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Exploring Psychosocial Effects of Societal Pressure and Expectations on College Girls: A Qualitative Research

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Abstract: *This qualitative study explores the psychosocial effects of societal pressure and expectations on college girls, employing purposive sampling and qualitative interviews discussions. The research aims to understand how societal norms related to academic performance, physical appearance, and social behavior shape their mental health, self-esteem, and identity. Data collected from individual interviews consisting of participants selected for their diverse experiences offer in-depth insights into the challenges and coping strategies of young women in higher education. Findings reveal recurring themes of stress, anxiety, and the impact of cultural and gendered expectations, highlighting the need for targeted support systems to foster resilience and well-being.*

Keywords: Psychological Effects, Societal Pressure, College Girls, Academic Performance, Education

Introduction

Societal expectations and pressures significantly influence individuals' behavior, choices, and mental well-being, particularly among young women. College girls, in the crucial phase of transitioning into adulthood, often find themselves navigating the complexities of these external pressures, which dictate how they should look, act, and succeed. These expectations come from various sources, including family, peers, educational institutions, and cultural norms, creating a challenging environment where academic, social, and personal demands can feel overwhelming.

The psychosocial effects of such pressures are profound, affecting mental health, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships. Understanding how societal expectations shape the experiences of college girls is essential for recognizing the broader impact on their overall well-being.

Societal expectations are the beliefs and norms that a community holds regarding appropriate behavior, roles, and responsibilities of individuals. These expectations shape social interactions, influence individual choices, and define acceptable standards within various contexts, such as family, work, and public life (Durkheim, 1893). At the core of societal expectations are established norms that often dictate appropriate behavior in various contexts, including family life, work, and social interactions.

Societal pressure refers to the external forces exerted by societal expectations that compel individuals to conform to specific norms, values, and behaviors. The dimensions of social pressure include emotional pressure, behavioral pressure, interpersonal pressure, and institutional pressure.

The psychological effects of social expectations on girls can be significant, shaping their mental health and overall well-being. Gender norms often impose pressure on girls to conform to societal expectations regarding behavior, appearance, and roles. This can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and depression, especially during adolescence, a time when gender roles become more rigid.

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Girls experience worse mental health outcomes compared to boys, particularly as they reach adolescence. For instance, girls often feel more pressure to meet societal standards of beauty, behave "appropriately," and excel academically, all while navigating the complexities of relationships and identity. This pressure contributes to higher rates of loneliness, low self-esteem, and mental health issues such as depression, with a notable increase by the age of 15. Furthermore, gender inequalities and social expectations expose girls to heightened risks of violence, coercion, and discrimination, which further affects their mental health (WHO, 2006).

Rationale

The purpose of researching the psychosocial effects of societal expectations and pressure is to understand how external social norms influence individuals' mental health, self-identity, and behavior. This research aims to identify the negative impacts of these pressures and explore ways to promote well-being and resilience in individuals facing societal demands. The advantage of this research is that it helps identify the root causes of mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression. This understanding can guide the development of interventions, support systems, and policies that promote healthier social environments, enhance individual well-being, and reduce harmful pressures on individuals. The reason for conducting this research is to gain a deeper understanding of how societal norms and external demands impact individuals' mental health, behavior, and overall well-being. By exploring these effects, researchers aim to identify harmful patterns, develop strategies to mitigate negative consequences, and promote healthier, more supportive environments that foster emotional resilience and self-acceptance.

Aim of the Research

The aim was to explore the psychosocial effects of societal expectations and pressure on college girls.

Research Questions

1. What is societal pressure in front of you?
2. Can you describe a situation where you felt pressured to conform to societal expectations and how did you handle it?
3. How do social media and societal expectations influence your choices and decisions?
4. Have you experienced feelings of guilt or shame due to not meeting societal expectations? Can you elaborate.
5. Do you feel like societal expectations limit your choices or opportunities? In what ways?
6. Can you describe a situation where you felt like you had to choose between being true to yourself and conforming to societal expectations?
7. How do you think societal expectations impact your mental health and well-being?
8. How do you think societal expectations impact your relationships with family and friends?
9. How do you perceive the alignment or mismatch between your personal values and societal expectations, and what tensions arise from this dynamic?
10. How do societal beauty standards and gender roles influence your self-talk, self-perception and emotional regulation?
11. What role do social media and technology play in reinforcing or challenging societal expectations and internalized messages in you?
12. What adaptive or maladaptive coping strategies do you employ to manage the emotional resonance of societal pressure, and with what consequences for mental health?
13. How do societal expectations (such as academic performance, appearance or social behavior) conflict with your personal beliefs or values? Can you share any experiences where you felt pressured to act against your own beliefs?
14. In what do you find yourself justifying or rationalizing actions that may not alignment with your personal goals, in order to fit in or meet societal standards?
15. How do you feel societal pressures regarding success beauty, or behavior Influence your self- esteem or sense of identity? Can you think of any instance were trying to meet these expectations led to stress, anxiety or other psychosocial effects?

Method

In the present study qualitative research approach was employed. Purposive sampling was used for conducting the research. The participants of the study were those who had psychosocial effects of societal expectations and pressure.

Inclusion Criteria

- Private college students were selected.
- Participants from CS and B. Ed departments were selected.
- Participants were selected who had siblings.
- Participants who had psychosocial effects of societal pressure and expectations.

Exclusion Criteria

- Participants were not selected from psychology department.

Data Collection

The approval for conducting the research, by the department was sought from Research Committee. After receiving ethical and methodological approval for the current research a semi-structured interview protocol. For the development of the interview protocol, the previous literature and theories on the current topic were consulted. They were used as the driving force in the formulation of the interview protocol.

The participants were given informed consent to ensure that they would willingly participate in the study. The participants were assured that their responses would be confidential and would be used solely for research purposes.

The data was collected from the four participants (college students) who fulfilled the inclusion criteria. Moreover, they would be allowed to ask any question regarding the present study. Before the interview, an informed consent form was duly signed. All interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview. As we proceeded with the interview, follow-up questions were asked to gather more details on their experiences. Interviews were recorded.

The time duration of all the interviews ranged from approximately 30-60 minutes. Each recorded interview was then transcribed, removing all identifiable information from the transcripts. All the notes were taken, describing the thoughts, feelings, or assertions we had before, during, and/or after any interview session. These notes helped us to add context to transcribed data, and they also reflected vigilance and alertness during the interview.

Participant Characteristics

The participants with age ranges of 19-22 years undergraduates were selected. Two of them were doing graduation in computer science and two of them were doing graduation in education. Participants experience psychosocial effects of societal pressure and expectations.

Results

After analyzing the data, the following themes were emerged from this research study. Career Aspiration and Academic Pressure, Family Expectations and Pressure, Limitations of Personal Choices, Gender Roles Conformity, Psychological and Emotional Health, and Coping Mechanism.

Theme 1: Career Aspiration and Academic Pressure
Academic Expectations and Performance

Participant 1: "Expectations have entered my life in this way: if someone else has something, people question why I don't. If I have a certain quality, and people expect something from me because of it, it's not necessarily wrong. For example, I am studying computer science, and my mother has expectations that I will earn and contribute. I also try my best—I work and make an effort to meet those expectations".

Participant 2: "I must say that academic expectations can be super overwhelming. Our society places a huge emphasis on achieving excellent grades and securing top positions. It's like, if you're not getting straight A's, you're not good enough."

High Academic Standards

Participant 1: "I haven't faced this situation myself, but I can share the experience of someone else. There was a cousin of mine who went through this. Our family mostly belongs to the Army, so expectations naturally become high. It's like, if everyone in the family is doing well, then you're also expected to be intelligent. This cousin of mine had given the Army test and even made it to ISSB, but he couldn't clear it. He took this failure very hard, constantly thinking about what his family would say and what people would think—especially since his elder brother was already in the Army. This pressure led him to start smoking. He stopped eating properly, stayed awake all night, and spent the entire day lying in bed. I witnessed all of this myself, and it was deeply shocking for me to see him like that."

Participant 2: "I've grown up with incredibly high academic standards. From a young age, I've been taught that academic success is paramount. Parents, teachers, and society emphasize the importance of Scoring top grades."

Career Restrictions

Participant 1: "Social media and societal expectations do have a significant influence. When we start worrying about what the world will think, we often forget what is right and what is wrong. It's not always necessary that what society thinks is correct. In the process of aligning ourselves with societal norms, we often end up compromising our own decisions."

Participant 2: "When I was a child, I was very passionate about becoming a pilot or an air hostess. However, becoming one is not easy—it requires proper education and training. But society views such professions as not respectable or ideal, and because of this mindset, I had to give up on my dream. I couldn't pursue it and make it a reality. In the end, I changed my decision and let go of my dream."

Participant 3: "Be Independent while meeting society expectation, there are many barriers occurs which limit our choices so as it happens to me, then I have decided that I should teach in future because it is the best field for the future generation, so, whatever happened to my dreams, I will have it as a last option."

Theme 2: Family Expectations and Pressure

Impact of Family Values on Personal Choices

Participant 1: "If you have seen some cool girls, It will have an effect. Girls who are broad minded, we are told not to be friend with them, even though our vibes might match with them, even if our heart says that we should sit with them, having meals with them but our parents restrict us that they are not good people."

Participant 2: "I've come to realize that family values significantly influence my personal choices. Growing up in a collectivist culture, I've learned that family honor, reputation, and harmony are prioritized over individual desires. My parents encourage me to pursue medicine or engineering, deemed prestigious and secure, even though my passion lies in social sciences"

Participant 3: "Expectations have entered my life in this way: if someone else has something, people question why I don't. If I have a certain quality, and people expect something from me because of it, it's not necessarily wrong. For example, I am studying computer science, and my mother has expectations that I will earn and contribute. I also try my best—I work and make an effort to meet those expectations.

Participant 4: "I've come to realize that family values significantly influence my personal choices. Growing up in a collectivist culture, I've learned that family honor, reputation, and harmony are prioritized over individual desires. This impact is evident in various aspects of my life, starting with my career choices. My parents encourage me to pursue medicine or engineering, deemed prestigious and secure, even though my passion lies in social sciences.

Parental Expectations

Participant 1: "I am talking about negative expectations, like when one of my cousins, who does knit, expects me to do the same. But this is a negative mindset because, instead of appreciating someone for their efforts, people start looking for flaws in others if they don't do the same."

Participant 2. "My parents, especially, have high expectations from me. They want me to become a doctor or an engineer, just like every other parent. But, honestly, I'm more interested in computer science I feel like I'm constantly battling between fulfilling my own dreams and meeting their expectations Sometimes, it feels like our worth is measured by our grades alone."

Comparison with Siblings and Peers

Participant 1: "In childhood, whenever my cousin got something, I was compared with her. I hated being compared. If I tell someone something serious, I could even hurt them, but I control myself. I become aggressive when someone compares me to others."

Participant 2: "I've been constantly compared to my siblings in various aspects of life. I feel like I'm constantly trying to prove myself, to show that I'm just as capable as my siblings. I've come to realize that comparisons are unfair and unproductive. I'm trying to focus on my own strengths and weaknesses, rather than measuring myself against others."

Participant 3: "I wish my parents would understand that comparisons can be damaging. I wish they would focus on nurturing our individual talents and interests, rather than pitting us against each other."

Participant 4: "There is a lot of comparison. I remember the result of matric, my father was happy that it's very good marks. When my father found out about the result of my class fellow, they got sad and pressurized me, why did not your marks come and I had 900 marks and my friend had 902 marks."

Theme 3: Limitations of personal Choices
Conflicting Personal Choices

Participant 1: "In the process of aligning ourselves with societal norms, we often end up compromising our own decisions. For instance, take the example of a career. When I was a child, I was very passionate about becoming a pilot or an air hostess. But society views such professions as not respectable or ideal, and because of this mindset, I had to give up on my dream. I couldn't pursue it and make it a reality. In the end, I changed my decision and let go of my dream."

Participant 2: "I was very fond of riding a bike, but many people disapprove of it. They ask, "How can you ride a bike?" "The way you sit is so strange." "If you wear jeans, where will your dupatta be?" But I said, "I have a passion for it. I will do it." And I did ride the bike, and I still ride it to this day."

Financial Limitations

Participant 1: "I come from a middle-class family, and my father is not highly educated. My father is a manager in a factory, and there has always been a financial difference between us. But no one justifies that the financial differences between us exist because he sacrificed his own education for his siblings. Because of this, there has been a lot of comparison over time."

Participant 2: "When we recently moved to Lahore, we had to live in a house that, although it seemed acceptable to us, was not as good as others. When other family members visited our house, they started laughing while looking at each other. We had to face this situation a lot."

Theme 4: Gender Roles Conformity
Gender Based Restrictions

Participant 1: I face numerous gender-based restrictions that impact my daily life. These limitations stem from societal norms, cultural expectations, and family values. Restricted movement I need permission from family members to go out, even for educational purposes. I have to return home early, often before sunset. I'm discouraged from interacting with males outside family circles."

Participant 2: "I had a friend who went through a terrible experience. Right in front of her eyes, her uncle murdered her mother, and this incident caused her significant psychological damage. Society's expectations from her were that, as the eldest daughter, she should act as the head of the household. The younger siblings didn't understand, but society still expected her to act as the leader and take care of the other siblings. They didn't consider that she had gone through such trauma and needed time to recover."

Participant 3: "We can't come by our own will that our society is like that, people are like that, parents as you know are epically afraid these days that they will let their daughter go easily. This thing bothers me mostly, why can't we come out."

Participant 4: "About 3-4 years ago, I became interested in starting a YouTube channel where I could share cooking recipes and related content. However, unfortunately, I didn't get permission. Every family has its own rules and regulations, and I wasn't allowed to appear physically on the internet or have my voice shared."

Societal Pressure Faced by Women

Participant 1: "Societal beauty standards have a very negative influence on your self-talk, self-perception, and emotional regulation. If I talk about my relatives or siblings, one of my sisters has trouble getting married just because her complexion is dull."

Participant 2: "As for myself, people have joked about my appearance, saying things that lower my confidence. They say I shouldn't smile showing my teeth, and that I should smile with my mouth closed. When I feel nervous, my skin turns red and black, and people have commented on these many times as well. But I don't take it to heart."

Participant 3: "When it comes to fitness and complexion, people often show reels and other content that define beauty standards for girls. Many girls see this and stop eating properly because they think they need to be thin. But being thin is not necessarily important. I'll admit, I am overweight, but it doesn't affect me. Honestly, I eat what I want because I am my own person."

Participant 4: "In our society, girls face a lot of struggles in every aspect. There is constant comparison between boys and girls, even within families. Sons and daughters are often compared, and girls are told things like, "You can't go out," or "You can't be independent." Boys are given more importance in almost every family matter. I believe girls suffer more because of this."

Theme 5: Psychological and Emotional Health

Distress

Participant 1: "I became so mentally disturbed that I started having anxiety attacks. I remember experiencing shortness of breath and losing my senses. At that time, I couldn't remember anything, and my memory was completely blank. Others had to tell me what I had done, and they said I had reached an extreme point. I would sit and cry, but I couldn't even find a reason to cry."

Participant 2: "Beauty standards and the pressure to conform to traditional notions of beauty can be damaging. We're bombarded with images of flawless skin, perfect features, and slender bodies, leading to body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and depression and anxiety."

Detachment

Participant 1: "Before I was ill, I was very overweight. My weight was around 60-65 kg, and whenever I went somewhere, my aunt or people from outside would say, "Look how fat she is." The next time I went in front of them, I felt ashamed, as if I had done something wrong."

Participant 2: "I lock myself in the washroom for 5-6 hours, but the strange thing is, no one even notices because of my physical health. Due to this, I often spend a lot of time in the washroom. I have stomach ulcers, which is why my eating is almost nonexistent. Most of my time is spent in my room. Earlier, if someone said something hurtful, I would just go to sleep. And when I woke up, it felt like nothing had happened."

Low Self Esteem

Participant 1: "It happens, like, I make you one of my reasons that there are people who are like fine, they have beauty, so compared me to them with others in matter of marriage proposals, like, she is cute, so proposals are only coming for them and not for me, so they said; my dear, do something, do it for your skin, that's why it's done, it's like."

Participant 2: "We're expected to excel in school, secure top grades, and gain admission to prestigious universities. The fear of failure is palpable, and the pressure to perform can lead to burnout and mental health."

Theme 6: Coping Mechanism
Religious Reliance
Participant 1: "I used to pray a lot. Then I realized that He does show the right path, but He doesn't grant the ability to walk on it. Because the prayer I made was only asking to see the path, not the strength to follow it. When I pray, I cry without any specific reason, asking Him to forgive my sins and grant me the ability to fulfill my parents' hopes."

Participant 2: "Recently, something happened to me that I won't share in detail, but I will say that it had a significant impact on me. It pushed me into deep depression, and I felt completely alone with no one to share my feelings with. Then, I decided to turn to Almighty and pour my heart out to Him."

Empowering Inner Strength
Participant 1: "I used to be very stubborn. Earlier, I would get upset over small things, either I would get angry and go to sleep or hide away. But now, I don't care anymore. Whatever happens, let it happen— even if things go to an extreme, I don't feel affected. Literally, a few days ago, there was a huge fight between my two brothers. My mom and sister were crying, and I was just sitting quietly, watching and using my phone. I've become like this, and I don't even know why."

Participant 2: "I had become rebellious, and my life was heading in a very negative direction. Then, I reflected on my life and realized that at 22 years old, I felt like I had wasted all those years. I decided to change my approach: to live independently but maintain relationships with others, though not so deeply that someone's words could hurt me or I could unintentionally hurt someone else."

Participant 3: "It's essential to acknowledge the impact of societal pressure on our mental health. We need to create a safe, supportive environment where girls feel comfortable discussing their struggles and seeking help."

Table 1
Frequency Table

Subthemes	P1	P2	P3	P4
Major Theme 1: Career Aspiration and Academic Pressure				
Academic Expectations and Performance	–	–		
High Academic Standards	–	–		
Career Restrictions	–	–	–	
Major Theme 2: Family Expectations and Pressure				
Impact of Family Values on Personal Choices	–	–	–	–
Parental expectations	–	–		
Comparison with Siblings and Peers	–	–	–	–
Major Theme 3: Limitations of personal Choices				
Conflicting Personal Choices	–	–		
Financial Limitations	–	–		
Major Theme 4: Gender Roles Conformity				
Gender Based Restrictions	–	–	–	–
Societal Pressure Faced by Women	–	–	–	–
Major Theme 5: Psychological and Emotional Health				
Distress	–	–		
Detachment	–	–		
Low Self Esteem	–	–		
Major Theme 6: Coping Mechanism				
Religious Reliance	–	–		
Empowering Inner Strength	–	–	–	

Note. P1,P2,P3,P4= Participant 1,2,3,4

Discussion

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers valuable insights into how career aspirations and academic pressure intersect with intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. When applied to career aspirations, Self-Determination Theory emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in shaping individuals' career goals. If students or young adults feel they have control over their career choices and are supported in developing their skills (competence), they are more likely to pursue careers that align with their intrinsic interests, leading to greater satisfaction and long-term fulfillment. However, when career aspirations are driven solely by external expectations—such as societal norms or parental pressure—students may feel less autonomous, potentially leading to disengagement and burnout.

Moneva and Moncada (2020) studying that parental pressure is the drive that parents put on their children to achieve a goal. On one hand, student's self-efficacy is the belief of the students that they can do successfully a task whatever it is. On the other hand, in terms of student's self-efficacy, they reported that they can always handle in solving difficult problems if they try hard enough. However, they do not have enough self-efficacy when it comes to dealing with unexpected events. It was also revealed that the student's self-efficacy is high when it comes in doing a task in school.

Tao et al. (2024) aimed to investigate the relationship between parental educational expectations and adolescent mental health problems, with academic pressure as a moderating variable. Parental educational expectations had a close relationship with adolescents' mental health problems, and academic pressure moderated this relationship. For those adolescents with high levels of academic pressure, the association between high parental educational expectations and mental health problems became stronger. On the contrary, for those adolescents with low levels of academic pressure, the association between high parental educational expectations and mental health problems became weaker.

Kamyab and Hoseinzadeh (2023) studied about Identity and Self-Perception, Interpersonal Relationships, and Mental Health and Well-Being. Participants reported significant pressure from societal beauty standards, gender roles, and traditional social expectations, impacting their self-esteem, career choices, and social roles. Family dynamics, romantic relationships, and peer influences further complicated their decision-making processes. The pressure to meet societal standards also led to considerable stress, anxiety, and challenges in emotional regulation. Women employed various coping strategies, including resilience, support systems, and self-care practices, to manage these pressures.

The findings underscore the profound influence of social expectations on women's psychological well-being and personal choices. These expectations create significant internal and external conflicts, affecting women's identities, relationships, and mental health. The study highlights the need for supportive interventions and societal changes to promote gender equity and empower women to make autonomous decisions. Future research should expand on these findings with larger, more diverse samples and explore the intersectionality of various social identities.

Iwamoto et al. (2024) studied on nuanced sociocultural factors influence college women's health. Feminine norms, or the beliefs and expectations of what it means to be a woman, is one important factor that may help explain psychological distress. Emerging research has found that conformity to feminine norms is significantly associated with several health outcomes including substance use and eating disorder symptomatology. Guided by the gender role strain paradigm, we examined the role of conformity to feminine norms on psychological distress among college women.

Kabat-Zinn (2003) studied on the effects of mindfulness on stress reduction. This study investigated the effects of mindfulness on stress reduction in college students. The study found that participants who practiced mindfulness experienced significant reductions in stress and anxiety. The study also found that mindfulness was associated with increased self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-compassion.

Limitations

- There was classroom distraction during a couple of interviews.
- The participants were recruited from only one institute and couldn't explore any other institute for data collection.
- The participants were females only.

Suggestions and Future Implications

- The research implications for this research are that for future research the sample should be large to have more insight into the issue, and it should be equal to equally generalize the issue.
- Promote awareness campaigns to challenge stereotypes and encourage diverse representations of girls in media and society.
- Encourage parental and peer education to reduce harmful comparisons and emphasize individual strengths.
- Advocate for policies addressing gender inequality and harmful societal norms to create long-term cultural change.

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