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Physical Fitness as Social Status: A Sociological Study on Understanding Body Image in Public Parks of Thiruvananthapuram

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary society, increasing Fitness and body maintenance are influenced by globalisation, urbanisation, and the wellness industry, influencing individuals 'ideas towards being fit. Individuals increased their participation in physical activity with growing norms and social values surrounding the social body. This research study aims to understand the practice of physical fitness among individuals, which has led to a change in body image perception in Thiruvananthapuram parks. This study focuses particularly on daily walkers and open gym users, with a sample size of 129, including all genders and socio-economic groups. The findings include a relation between Physical activity, Body image, and fitness as perceived social status. Finding highlights, economic background shaping confidence of body-related fitness and social respect, which culturally the body needs, which is also known as Cultural capital.

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Introduction:

In the contemporary period, health and fitness are becoming a primary priority, due to the increased burden of lifestyle diseases or Non-communicable diseases(NCD)(World Health Organization, 2014). A part of NCD's physical fitness is also becoming a dominant social value, which is highly reflected in societal norms and values in maintaining and self-care the body. Earlier, the body was seen

as a religious and medical entity, and later it became essential to public display, where individuals had to show perfection in the size and shape of their bodies. The rise in emerging fitness communities, parks, and gyms in urban areas symbolises how individuals relate their bodies to a social status.

In this research, Pierre Bourdieu's theorisation of the body as physical capital will help you to understand that the material investments in the body for physical fitness, such as sportswear, gadgets, and gym routines, will lead to symbolic power and lead to social distinction among the individuals, participation of physical fitness with discipline and self-regulation will lead to perception of fit body into feeling like self-worth and give social respect in the society.

This study explores the relationship between physical fitness, body image, and social status among fitness participants in public parks at Thiruvananthapuram city limits, by focusing on their everyday practice and the attached social meanings about physical fitness as an identity of the body.

Literature review

As per the research objective, to understand how physical fitness shapes body image and social status concepts like Body and Social theory, Bourdieu's capital was used with the addition of Shilling's physical capital.

Pierre Bourdieu, in his book Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste(1984), mentioned that there are four capital forms which are interrelated to help mobilise individuals from their social position. They are economic capital, cultural capital, social capital and symbolic capital. Money and material sources can be converted into cash or property. Individuals with economic capital can access branded clothing, trackers and supplements for their physical appearance(Bourdieu, 2002). In practising fitness, having knowledge about the right time and the right diet, the right clothing is also considered cultural capital. While practising these physical fitness activities, social capital will be built through the associations, e.g. walkers and joggers associations, where knowledge and support will be obtained by the individuals. Prestige recognition and social status will be obtained when individuals dress up and are praised by their peer group.

Later years, Chris Shilling, in his book The Body and Social Theory (1993), argues that the body becomes a site of investment in consumer society. Individuals invest time and money on body through exercise, consumption, and grooming. Shilling sees the body as a positional good; its value depends on how it compares in a social setting or space(Shilling, 2003).

Mike Featherstone's argument about the consumer culture of the body explains how the body becomes a site of self-identity, aesthetic display, and has a social value. Were people encouraged to shape and maintain their body shape and size with a young, fit and controlled body narrated in various media, became cultural norms (Featherstone, 2010; Featherstone, Hepworth, & Turner, 1991).

By the conclusion of the above literature review. This study is trying to focus on physical exercise practices, such as running, jogging, walking and yoga, not only for health, but also goes beyond health and acts in negotiation of status, body image management, focusing on the Thiruvananthapuram city parks of Kerala state.

Study Design and Approach:

Participant observation is the approach to study. This study includes a quantitative method of approach, using a questionnaire to collect data. It is a cross-sectional study carried out for a month to understand the relationship between physical capital and perceived body image and social status among the practitioners of physical activity in the public parks of Thiruvananthapuram, which includes walkers, joggers, gym participants, and yoga participants. The approach consists of measurable variables related to fitness investments, self-evaluation and socio-demographic characteristics.

Target Population of the study:

As per the demand of the study, research was carried out in the public parks of Thiruvanthapuram, where the sample was selected based on daily participation in physical activity. The sample method used for choosing respondents is completely purposive sampling. The age group above 18 and individuals who do regular physical activity, at least 3 days a week, are considered.

Research Instrument:

The questionnaire, which is structured with four main sections, includes a socio-demographic profile (age, gender, education, occupation, income, and social category), physical capital indicators (use of fitness gadgets, physical activity attendance, sports attire, dietary practices), and physical activity behaviors (frequency of physical activity, time spent for physical activity and monthly expenditure on physical activity related products were taken), and Self-perception(Body image, perceived social status) were taken by Likert’s scale measurement.

Data collection procedure

Data collected through direct physical presence in famous parks, such as Museum Park, Kowdiar Park and an open ground, is selected for research, where the most common walkers and joggers are present. A structured questionnaire, a Google Form, is used to collect data. Informed consent was obtained before participation.

Data analysis

All data collected was coded in Microsoft Excel and analysed using high-end analysis software, Statistical Package for Social Sciences SPSS. Procedures include Descriptive statistics, Chi-square tests, Correlation analysis and Reliability analysis for Likert-scale.

Results

Based on the data collected from 129 respondents, data analysis was done in SPSS. Below are the results of the correlation between the Family income of individuals and the time of active physical activity, expenditure on physical activity, the type of brand they purchase, and the confidence level after participating in physical activity. This analysis is for the purpose of understanding how income levels influence purchase, participant and self-perception of body image. A regression analysis was done to confirm the confidence level for the statement about body image.

Table 1: Correlation between Family monthly income and the average participation in physical exercise each day.

Correlations

		Family Income montly	On average, how long will you participate physical exercise in each day?
Family Income montly	Pearson Correlation	1	.391**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	129	129
On average, how long will you participate physical exercise in each day?	Pearson Correlation	.391**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	129	129

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

By the analysis of Table 1, the Pearson correlation coefficient r = 0.391 indicates a relation between Family income and average participation in physical exercise each day, which is a moderately positive correlation. This represents that with an increase in family income, the time individuals spend on their bodies increases.

p-value <.001 is a highly statistically significant value confirming the relation between Family income and average participation in physical exercise each day. Suggesting individuals from the higher income households are engaging in physical activity, they have greater leisure time and fitness resources.

Table 2: Correlation between Family monthly income and Monthly Expenditure on fitness-related products or services.

Correlations

		Family Income montly	Monthly Expenditure on fitness related products or services?
Family Income montly	Pearson Correlation	1	.612**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	129	129
Monthly Expenditure on fitness related products or services?	Pearson Correlation	.612**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	129	129

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

By the analysis of Table 2, the Pearson correlation coefficient r = 0.612 indicates a relation between Family income and Monthly Expenditure on fitness-related products or services, which is a strongly positive correlation. This represents that with an increase in family income, Monthly Expenditure on fitness-related products or services. p-value <.001 is a highly statistically significant value confirming the relation between Family income and Monthly Expenditure on fitness-related products or services. Suggesting that individuals from the higher-income households have become consumers of fitness-related products.

Table 3: Correlation between the family's monthly income and the type of specific clothing or gear worn for workouts.

Correlations

		Family Income montly	Do you wear specific clothing or gear for workouts?
Family Income montly	Pearson Correlation	1	.412**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	129	129
Do you wear specific clothing or gear for workouts?	Pearson Correlation	.412**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	129	129

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

By the analysis of Table 3, the Pearson correlation coefficient r = 0.412 indicates a relation between Family income and the type of specific clothing or gear worn for workouts, which is a moderate positive correlation. This represents that with an increase in family income, a slight change in the type of specific clothing or gear worn for workouts. p-value <.001 is a highly statistically significant value confirming the relation between Family income and the type of specific clothing or gear worn for workouts. Suggesting that individuals from the higher-income households are more likely to wear branded or a specific type of clothing.

Table 4: Correlation between Family monthly income and Statement: I feel more confident about my physical appearance after practising a workout.

Correlations

		Family Income montly	Statement: I feel more confident about my physical appearance after practicing workout?
Family Income montly	Pearson Correlation	1	.383**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	129	129
Statement: I feel more confident about my physical appearance after practicing workout?	Pearson Correlation	.383**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	129	129

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

By the analysis of Table 4, the Pearson correlation coefficient r = 0.383 indicates a relation between Family income and Statement: I feel more confident about my physical appearance after practising a workout, which is a moderate positive correlation. This represents that with an increase in family income, a slight change in confidence about physical appearance. p-value <.001 is a highly statistically significant value confirming the relation between Family income and the type of specific clothing or gear worn for workouts. Suggesting that individuals from the higher-income households are more confident about their physical appearance.

Regression analysis between Family monthly income and Statement: I feel more confident about my physical appearance after practising a workout.

Table 5:

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.383[a]	.147	.140	.553

a. Predictors: (Constant), Family Income montly

In Table 5, model summary results, R(0.383): Correlation between the observed and predicted values of the dependent variable. It indicates a moderate positive relationship. R^2(.147): It is 14.7% of variance, so it is not a strong model, but a statistically significant model.

Table 6:

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	6.682	1	6.682	21.841	<.001[b]
	Residual	38.853	127	.306		
	Total	45.535	128			

a. Dependent Variable: Statement: I feel more confident about my physical appearance after practicing workout?

b. Predictors: (Constant), Family Income montly

Table 6 represents the strength of the argument with a $p<0.001$, it's a significant predictor of outcome.

Discussion

The results of the discussions say that individuals with high family income, especially from the aspirational middle class group, are involved in the body image status. Those who have more income are likely to spend more time and money on purchasing sports-related gadgets. Simultaneously, individuals with high income have a high confidence level in their body appearance. The analysis between family income and average participation in physical exercise each day, Monthly Expenditure on fitness-related products or services, type of specific clothing or gear worn for workouts. confidence about physical appearance is highly significant with all $p<0.001$ value, family income of individuals is influential on consumer behaviour, and positive confidence in the body image.

Conclusion

This cross-sectional study is providing data where physical activity is not only for Health, but is surrounded by social perceptions. The body is regulated and maintained by the social expectations, values and image projected through media. The body is not only seen as a biological entity, but it is also embodied with cultural expectations. By concluding, all the above arguments in the data result represent and support the Shilling concept of physical capital, where the body with discipline to fitness will have high social value, thus resulting in high social status. The person who invests time in leisure for physical activity has social connections, and this will lead to cultural capital, which Bourdieu argues. Positive Correlation between body image and satisfaction aligns with the argument of body becoming a project to do workout, where a fit body becomes a moral worth and a symbol of success.

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