in this study was entirely voluntary. Participants' informed consent was obtained

before completing the survey. Respondents might leave the survey at any moment and email the researchers if they had any problems or had trouble answering the questions. The questionnaire was completed by 344 people. The study included participants aged 18 to 25.

Socio-demographic characteristics: To assess the socio-demographic profile of the respondents, we asked questions about gender, educational status, monthly family income, employment status, living area, and family type of the respondents.

Body Image Scale: The authors reviewed the existing scales of body image (more details required). In order to address the cultural context, the researcher finalized seven items to measure body image in Pakistani society. These items are: I like what I look like in pictures; other people consider me good-looking; I am proud of my body; I like what I see when I look in the mirror; I am satisfied with my weight; people of my age like my looks; and I like my height. These items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). This scale showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.794$). The values of inter-item correlations were significant (min.=0.154 – max.=0.566).

Casteism: The authors measured casteism with six item scale. The scale includes: My caste is superior to other castes/*biradaris*; I feel honoured to be a member of my caste/*biradaris*; I want to promote my caste/*biradari*; My caste/*biradari* has better traditional values than other castes; I can only preserve my caste by getting married within my caste/*biradari*, and I believe that I can find a better marriage partner within my caste/*biradari*. The scale had good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.891$). The values of inter-item correlations were highly significant (min.=0.382 – max.=0.790).

Marriage Prospects Scale: The scale of marriage prospects consisted of five items. The items are: I believe that I can find a marriage partner for myself; It is easier for me to find a marriage partner as compared to other girls; My parents will not delay my marriage because of their certain demands; My parents will not have to go long negotiations while finding my marriage partner and My prospect marriage partner will not undergo long negotiations before marriage. Using a Likert scale of five points, these items were scored from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The internal consistency of this scale was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.723$). The inter-item correlation coefficients (min. = 0.086 - max. = 0.730) were also significant.

Findings

Socio-demographic profile of the respondents

This study was conducted with young people aged between 18 to 25 years. Most of the respondents were doing graduation (54.4 per cent) or post-graduation (42.7 per cent). Consequently, more than three-fourths of the respondents were unemployed. The majority of the respondents were female (59.6 per cent), and an

almost equal number of respondents had an unclear family system. The majority of them also belonged to the urban areas of the country. In addition, the study population had almost equal representation of each economic class (Table 1).

Table 1: Inter-Item Correlation Matrix and Cronbach Alpha of Body Image Scale

	BI1	BI2	BI3	BI4	BI5	BI6	BI7
BI1	1.000	.289	.345	.481	.254	.229	.207
BI2	-	1.000	.399	.378	.289	.472	.154
BI3	-	-	1.000	.536	.566	.443	.426
BI4	-	-	-	1.000	.405	.374	.383
BI5	-	-	-	-	1.000	.397	.388
BI6	-	-	-	-	-	1.000	.278
BI7	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.000
Cronbach's Alpha	0.794						

Descriptive results

The authors calculated central tendency, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis measures for three variables, body image, casteism, and marriage prospects, measured on a Likert scale in this study. The respondents' body image was measured using seven items. Each item's average score was greater than 3. This indicates that people agreed with the statements and they valued their bodies highly. According to Byrne and Campbell (1999), the distribution of items is normal if the skewness and kurtosis values are between ± 1.5 . Our findings show that all items were normally distributed because no item had a skewness or kurtosis value greater than ± 1.5 (See Annexure 2).

Casteism was measured using six items on the Likert scale. Six Likert scale items were used to assess casteism. The arithmetic mean value for items 1 to 3 was greater than 3, while the arithmetic mean value for items 4 to 6 was less than 3. This demonstrates that people have mixed feelings about casteism. Because the skewness and kurtosis values were between +1.5 and -1.5, the distribution of all items is normal. For marriage prospects, a five-item Likert scale was developed. The average score for each item was greater than three, indicating that respondents were in agreement about marriage prospects. In addition, the values for skewness and kurtosis were within the normal range (See Annexure 2).

Effect of socio-demographic variables on marriage prospects

Independent sample t-test and one-way ANOVA were performed to see the effect of socio-demographic variables on marriage prospects of the respondents (See Table 2). The results indicate that employment status ($t = -0.128$, $p < .05$), area of living ($t = -0.95$, $p < .05$), type of family system ($t = -0.430$, $p < .05$) and the level of education ($f = 1.491$, $p < .05$) did not have any effect on the marriage prospects of the respondents.

Only the gender of the respondent ($t = -3.11, p < .001$), had a significant effect on the marriage prospects of the respondents. Findings indicate that male respondents ($M = 18.45, SD = 3.43$) had more marriage prospects as compared to female respondents ($M = 17.23, SD = 3.64$).

Table 2: *Inter-Item Correlation Matrix Cronbach's Alpha of Casteism Scale*

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6
C1	1.000	.537	.632	.524	.382	.382
C2	-	1.000	.622	.428	.438	.438
C3	-	-	1.000	.556	.477	.477
C4	-	-	-	1.000	.742	.742
C5	-	-	-	-	1.000	.790
C6	-	-	-	-	-	1.000
Cronbach's Alpha	0.891					

Correlational analysis between the variables

Pearson's r correlation was performed to see the relationship between body image and marriage prospects, and casteism and marriage prospects. The relationship between body image and casteism was reported. Findings indicate that casteism had a statistically significant and positive relationship with marriage prospects ($r = .353, p < .01$) and body image ($r = .125, p < .05$). Moreover, body image had a statistically significant and positive relationship with marriage prospects ($r = .197, p < .01$). The findings reveal that casteism has stronger relationship with marriage prospects as compared to the relationship between body image and marriage prospects.

Table 3: *Inter-Item Correlation Matrix and Cronbach Alpha of Marriage Prospects Scale*

	MP1	MP3	MP4	MP5	MP6
MP1	1.000	.458	.086	.170	.179
MP3	-	1.000	.269	.303	.300
MP4	-	-	1.000	.536	.423
MP5	-	-	-	1.000	.730
MP6	-	-	-	-	1.000
Cronbach's Alpha	0.723				

Linear regression analysis

The authors performed linear regression (Table 4) to see the role of body image and casteism in explaining the variance of marriage prospects of the respondents. Findings show that body image ($\beta = .194, R^2 = .035, F = 13.41, p < .0001$) predicts marriage prospects of the respondents. In model 2, casteism was added along with body image to predict marriage prospects. Results indicate that the casteism ($\beta =$

.334, $p < .001$) and body image ($\beta = .153$, $p < .001$) explain marriage prospects ($R^2 = .143$, $F = 29.51$, $p < .001$) of the respondents. Moreover, casteism is a stronger predictor than body image to explain the marriage prospects of the respondents.

Table 4: *Skewness & Kurtosis of Body Image, Casteism and Marriage Prospects Scale*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
BI1	3.90	.890	-.699	.261
BI2	3.92	.771	-.369	-.185
BI3	3.90	.978	-.541	-.393
BI4	3.86	.937	-.637	.083
BI5	3.51	1.282	-.426	-.973
BI6	3.65	1.033	-.665	.042
BI7	3.90	1.097	-.843	-.071
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
C1	3.12	1.212	-.062	-.862
C2	3.78	1.109	-.727	-.054
C3	3.35	1.186	-.217	-.752
C4	2.76	1.377	.206	-1.186
C5	2.78	1.391	.148	-1.279
C6	2.78	1.391	.148	-1.279
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
MP1	3.68	1.056	-.526	-.328
MP3	3.27	1.032	-.138	-.394
MP4	3.43	1.146	-.425	-.546
MP5	3.48	1.044	-.433	-.377
MP6	3.46	1.029	-.422	-.254

Discussion

We conducted this study to understand the perceived marriage prospects of Pakistani youth using the two unrelated concepts, i.e., body image and casteism. Although the extant literature on the concurrent use of these concepts is very scarce, the constructs of body image and casteism are highly relevant in traditional Pakistani

society. The previous literature on the role of body image shaping the marriage prospects and prospects of life has been replete, but the combined effects of both of these variables have not been assessed yet. The findings of the study are very radical. Statistical results indicated that caste is a more powerful/robust predictor of marriage prospects among adults as compared to their body image. Although the findings showed a positive effect of body image on marriage prospects but caste came out as a stronger predictor.

Keeping in view the role of body image in finding intimate relations and marriage prospects, the findings of our study are consistent with Bakhshi and Baker (2011), Kark and Karnehed (2012), and Ali et al., (2013). Although the findings of the study seem somewhat odd but keeping in view the politics of marriage in Pakistan, such findings look very much logical. Endogamy is a key decisive factor in the Pakistani marriage market (Safdar et al., 2022). This practice has deep socio-political and economic implications. In Pakistan, the other name of caste is "*biradari*". Endogamy is considered a key social practice to keep the *biradari* intact (Hussain, 2005). Marriage within *biradari* is a source of social support, particularly during emergencies, and has important socio-biological significance (Small et al., 2017; Saher, Matloob, and Shabbir, 2020). Secondly, many families do not want to transfer their inherited property to individuals other than their *biradari* (Muhammad, 2011; Safdar et al., 2021). Endogamy provides a suitable way to keep the family property intact (Khan et. al., 2011). Third, the system of endogamy keeps the *biradari* intact, and this practice is perpetuated by political elites so that they can appeal to people for a vote based on *biradari* (Anwar, 2016). *Biradari* also renders bargaining power to its member so that they can utilize their position for personal and collective gains, such as employment of a youth, legal and social support in case of dispute within and outside the *biradari*. These three factors play an important role in keeping the *biradari* intact and this practice reinforces people's belief that their *biradari* is an important contributing factor for their future prospects, particularly their marriage decisions.

Secondly, arranged marriage is considered an important social value in Pakistani society. The decision about match-making is usually taken by the senior members of the family, such as parents or grandparents (Ghazal et al., 2022). As compared to young adults, older people are more conservative. Secondly, their own successful experience of endogamous marriage lends the belief that this is the best way to achieve matrimonial happiness in life. Keeping in view such considerations, the findings of the study are not so much unusual, and they depict the particular marriage pattern of Pakistani society.

Another important finding of the study is that male young adults have reported more prospects of marriage as compared to females. Although compared to the female population, the male population is higher in Pakistan (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022), this finding depicts specific socio-cultural dynamics of the marriage market. The issue of late marriage is growing serious with the passage of time (Ghazal et al.,

2022). Currently, more than twenty million girls in Pakistan have reached their marriage age, but many of them are unable to find a suitable marriage partner. Secondly, men are more worried about their career, so they can take the risk of late marriage, while the prospects of marriage for women become lesser as they cross thirty years of age (Sathar et. al., 1998; Sultan, Ahmad, and Ayub, 2020). However, the marriage prospects of men who cross thirty years age of thirty do not diminish as compared to women.

Findings of this study can be generalized with some caveats. Although both caste and body image appeared as predictors of marriage prospects among young Pakistani adults, another important factor was the socioeconomic status of the parents of the respondents. This is an important finding, keeping in view the sociocultural and structural organization of Pakistani society. In a class-based Pakistani society, the gross socio-economic inequalities also reflect in the institution of marriage as well. So, predicting the marriage prospects of young adults by using structured measures such as body image and casteism cannot be exhaustive. Future research in this regard may involve a detailed qualitative investigation to learn the ropes of marriage prospects among young adults. Future research should focus on delineating the specific situations that prompt the interplay of different factors, such as body image, casteism, gender, and socioeconomic status, in shaping the marriage prospects among youth.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, we can conclude that three factors, i.e., caste, body image, and economic status, are important in predicting the marriage prospects among young adults. However, caste came out as a strong predictor. In a traditional Pakistani society, caste is not just a historical phenomenon, but it contains deep cultural and socio-economic, and socio-psychological ramifications. However, the results of the study could be generalized with some caveats, keeping in view the dynamics of the rapidly changing cultural base of the society due to the proliferation of mass culture and international mobility.

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