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A Call to Prayer: A Cross-Cultural Examination of Religious Faith, Modesty, and Body Image

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Heidi Woofenden recently graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology. This article is an abridged version of her honors thesis, completed under the mentorship of Dr. Teresa King.
A Call to Prayer: A Cross-Cultural Examination of Religious Faith, Modesty, and Body Image

HEIDI WOOFENDEN

Body image, a multidimensional construct encompassing the perception and evaluation of appearance, was examined in connection with religious faith and modesty of dress in a sample of 291 Jordanian and 189 American women university students. Participants completed the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire-Appearance Scales, the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire, and a modesty scale. As hypothesized, Jordanians reported more favorable body image evaluations, greater religious faith, and greater modesty than Americans. Also, religious faith was positively correlated with better body image for both groups. Although religious faith and modesty were weak predictors of better body image, culture was found to be the overwhelming predictor. Results suggest that Jordanian culture, and to a lesser degree religious faith (particularly Islam), are potentially protective against negative body image.

Introduction
Although every human has an identity and a body to complement it, not every human experiences this body the same way, nor experiences the same influences on their body image. Culture has been shown to have great influence on body perceptions and body image (Akiba, 1998; Mahmud and Crittenden, 2007; Nasser, 1986), and specific aspects of culture, such as religion, are thought to buffer against body dissatisfaction and more serious disorders associated with it (Homan & Boyatzis, 2010; Joughin, Crisp, Halck, & Humphrey, 1992; Kim, 2006; Mahoney, et al., 2005; Smith, Hardman, Richards, & Fischer, 2003).

Although it is at first glance a superficial construct, body image affects most (if not all) aspects of human experience, including emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and relationships (Pruzinsky & Cash, 2004). Those suffering from body dissatisfaction or body disturbance may experience reduced functioning in these areas or even total loss of control, as in the case of eating disorders. Scholars increasingly agree that body image embodies so much more than its most basic sense, a person’s perception and evaluation of their physical appearance (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2004). Defining it can be difficult because of its multifaceted nature. According to Thompson (1996), so many terms are used to define the different dimensions that they inevitably get used interchangeably when perhaps they should not.
Over the years, a great deal of body image research has been conducted in the West, and generally body satisfaction has gone down over time, plummeting for women (Cash, 2004). So common is body dissatisfaction in modern women of Western cultures, researchers have termed it “normative discontent” (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985). This growing increase in body dissatisfaction is often attributed to the “thin ideal,” or the tall, extremely slender but large-breasted woman of Western media (Pokrywka, 2006; Ruggiero et al., 2000; Williams, et al., 2006). Research has shown that Western acculturation and exposure to Western media negatively influence body image (Apter & Shah, 1994; Mussap, 2009a) and encourage disordered eating (Berry, 1997; Dolan, 1991; Lake, Staiger, & Glowinski, 2000; Nasser, 1986). For example, a meta-analysis conducted by Groesz, Levine, and Murnen (2002) found that women’s body satisfaction decreased significantly after viewing thin models as opposed to average or overweight models or control images.

Body image concerns have been linked to poor self-esteem, anxiety, depression, sexual dissatisfaction, dysfunctional eating and exercise behaviors, and generally unhealthy behavior patterns that can develop into eating disorders and other negative coping strategies (Gardner, 2004; Jefferson & Stake, 2009; Rand, Resnick, & Seldman, 1997; Stice, 2004). Negative body image is in fact a strong predictor of eating disorders (Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983; Stice, 2004; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994; Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2004), and body dissatisfaction is considered the “most immediate or proximal antecedent to the development of anorexia nervosa” (Gardner, 2004, pg. 295). Thus, body image is an important research area in the West, and increasingly so in other parts of the world as Western media and influence become more prevalent.

Although research on non-Western body image could greatly benefit from expansion, it generally shows that individuals from non-Western cultures have better body image than those from Western cultures (Akiba, 1998; Barak, Sirota, Tessler, Achiron, and Lampl, 1994; Mahmud and Crittenden, 2007; Nasser, 1986). In an extensive survey of 800 Jordanian women of all ages (18-73 years), Madanat and colleagues (2011) discovered that, in contrast to Western women who strive to be thin, Jordanian women simply want a “normal” body size. Although a large percentage (66.1) desired to lose weight, the majority of these participants fell within the overweight or obese ranges. Furthermore, 12.7% of the overweight and obese participants actually wanted to gain weight.

Islam stresses acceptance of one’s body and de-emphasizes appearance, attributing the most importance to outward actions (Ahmad, Waller, & Verduyn, 1994). Yet it also teaches that Allah commands his followers to take care of the body that he has given them (Mahmud & Crittenden, 2007; Odoms-Young, 2008). Research generally shows the impact of religion—and especially Islam—on body image to be positive (Dunkel, Davidson, & Qurashi, 2010; Kim, 2006; Levin, 1987, 1994; Mahoney et al., 2005; Mussap, 2009a, 2009b; Strawbridge, Cohen, Shema, & Kaplan, 1997). Religious people tend to judge themselves and others based on spiritual characteristics rather than physical ones (Graybill & Arthur, 1999; Nelson, 2009; Odoms-Young, 2008). They also may feel less pressure to meet societal appearance and weight ideals if they feel that they are living a rewarding life, which includes adequately participating in religious activities.

Islam also holds modesty for women highly important. Traditional Islam mandates that only the face and hands should be visible when in public (Winter & Williams, 2002). Such modesty often takes the form of long, loose-fitting clothing (e.g. jilbab dress or salwar-kameez pant suit) and a hijab head covering to conceal the hair and ears. Research confirms that many Muslim women believe their religion and modesty bolster their body image (Bigger, 2006; Droogsma, 2007; Odoms-Young, 2008). According to those interviewed by Odoms-Young (2008), “by covering they were treated with more respect and viewed in a less sexual manner” (pg. 2581). One woman went as far to say “you protect yourself by cover” (p. 2579).

It is a common Western conception that modest dress on the part of Muslim women is simply a mechanism of sexist oppression (Cloud, 2004; Droogsma, 2007; Dunkel et al., 2010; El Guindi, 1999). Although this may be the case for some, most others seem to appreciate the relative safety and anonymity such coverage affords them, and would even go as far as to argue that the Western female custom of dressing (to Easterners) provocatively and constantly comparing oneself to others when in public is much more oppressive than covering up to control who sees “your beauty” (Bigger, 2006). “A woman who wears a hijab can be active and engaged, educated and professional” (Bigger, 2006, p. 219). In other words, a hijab does not signify weakness or repression.

Current Study
The purpose of the current study was to compare university women from Jordan and the United States on strength of religious faith, modesty, and body image. This age group is especially relevant for body image research because it is at high risk for eating disorders (Rand, Resnick, & Seldman, 1997). It was hypothesized that greater religious faith and modesty would be associated with and predict better body image,
especially for Jordanians. Because Middle Eastern cultures tend to be more conservative and religiously oriented than Western cultures, it was predicted that Jordanians would have greater religious faith and modesty than Americans, leading to greater body image satisfaction for Jordanians.

METHOD

Participants
The Jordanians \( (N = 291) \) ranged in age from 18 to 43 years \( (m = 21.45) \). Body mass indexes (BMIs) ranged from 13.71 to 58.92, averaging 21.67. The vast majority (91.4%) reported their nationality as Jordanian, with the small minority (8.6%) reporting being Palestinian, Omani, Israeli, Qatari, Kuwaiti, Bahraini, Egyptian, or Yemeni. Of those that reported their religion, the overwhelming majority (97%) were Muslim, while a very small minority (1.7%) reported being Christian or Hindu (0.2%).

The Americans \( (N = 189) \) ranged in age from 18 to 63 years \( (m = 19.95) \), and BMIs ranged from 16.3 to 50.02, averaging 23.63. The vast majority (78%) reported being Caucasian, followed by 5.4% African American, 5% Latin American, 4.6% Cape Verdean, 4.6% Other (including bi-racial), 1.5% Asian American, and 0.8% Native American. Christianity was the dominant religion (74.8%) followed by “spiritual but no religious affiliation” (10%), agnostic (5.2%), atheist (4.8%), “other” (3.5%; several wrote in Unitarian Universalist), and Jewish (0.9%).

Based on the reported education level of participants’ parents, overall both cultural samples appeared to be from middle to upper socioeconomic status.

Procedure
Data were collected at Yarmouk University located in Irbid, Jordan during July 2009 and at Bridgewater State University from September 2009 to November 2010.

Questionnaire packets were distributed within various classrooms at Yarmouk University. Several classes were visited per day over a one-week span, and most (if not all) students from each class consented (i.e. signed the informed consent form) and completed the questionnaire. To ensure accuracy, all Jordanian questionnaires were translated into Arabic and cross-checked by a second native Jordanian translator before copying and distribution. Any items (such as certain demographics) requiring back-translation into English were transcribed by a third native Jordanian in the United States.

American university students were recruited through postings in Bridgewater State University’s psychology department. Data were collected starting in the spring semester of 2009, and ending in the fall semester of 2010 in the psychology research lab. Participants received either course credit for Introductory Psychology or extra credit for other courses.

Approval to conduct this study was granted by Bridgewater State University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Yarmouk University did not have an IRB, but its president granted permission to collect data there. All participants signed an informed consent form and were treated with full respect, confidentiality, and in accordance with the guidelines established by the American Psychological Association.

MEASURES

Demographics. Participants from both countries were asked to self-report their gender, weight, height, ethnicity, and parents’ education.

Body Image. The Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire—Appearance Scales (MBSRQ-AS; Cash, 2000) is an abbreviated version of the MBSRQ, arguably the most widely used and validated self-report measure of body image (Cash, 1994; Thompson, 1996; Thompson & Gardner, 2004). It has 34 items within a total of five subscales. These consist of the Appearance Evaluation Subscale (AE), with a reported Cronbach’s alpha score of \( r = .88 \) (Cash, 2000) and items such as, “I like my looks just the way they are”; the Appearance Orientation Subscale (AO), with a reported Cronbach’s alpha score of \( r = .88 \) (Cash, 2000), and items including “before going out in public, I always notice how I look”; the Body Areas Satisfaction Scale (BASS), with a reported Cronbach’s alpha score of \( r = .77 \) (Cash, 2000), and consisting of rating 8 specific body parts; the Overweight Preoccupation Subscale; and the Self-Classified Weight Subscale. For the current study, only the first three were analyzed, yet they provide a broad assessment of body image (Thompson, 1996). Subscales were scored by computing a mean of the scale items after reverse-scoring certain items. Scores range from one to five, with higher scores indicating better appearance evaluation and body areas satisfaction, and greater appearance orientation.

Religious Faith. The Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire (SCSORF) (Plante & Boccaccini, 1997a) was used to assess religiosity. This 10-item measure is formatted as a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Questions include “my religious faith is extremely important to me” and “my faith impacts many of my decisions.” The SCSORF has been found to be valid and
Table 2. Summary of Intercorrelations as a Function of Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. AE</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-.28*</td>
<td>.74**</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
<td>-.32**</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. AO</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. BASS</td>
<td>.64**</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
<td>-.27**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. REL</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. MOD</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Scarf</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.47**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. BMI</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>-.15*</td>
<td>-.24**</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.11</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

Note. Intercorrelations for American women (N = 189) are presented above the diagonal, and intercorrelations for Jordanian women (N = 291) are presented below the diagonal. For all scales, higher scores are indicative of more extreme responding in the direction of the construct assessed. AE = Appearance Evaluation; AO = Appearance Orientation; BASS = Body Areas Satisfaction; REL = strength of religious faith; MOD = modesty; Scarf = observed head coverage; BMI = body mass index.

* p < .05  
** p < .01  

Modesty. A modified version of the measure employed by Mussap (2009b) was used to assess modesty of dress. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they cover various parts of their body when in public using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from “never” to “always.” Specific body areas assessed included hair, nose, mouth, neck, chest, shoulders, upper arms, lower arms, hands, waist, legs, and feet. The original scale included “thighs” and “calves” but for the current study these were combined as “legs” for cultural sensitivity purposes. Responses were averaged to produce a final modesty score ranging from 12 (not at all modest) to 60 (very modest).

Results  
Means and standard deviations for all study variables and BMI are presented in Table 1, and correlations are presented in Table 2.

A Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) revealed a significant omnibus effect of culture on all dependent variables, $F(5, 419) = 319.34, p < .001, \lambda = .79$, multivariate $\eta^2 = .79$. Jordanian women scored significantly higher than American women on each measure: AE, $F(1, 419) = 138.29, p < .001$; AO, $F(1, 419) = 160.04, p < .001$; BASS, $F(1, 419) = 85.53, p < .001$; religious faith, $F(1, 419) = 486.92, p < .001$; and modesty, $F(1, 419) = 922.36, p < .001$. Independent sample t-tests revealed that Americans had significantly higher mean BMI than Jordanians, $t(353.14) = 4.65, p < .001$, and BMI was a significant covariate between culture and the dependent variables, $F(5, 419) = 12.01, p < .001, \lambda = .13$, multivariate $\eta^2 = .13$. However, controlling for BMI through the MANCOVA...
Multiple regressions showed that religious faith weakly but significantly predicted higher BASS scores for both groups: Americans, $R^2 = .03, F(1, 185) = 5.56, p = .019$; Jordanians, $R^2 = .03, F(1, 274) = 7.41, p = .01$. Culture accounted for the majority of the variance in religious faith ($R^2 = .52, F(1, 470) = 511.63, p < .001$) and modesty ($R^2 = .67, F(1, 473) = 999.15, p < .001$), and a significant amount in AE ($R^2 = .26, F(1, 474) = 171.9, p < .001$), AO ($R^2 = .29, F(1, 468) = 194.23, p < .001$) and BASS ($R^2 = .19, F(1, 467) = 105.66, p < .001$).

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to compare university women from Jordan and the United States on strength of religious faith, modesty, and body image. It was hypothesized that greater religious faith and modesty would be associated with and predict better body image, especially for Jordanians. Because Middle Eastern cultures tend to be more conservative and religiously oriented than Western cultures, it was predicted that Jordanians would have greater religious faith and modesty than Americans, leading to greater body image satisfaction for Jordanians.

As hypothesized, Jordanian women had significantly better overall body image than American women. One might argue that an obvious explanation appears to be their significantly lower mean BMI (21.67 as opposed to 23.62 for Americans). BMI was in fact negatively correlated with both measures of body satisfaction for women of both cultures. Yet even after controlling for BMI through the MANCOVA, women's mean body image scores remained significantly different.

A more plausible explanation for the differing body image scores lies in Jordanian cultural and religious customs. According to Dunkel, et al., (2010), Muslim women may hold beliefs, religious or otherwise, related to their modesty that provide protection against body image concerns. Droeber (2003) also witnessed that Muslim women pray more often and regularly than do Christian women, who are more likely to pray when they "feel the need to do so" (p. 418) instead of according to a pattern like that dictated by Islam. In fact a call to prayer is broadcasted throughout Jordan and other Muslim countries five times a day, compelling citizens to pause and remember Allah. Due to culturally encouraged increased religious adherence (Jordanians were reportedly almost twice as religious as Americans in the current study) and the guidelines of Islam, most Jordanian women are much more modest in their dress than American women.

An intriguing finding was the way in which modesty related to body image for women of the different cultures. It was not correlated with any body image measures for Jordanian women, but was negatively correlated with both measures of body satisfaction for American women. This suggests that the American women covered because they were dissatisfied with their bodies and wanted to hide them—or at least specific parts of them—while the Jordanian women covered for reasons unrelated to body satisfaction.

Although Jordanian women were substantially more appearance-oriented, they were still much more satisfied with their bodies than American women. This could mean that because they are more invested in their appearance—which could lead to spending more time making themselves look good—they perceive themselves as more attractive and therefore have better body image. It also means that something is protecting them from negative body image, because they seemingly pay more attention to appearance but are less influenced by it, and are most likely internalizing Western beauty ideals less. Although it is impossible from the data collected in this study to determine exactly what this factor is, results point to culture and religion. Religious faith was significantly positively correlated with and predicted body areas satisfaction for both groups, yet when culture was added to the equation, it became the only significant predictor. In highly pious societies such as Jordan, religion and culture go hand-in-hand, a possible explanation for this effect.

There were some notable limitations in this study, first and foremost that the SCSORF and modesty scales have not been validated across culture, and the MBSRQ has not been validated on a Jordanian sample. The results cannot be generalized to all Jordanians or all Americans because neither sample ranged much in age nor was especially ethnically diverse, and both were collected at a single university in the respective country.

More cross-cultural (and especially Middle Eastern) body image research is needed, as well as research on religious faith of all denominations in connection with body image. A study of religious faith and body image in a culture with more religious variability and/or integrating multiple measures of religiosity would add greatly to existing literature. And most importantly, with increased knowledge comes improved prevention and treatment efforts. Understanding factors positively influencing body image could potentially assist therapists and laypeople seeking to improve body image and treat related disorders.

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References


