The Role of Acculturation in the Body Image Perceptions of Immigrants

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to examine the role of acculturation in the body image perceptions of an immigrant community in Australia, namely, Indian-Australians. Acculturation is the process of change in an individual experiences moving cultures, during which values, attitudes and societal standards of the new culture can be adopted. Body image is a multidimensional construct characterized by perceptions of, attitudes toward, and values about the body. This research builds on existing cross-cultural, body image research by applying a qualitatively assessed and multi-dimensionally constructed perspective of acculturation and utilizing avatars (i.e., digital visual representations of the ‘self’) to understand perceptions.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Body image has been investigated for centuries, however, theorists and practitioners alike are yet to achieve a complete understanding of this complex and multi-dimensional construct. Particularly over the past 50 years, body image research has proliferated in divergent areas of research (Cash 2004) ranging from the social sciences to medical sciences. One of the major areas has been in the area of cross-cultural studies, and the impact ethnicity has upon the development of body image perceptions (e.g., Abrams and Stormer 2002; McCabe, Ricciardelli, Mellor, and Ball 2005; Ogden and Elder 1998; Pompper and Koenig 2004; Sheffield, Tse, and Sofronoff 2005; Tiggesmann and Ruutel 2001). These studies attempted to investigate ethnic variations of the body image construct by comparing and contrasting a Western culture against an ethnic culture. However, many of these studies involved ethnic participants who either reside in a Western country or have had significant exposure to Western values and attitudes. They have failed to take into consideration the possible influence of exposure to, and/or adoption of, Western values and attitudes on their participants’ body image perceptions (e.g., Altabe 1998; Goodman 2002; Ogden and Elder 1998; Pompper and Koenig 2004; Sheffield et al. 2005). Soh, Touyz, and Surgenor (2006) believe that the results of these studies are limited as the role or influence of acculturation to the Western society was not considered.

In this research, body image has been defined as a “multidimensional construct characterized by perceptions of, attitudes toward, and values about the body” (Cash 2004, 216). Acculturation is defined as the process of change in an individual experiences moving cultures (Berry 1990). Values, attitudes and societal standards are adopted within this process, which in many cases may result in a change of an individual’s ethnic identity (Berry 1990). Soh et al. (2006, 55) suggest that the study of the impact that acculturation has on body image will provide a way forward in “teasing out” the relationship between body image concerns and culture.

Body image studies that have attempted to investigate the impact of acculturation (e.g., Ball and Kenardy 2002; Soh et al. 2006) have largely conceptualised it uni-dimensionally and measured it quantitatively. They have assessed the extent or degree of acculturation using proxy measures such as generational status (first-generation or second-generation). In order to achieve a contextual and multi-dimensional understanding of the acculturation experience, Cabassa (2003) believes that existing quantitative measures should be complemented with a qualitative methodology. This will produce a richer picture of what particular areas of a person’s life, including body image perceptions, change, when living in a new culture.

Building on our previous research (Agudera, Freeman, and Hingorani 2007), this research project aims to extend body image research, which so far has predominantly assessed acculturation uni-dimensionally and quantitatively, by utilizing qualitative methods to examine the acculturation experience as a multi-dimensional construct, and avatars, i.e., digital visual representations of the ‘self’, to understand body image perceptions. Specifically, this research has the following objectives:

1. To understand the impact of socio-cultural influences of media, peers and family, on an individual’s perceptions of body image.
2. To investigate generational differences in body image perceptions.
3. To identify any ethnic variations in body image perceptions across two cultures.
4. To investigate the factors that shape the acculturation experience and the impact they have on an individual’s body image perceptions.

A qualitative focus group study was conducted to allow for a contextual and holistic investigation of the relationship between the two complex constructs of body image and acculturation. Discussions in focus groups were guided by the research objectives and centered on perceptions of ‘ideal self’, ‘actual self’, and a ‘typical Australian’. Leading-edge technology was developed to allow focus group participants to first individually create avatars and then interpret them for the group. Generally speaking, avatar-creation is tantamount to a visual projective technique. The creation of avatars facilitated clearer articulation and discussion about body image issues, which might otherwise be unclear or incomplete, given the reliance on participants’ drawing skills, and ability to communicate visually using traditional paper-and-pencil methods. Prior research has demonstrated the effectiveness of visual projective techniques to understand body image issues in a multi-cultural context (Haward 1955; Hayslip Jr., Cooper, Dougherty, and Cook 1997).

Most research on body image issues has focused on women, as does this research. However, to date, there has been little research on body image in the Indian-Australian community, which is growing rapidly (ABS, Australian Social Trends 2003). Hence, this particular immigrant community was selected. Specifically, the focus group sample consisted of females with Anglo and Indian heritages in an Australian context, and from two generations, namely, Generation Y (aged 20-25 years, approximately) and Baby Boomers (aged 43-55 years, approximately).

Generational status is a common proxy variable for assessing acculturation in quantitative research. It is employed under the premise that later generations experience acculturation at a much faster rate, whilst first-generation immigrants tend to maintain and hold fervently on to their ethnic values and attitudes. First-
generation immigrants are those born overseas, second-generation immigrants are those who were born in the host country but their parents were born overseas and third- or greater generation immigrants are those who were born in the host country along with their parents (Valentine 2001). To gain a deeper understanding of the acculturation process, generational status was employed qualitatively by exploring the manner in which first- and second-generation immigrants have experienced acculturation and investigating the extent to which the adoption of Australian attitudes and values has affected the development of body image perceptions across two generations. Therefore, one of the Indian-Australian focus groups consisted of first-generation immigrants, and the other, second-generation immigrants.

By examining two different generations of Indian-Australians, it is likely that some of the differences in body image perceptions might be due to external influences, which are not acculturation-related. To ensure that acculturation-related differences in the Indian generations are clearly captured, inter-generational differences and similarities between Generation Y and Baby Boomer Anglo-Australian groups were studied as a “control”.

Prior cross-generational body image research on Filipino-and Anglo-Australians (Agudera et al. 2007) that did not involve computer-generated avatars found similarities and differences between the various groups. For example, the older Anglo-Australian group felt that the younger generation have become more materialistic and more concerned with themselves but that they were just as concerned with their body image when they were their age. The older Filipino-Australian group believed that because they lived on the very basics in the Philippines and had less affordability and access to consumer items, they were less materialistic and concerned with appearance, fashion and body image than the younger generation.

Findings similar to the Filipino research are expected in this research on Indian-Australians when the data are completely analyzed. However, what has been determined via observation is that unlike the Filipino research, the use of cutting-edge technology to create avatars enabled participants in this research to more completely communicate their perceptions, and focus on issues surrounding body image.

REFERENCES


