

## Gender Differences in the Salient Identities of Adolescents

### Abstract

*The study examined gender differences in the salient identities of adolescents. It was expected that adolescent boys will score high on collective, social and personal identity whereas adolescent girls would score high on relational and physical identity. A purposive convenient sample of 100 adolescents with a distribution of 50 boys and 50 girls with an age range of 13-16years was drawn from two private schools. Aspect of salient identity questionnaire (Cheek, Smith & Tropp, 2002) was administered to measure the personal, social, collective and relational identities and figure rating scale (Stunkard, 1983) was used to investigate physical identity of adolescents. MANOVA was used to see the effect of adolescents' gender on salient identities. Results indicated significant effect of gender on salient identities of adolescents. Girls significantly scored higher on relational identity whereas boys significantly scored higher on collective identity and were also significantly dissatisfied with their physical identity. Results also indicated that social identity and personal identity is equally important for both adolescent boys and girls. This study has important implications for developmental psychologists, educationists, parents and adolescents.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Salient, Identity, Adolescents.

### INTRODUCTION

Human beings spend most of their time in knowing themselves. Identity formation is

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**Ms. Noor-ul-Ain**

GC University, Lahore

**Dr. Syeda Salma Hasan**

Assistant Professor

Department of Psychology, GC University, Lahore.

the continuous process of life which goes from birth to death. It neither begins nor ends in adolescence (Santrock, 2002). Adolescence is an exciting period of life and involves the first significant transformation of the individuals' sense of self at a time when they are intellectually able to understand the reason of vital changes (Steinberg, 1996). In adolescence, identity specially related to physical, social, cognitive, development advance to the point at which they can synthesize their childhood identity (Santrock, 2002). Erikson (1968) considers adolescence as a central period to search for identity as well as to face the crisis in this regard. He considered identity as a "psychological moratorium" "a gap between the security of childhood and autonomy of adulthood" (as cited in Santrock, 2002, p.382).

Identity is the general picture that one has about oneself (Santrock, 2002). According to Tajfel (1974), identity is all about the roles and group categories which are personally meaningful to the individuals. According to social psychologist, Deaux (1993) each one of us have "packages" of our own identity, in terms of both the categories that are important to us and the meaning that we attach to others.

An individual defines himself or herself in different ways. Identity information involves how we process information about society and how we remember and evaluate this information about others and ourselves. Our self-schemas include not only the schemas of our current self but also the possible selves (Myers, 1996). From sociological perspective, it involves all the meanings that are related to oneself based on gender identification. In turn, these meanings help to engage in gender related behavior (Burke, 1980) and also influence other aspects of identity. Identity is the self-portrait composed of many components such as physical, personal, social and relational and collective identities.

A Salient identity of adolescents' is physical identity as they experience many physical changes in this developmental phase of life. It deals with person's own body image. Females are more conscious and concerned about their body figure than boys (Pliner, Chaiken, & Flett, 1990). Specifically, the Western society emphasizes slim body for women; average and muscular body type for men is considered as an "ideal" (Sheffield, Tse, & Soffnoff, 2005). Obesity is a stigma for teenage girls rather than for boys. It has been observed that obese girls receive more peer rejection. Similarly, Phan and Tylka (2006) found that Asian women are susceptible to pressure from their community to reach thin ideal; since these women see their bodies in the light of community standards for ideal figure, and if they do not reach

ideal body shape, they are afraid that this would negatively affect their relationship with their loved ones. However, since these socially endorsed ideals, especially for women, are so difficult if not impossible to achieve. When they do not achieve western ideal of beauty, they might develop dissatisfaction with their bodies (Cash, 2002). On the other hand Shepeliak (2006) found that women are more satisfied with their upper torso than men. Regarding the ideal body image of men Fallon and Rozin (1985) indicated slight discrepancy between their current and ideal body image. Men prefer to have larger and broader body shape.

Defining “Who I am” in terms of personal attributes is a personal identity. It defines an individual in terms of personal traits such as optimistic, pessimistic, friendly, hostile, and polite and so on. It is the personal identity which makes us unique individuals. According to Bem sex role inventory (1974), the traits of males are aggressive, ambitious, analytic, athletics, assertive, competitive, dominant, self-reliant and so on whereas traits of females are affectionate, cheerful, loyal, sympathetic, gentle, sensitive, warm to the needs of others (Limpman-Bluman, 1988., Rosener, 1990). A person with a masculine identity is expected to behave in a more domineering, competing, and an independent way. It is not the behavior which is important but the meanings and value to those behaviors (Ashmore, Del Boca, & Wholers, 1986).

Human beings also highly value their Social identity the “We” aspect of self-concept. It is the part of the answer to “who am I?” that comes from our group membership, for instance, our race, religion, nationality, caste, academic major and so forth. It is the circle that includes “us” and excludes “them”. We value our own groups and this enhances our social selves (Tajfel,1981). Self-concept is a major focus of social psychologists because it helps to organize our social behavior. Studies indicate that not only genetics of an individual helps to develop a unique personality and self-concept, but social experiences also play an important role in reshaping of an identity. Through social identity we can explore the roles we play, the social identities we form, the comparison we make with others, our success and failures, the surrounding culture and how other people judge us (Myers, 1996). Social identity has different types; however, these identities are interrelated and often take the characteristics of each other. Brewer and Gardner (1996) postulated two different forms of social identity, i.e., collective identity and relational identity.

‘Collectivistic identity’ involves depersonalized relationship with others by virtue of

common membership in a symbolic group. Collective identities do not require interpersonal knowledge or interaction but rely on shared symbols and cognitive representations of the group as a unit of personal relationship within the group for instance Muslims, Asians, etc (Etzioni, 1968; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). In contrast, 'relational identity' is personalized; incorporated dyadic relationship between self and closer one's. Women are more likely to share rewards when they interact with others than men and they may sacrifice themselves in order to help others (Leventhal & Anderson, 1970; Major & Deaux, 1982).

Previous literature regarding social self has indicated that men are more social than women. Maddux and Brewer (2005) reported that women are more "relationally interdependent" whereas men are more "Collectively interdependent" and these differences in self definition are associated with gender differences in motivation, emotions, cognitions, and social decision making. Gilligan (1990) was one of the psychologists who views that women and girls define themselves as responsible and caring for others and themselves. Kashmia and Hardie (2000) study found that women are higher on relational identity than men. On the other hand Sandu and Tung (2006) does not support the extensive previous literature that Indian girls identity is affected by their husband's and family.

A lot of research work has been done in west on physical, personal, social, collective and relational identities of adolescents and there is a need to address the gender differences in salient identities of adolescents with reference to Pakistani culture. Keeping in view the previous literature the following hypotheses were formulated.

### **Hypotheses**

1. Adolescent girls would be more conscious about their physical identity than adolescent boys.
2. Adolescent boys would score high on collective identity, social identity and personal identity than adolescent girls.
3. Adolescent girls would score high on relational identity than adolescent boys.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Sample**

Sample of the study consisted of 100 adolescents with an equal distribution

of boys and girls; age range of adolescents was 13-16 years. These adolescents were selected from two different educational institutions.

**Table 1:**

Demographic characteristics of girls n= 50 and boys n=50

Variables	Boys	Girls
<b>Age</b>		
13 years	9 (18%)	18(36%)
14 years	24 (48%)	24 (48%)
15 years	12 (24%)	7 (14%)
16 years	5 (10%)	1 (2%)
<b>Grade</b>		
IX	33 (66%)	32 (64%)
X	17 (34%)	18 (36%)
<b>Family System</b>		
Nuclear	19 (38%)	29 (58%)
Joint	27 (54%)	17 (34%)
Single	4 (8%)	4 (8%)

**Instruments:**

1. *Aspects of Salient Identity Questionnaire* (AIQ IV; Cheek, Smith, & Tropp, 2002). It was used for measuring different salient identities of adolescents. It consisted of 45 items. AIQ-IV subscales measuring personal, social, relational, and collective identity. Personal identity subscale includes the items such as “My personal goals and hopes for the future”, “My feeling of being a unique person being

distinct from others". Social identity subscale consists of items such as "My reputation what others think of me" "the ways the other people react to what I say and do". Relational identity subscale includes items for instance "having close bond with others" "being a good friend to those I really care about" and collective identity includes items such as "My religion", "Being a part of many generations of my family", and "My feeling of belonging to my community". Higher the score the more salient the identity on these subscales. The responses were elicited on 5-point Likert scale. Coefficient alpha reliability of the scale was .78. Test retest reliability with three-week interval was .74.

2. *Figure Rating Scale* (Stunkard, 1983). It was used for measuring physical identity. It consists of nine figures of male and females. Subjects selected the figure, which was closely related of their own current figure. The scale also indicated the level of dissatisfaction with their current figure scale ranging from 1 to 9, with 1 being the thinnest body type and 9 being the largest, most obese type. Body dissatisfaction was calculated by subtracting ideal body figure from current body figure.

### **Pilot Study**

Pilot study was conducted on 10 adolescents (5 boys and 5 girls) to identify the difficult items in a questionnaire and total time taken by the subjects for the completion of questionnaire.

### **Procedure**

Prior to data collection permission was taken from the institutions. The data was collected from 50 girls and 50 boys from two different institutions. Purposive convenient sampling technique was used for drawing the sample. Standardized scales measuring different dimensions of identities were administered. The meanings of items were also explained to the respondents. Scoring was done with the help of scoring key. Independent group design was followed in this study. The participants cooperated well in this study.

### **Statistical analysis**

- Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used for measuring the effect of gender on the salience of identities.

- Graphic representation indicating means of salient identities of adolescent girls and boys

**RESULTS**

**Figure 1.1**

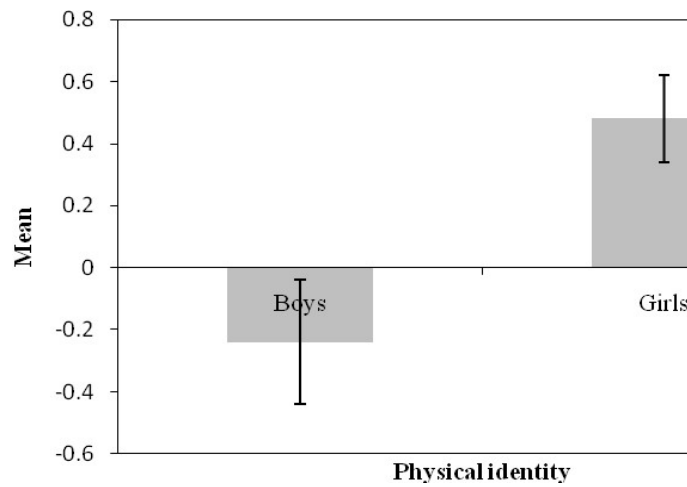


Figure shows gender differences in terms of satisfaction with figure

**Figure 1.2**

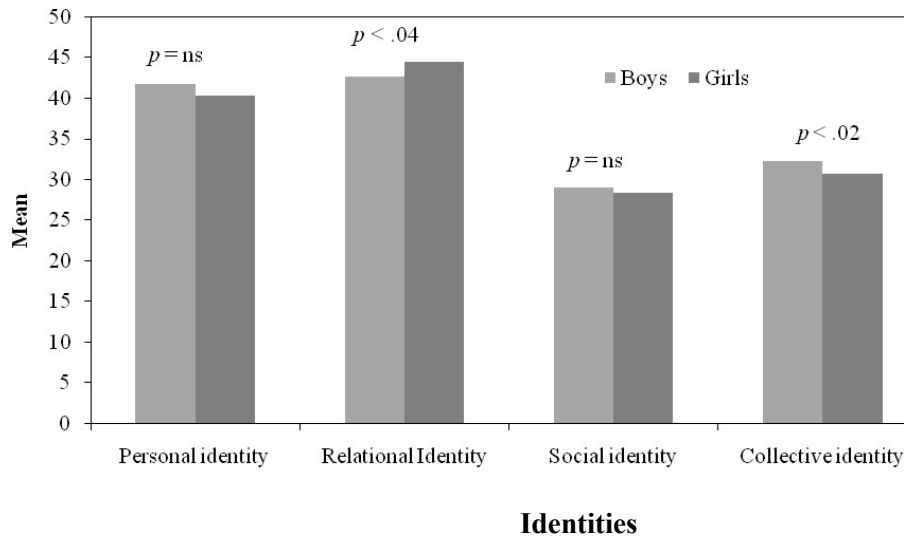


Figure shows gender differences in terms of different dimensions of identity

**Table 2**

Variables	Groups	N	M	SD	F(1,98)	p	CI 95%	
							LL-UL	$\eta^2$
<b>Physical Identity</b>	Boys	50	-.2400	1.42	8.605	.004**	-.124-.364	.081
	Girls	50	.4800	.99				
<b>Personal Identity</b>	Boys	50	41.66	4.23	2.326	.130 <sup>ns</sup>	40.02-41.87	.023
	Girls	50	40.24	5.04				
<b>Social Identity</b>	Boys	50	28.92	3.33	.702	.404 <sup>ns</sup>	27.91-29.33	.007
	Girls	50	28.32	3.81				
<b>Relational Identity</b>	Boys	50	42.66	4.15	4.163	.044*	42.68-44.35	.041
	Girls	50	44.38	4.27				
<b>Collective Identity</b>	Boys	50	32.18	3.49	5.099	.026*	30.69-32.08	.049
	Girls	50	30.60	3.49				

Significant Differences between boys and girls in terms of Physical, Relational and Collective Identity.

*df=98, p<.05\*, p<.01\*\**

Manova Analysis indicates that boys ( $M = -.24$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ) scored low than girls ( $M = .48$ ,  $SD = .99$ ) on Physical identity,  $F(1, 98)$ ,  $p < .01$ . Girls ( $M = 44.38$ ,  $SD = 4.27$ ) significantly score high than boys ( $M = 42.55$ ,  $SD = 4.15$ ) on relational identity,  $F(1, 98)$ ,  $p < .05$ . Boys ( $M = 32.18$ ,  $SD = 3.49$ ) significantly scored high on collective identity,  $F(1, 98)$ ,  $p < .05$ , compared to girls ( $M = 30.60$ ,  $SD = 3.49$ ). Boys and girls do not differ significantly in terms of personal identity and social identity.

## DISCUSSION

The study was carried out to explore gender differences in salient identities of the adolescents. Adolescence is a critical period in which adolescents try to understand themselves as a separate individual. It has been observed that adolescents explore

many identities and they identify themselves with various groups and some adolescents define themselves by their personal attributes i.e., “who they are?” Previous literature has shown gender differences in terms of physical identity, social, relational, and collective identity.

Findings of our study indicated that boys are significantly dissatisfied with their physical identity than girls. They perceive more discrepancy between their current figure and ideal one that is how they aspire to look like. The findings contradict with the extensive previous literature regarding gender differences in physical identity. Most of the studies have indicated that adolescent girls are more dissatisfied with their appearance and they invest more energy and time to achieve their ideal figure perception. Women are more likely to be conscious and concerned about their body figure than men (Pliner, Chaiken, & Flett, 1990). Findings also contradict with Phan and Tylka (2006) study which reported that Asian women are susceptible to pressure from their community to reach thin ideal; since these women see their bodies in relationship to their community, and if they do not reach ideal body shape, they are afraid that not having an ideal body shape can negatively affect their relationships with the loved ones.

Prevos (2005) also reported that women are dissatisfied with their current figure, as they perceive it broader than their ideal one. On the other hand, our study has indicated that adolescents’ boys are more dissatisfied with their current figure. One reason perhaps could be that Pakistani adolescent boys want to look stronger, muscular and aspire to have a strong body built than to have a fragile and weak body posture. The adolescents boys included in our sample also had less muscular bodies and therefore they showed more dissatisfaction with their present body image. Our findings strongly support Fallon and Rozin (1985) study which indicate that ideal body figure for boys are muscular and they perceive more discrepancy between their current and ideal figure and it also supports Shepeliak (2006) that girls are more satisfied with their upper torso than boys. The findings of our study indicates the changing trends regarding the physical identity that nowadays boys have also become conscious about their looks and physique whereas teenage girls have always been sensitive about their physical identity.

Secondly, findings of present study have indicated no significant gender differences in personal identity. Keeping in view the findings, we can say that adolescent boys and girls perceive themselves as unique people distinct from others and they are

equally satisfied with their personal evaluation of their private self about how they define themselves as “who they are”. This study indicated that for both adolescents girls and boys their personal schemas, attributes, future aspirations, their emotions, feelings, thoughts and ideas, their dreams, their fears and anxieties are equally meaningful for them and effect their identity as “who am I ?”.

Thirdly, findings show no significant gender difference on social identity of adolescent boys and girls. The findings strongly support Tajfel (1981) that we use group membership to define our social selves. Findings of our study indicated no significant gender differences in terms of social identity of adolescents. This shows that social identity is equally important for both adolescent boys and girls. We can say that adolescent boys and girls are concerned the way the people react to their talk and what impression they leave on them. From the results we can infer that their identification with their group enhances their social self-esteem, pride, and self worth. This thing may lead to more positive appraisal of their group identity. In short, membership with a group provides adolescents a sense of belongingness and raises their self-esteem.

Fourthly, findings have shown significant gender differences in terms of relational identity in adolescents. Findings have indicated that relational identity occupies a more significant place in the lives of girls than boys. Findings support Helgeson (2005) point of view that females invest energies to maintain and strengthens their intimate and affiliative bonds. The possible reason for scoring high on relational identity of women could be that they are raised in a way to depend on others and try to secure themselves by relating and showing compliance to their significant others. The findings support Gilligan (1990) that girls are caring about themselves and others. On the basis of our findings we can say that girls value their connectedness with their significant others parents, siblings and friends. In an Asian culture, it has been observed that women are supposed to take care of their families and therefore building and strengthening healthy relationships are more meaningful to them.

Lastly, results have indicated significant gender differences in terms of collective identity. For adolescents’ boys collective identity is more significant. Previous studies support our findings as they reported that boys are high on collective identity, and associate themselves strongly with different groups. Previous studies significantly correlate with the current study findings on the collective aspects of identity. Brewer and Gardner (1996) reported that relational self is more important

for women and collective self is more important for men. The findings also support Maddux and Brewer (2005) that men are “collectively interdependent”. On the basis of our findings we can say that boys give more importance to their race, religion, ethnic background, language, regional accent, and to their citizenship as compared to girls. The reason behind such findings is that Pakistani culture is a collectivistic culture in which an individual defines himself with reference to his collective identity.

## **CONCLUSION**

On the basis of our findings we can conclude:

1. Adolescent boys and girls do not differ significantly in terms of personal and social identity. We can say social and personal identities are equally important for both adolescents’ boys and girls.
2. Significant gender differences were observed in terms of physical identity, relational identity and collective identity of adolescents. Adolescent boys are significantly dissatisfied with their Physical identity. For adolescents girls’ relational identity is more important than adolescent boys. Adolescent boys scored high on collective identity which indicates that collective identity has significant value in the life of adolescent boys as compared to adolescents’ girls.

In sum, adolescence is a period in which an individual gets complete picture of one’s personality by exploring salient identities. Family and culture play an important role in understanding of “who am I?”

## **Limitations**

- Sample was restricted to only two public institutions
- Only adolescents of 13-16 years were included in the study
- Adolescents in the study belonged to urban areas

## **Suggestions:**

- Comparison in terms of family system and urban and rural area adolescents’ girls and boys can give clearer picture of adolescents’ identities.

- Comparison of salient identities of early, middle, and late adolescents can portray more informative picture.

### **Implications of the study:**

Salient identities of adolescents have always been an important area of investigation for developmental psychologists. Since decades ago, Hall (1891) described the adolescents as a period of storm and stress. Erikson (1968) has given very comprehensive view of identity formation in adolescence. Adolescent girls and boys both experience pubertal changes and they become conscious about their physical appearance. Society assigns them different roles which to some extent develop a sense of “self”. The identity issues have been widely investigated in Western culture context. Very scarce research is being done regarding the salient identities of adolescents’ in our culture. Therefore, this study could be helpful for the social psychologists, parents, and adolescents’ in providing information about the salient identities of adolescents. This study portrays a very surprising picture regarding salient identities of Pakistani adolescents which contradicts with the findings of the western studies on physical and personal identities of the adolescents.

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