



Body Image Through Social Perception

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Abstract:

This article addresses the topic of body image as perceived by male clinical psychology students (Master's 1 and 2) at Badji Mokhtar University in Annaba, Algeria. The study employed a descriptive methodology, utilising the associative network technique and content analysis on a sample of twenty volunteers.

The results revealed the following:

The social perceptions of body image among the study sample comprise a diverse semantic field with positive polarisation based on three dimensions.

- 1) The psychological... 2. The social dimension: Cultural dimension: Its role in constructing social perceptions of body image.*
- 2) Scientific social information: One of the components of social perceptions of body image.*
- 3) Beauty and its manifestations: The role of beauty in constructing social perceptions of body image.*

Keywords: *Body image, social perceptions*

L'image corporelle à travers les représentations sociales

Résumé :

Cet article aborde le thème de l'image corporelle à travers les représentations sociales chez des étudiants en psychologie clinique (Master 1 et Master 2) de sexe masculin, à l'Université Badji Mokhtar d'Annaba - Algérie.

Cette étude s'est basée sur une méthode descriptive et a utilisé la technique des réseaux de significations et l'analyse de contenu sur un échantillon de 20 volontaires.

Les résultats ont révélé ce qui suit :

Les représentations sociales de l'image corporelle chez l'échantillon de l'étude présentent un champ sémantique diversifié, avec un attrait positif, reposant sur trois dimensions :

- 1) La dimension psychologique ... sociale ... culturelle et son rôle dans la construction des représentations sociales de l'image corporelle.*
- 2) Les informations scientifiques et sociales circulantes, en tant que composante des représentations sociales de l'image corporelle.*
- 3) La beauté et ses manifestations, et son rôle dans la construction des représentations sociales de l'image corporelle.*

Mots-clés: *image corporelle représentations sociales.*



Introduction

Body image is considered one of the fundamental concepts in psychology, sociology and social psychology. It encompasses more than an individual's perception of their external appearance; it also reflects social perceptions that influence the individual's relationship with their body within a system of cultural values and standards. This psychosocially constructed body image is laden with symbolic meanings and is reconstructed through patterns of social interaction, media discourse and prevailing aesthetic symbols. This leads individuals to face a continuous struggle between the ideal and real bodies.

The body is no longer merely a biological given; it has become a social construct influenced by psychological, social and cultural factors. Consequently, it is affected by the collective information, beliefs and opinions shared among individuals within a group. In other words, it is influenced by social perceptions – a cognitive-social construct produced by individuals within the group through interaction and discourse – aimed at understanding and adapting to social reality, guiding behaviour within it and facilitating communication.

Based on this premise, the present study aimed to explore social perceptions of body image among a sample of male clinical psychology students, given that social perceptions are one of the most effective ways of understanding body image. As Moscovici (1972, p. 61) defined them, social perceptions are models of thought and a process directed towards communication, understanding, and control of the social, material, and intellectual environment.

Accordingly, the following problematic question can be posed: What is the content of the students' social perceptions of body image? What is its nature? On what dimensions are these perceptions based?

1. The theoretical framework of the study

1.1. Body image:

Paul Schilder is widely recognised as the first person to coin the term 'body image' in 1935. He defined it as 'the image that a person forms of their body in their mind'. Schilder discusses body image as a conceptual construct, focusing on three research approaches:

The first approach: This approach focuses on the physiological foundations of body image and studies how the body's image is formed through sensations such as posture, location, spatial awareness, pain and touch. Cases such as phantom limb syndrome and apraxia are discussed, emphasising that body image is not merely a sensory perception, but an internal model developed over time and through experiences (Schilder, 1980, pp. 35-120).

- **The second approach:** This approach analyses and discusses the libidinal and psychological structure of body image and psychological disorders. It examines the relationship between narcissism and physical self-love. It explores the psychological mechanisms involved in disorders such as depression and hysteria, as well as illness delusions that affect body perception. It also explains the relationship between physiological changes and libidinal investment in specific body parts.

- **The Third Approach:** This approach clarifies the role of social, symbolic and cultural dimensions in the formation and construction of body image. It posits that the body is a



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social symbol that interacts with the external world, not merely a biological entity. Body image encompasses associated elements such as clothing, hats, and accessories, while considering its presence in the environment and external space. This includes social distance, tradition, identity, and emotional expression (Schilder, 1980, pp. 221–368).

Overall, Schilder's book *L'image du corps* is foundational in understanding body image from a neuropsychological and social perspective, inspiring many researchers to explore within this framework.

1.1.1 Body Image and Self-Image Theory – Rogers

According to Carl Rogers' theory of body image, body image is part of self-concept and is influenced by experiences and relationships. According to this theory, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's body reflects an individual's psychological state and their ability to accept themselves. Furthermore, it highlights the significant influence of societal norms and expectations on an individual's body image.

Rogers' self-image theory is one of the most significant contributions to humanistic psychology. It focuses on how individuals perceive themselves and the extent to which this perception aligns with their ideal self. This perception reflects mental health. Any discrepancy between self-image and the ideal self can generate feelings of dissatisfaction and may result in psychological disorders (Rogers, 1951, pp. 135–160).

Rogers adds that humans naturally strive for personal growth and possess the ability to change and develop if they

find themselves in an accepting environment. All of this contributes to building a positive self-image.

Rogers sees the self as composed of three interrelated elements:

Self-image: how an individual perceives themselves, including their traits, abilities, appearance and behaviour.

- ▶ Self-esteem: The degree to which an individual is satisfied with themselves, influenced by experiences, relationships and social acceptance.
- ▶ Ideal Self: How an individual wishes to be, reflecting their personal aspirations and values.

Notably, Rogers' ideas intersect with Schilder's analysis of body image, as both assert that an individual's perception of their body is influenced by their psychological and emotional state. This highlights the dynamic nature of this perception and its relationship with the social environment.

1.1.2 Body Image and Psychodynamic Theory

One of the most profound psychological theories explaining body image is the psychodynamic theory, which links body image to the unconscious, childhood, repressed drives and the defence mechanisms employed in Oedipal conflicts. Freud connected sexual identity, the unconscious and body image, arguing that an individual's perception of their body is influenced by repressions and conflicts, manifesting as physical disorders and perceptual distortions of body image, such as anorexia nervosa. He emphasised the importance of early childhood experiences of bodily pleasure and pain, such as harsh punishment and reprimand.

He believed that exposure to negative psychological experiences causes children to utilise defence mechanisms



Soumission : 10/12/2024 Acceptation : 10/04/2025 Publication : 15/08/2025

such as repression, projection and reaction formation to protect themselves from negative feelings associated with the body. These mechanisms affect how an individual perceives their body and may contribute to distortions in body image (Freud, 2006, pp. 123–180). He also discussed bodily transformations in dreams as being indicative of sexual desires and repressed feelings.

In contrast, Gustav Jung paid significant attention to the concept of the body, focusing on its symbolic and mythological aspects within the context of collective unconscious theory. He considered the collective unconscious to be a shared human heritage that expresses existential experiences in the form of universal symbols that appear in myths, rituals and art. For Jung, the body symbolises the self as a whole, and he discussed 'anima' (the feminine aspect in men) and 'animus' (the masculine aspect in women) as symbolic representations arising from the body itself as a material manifestation (Jung, 2016, p. 150).

Meanwhile, Lacan introduced the concept of the mirror in order to understand how body image develops. He stated that when a child first recognises their reflection in a mirror, they perceive it as a unified entity, which brings a sense of ecstasy. However, this perception is illusory, as it does not reflect the child's psychological reality, but rather an external reflection that quickly shatters. According to Lacan, body image is formed from the outside in; that is, individuals construct their perception of their body from the gaze of others and identification, making it susceptible to distortion and far from self-awareness, resulting in a kind of alienation.

Lacan posited that the mirror stage demonstrates that body identity is constructed through imagination and symbols rather than being innate, and this explains feelings such as narcissism, jealousy and competition in later stages of development (Lacan & Al-Khashab, 1994, pp. 175–183). The mirror stage helps the child to overcome their fragmented image, leading them to conceptualise their body as a unified whole. However, this acquisition can result in negative narcissistic identification prior to the consolidation of the symbolic dimension. The child is subject to their mother, and it is this dual relationship that allows them to position themselves within their identity and begin to engage with the external, real world.

1.1.3 Body Image and Sociocultural Theory

Body image refers to an individual's mental representation of their body, including its shape, weight, abilities, and attractiveness. Several factors influence the way in which individuals form an image of their body, including family, socialisation, cultural environment and media.

This theory posits that the body cannot be reduced to its biological dimension alone, but also extends into social contexts as a means of expressing identity and belonging. In modern societies, the body has become a symbol of consumption and an area of interaction between individuals and society at several levels: the individual body, the social body and the political body.

The culture of each society plays a role in shaping an individual's perception of themselves and others, as well as the influence of social pressures on perceptions of beauty, health, and sexual and social identity. Chris Shilling is a



Soumission : 10/12/2024 Acceptation : 10/04/2025 Publication : 15/08/2025

prominent researcher in this field, having made significant academic and critical contributions. His book *The Body and Social Theory* is considered a fundamental reference work in the sociology of the body.

Shilling argues that modern sociology considers the body to be a field for individual and social experience, a means of forming identity and a subject of social control and discipline.

According to Michel Foucault, the body cannot be reduced to a mere biological entity; rather, it is a tool for discipline and control in society, which he refers to as the 'microphysics of power'. The body image adopted by an individual stems from social and cultural norms imposed by monitoring institutions (such as schools, the media and the military). Thus, the body becomes a site of power, reshaped to align with the requirements of the social order.

Foucault illustrates that power operates through disciplinary mechanisms such as constant surveillance, normalization, and the physical and temporal organization of the individual. He believes that the individual constantly subjects their body to self-regulatory practices (such as dieting, cosmetic procedures, exercise, etc.), thereby engaging in a form of voluntary submission to a standardized bodily model imposed subtly and invisibly by contemporary power. This gives rise to "docile bodies" shaped by disciplinary practices embedded within the social and intellectual system. Body image becomes a form of discipline, where the undisciplined body – such as the obese, the transgender, or the physically different – is viewed as unnatural and outside the norms, making it vulnerable to exclusion, marginalization, and ridicule. This makes bodily

disorders or practices a sociocultural issue, not just a psychological one, because they arise from a failure to conform to the culturally produced ideal body model.

Although Pierre Bourdieu did not directly address body image, his sociological theory and related concepts, such as symbolic capital, symbolic and physical violence, and habitus, explain how the body is constructed culturally and socially. According to Bourdieu, the body is a form of capital that can be invested in and used to demonstrate social status through appearance, clothing and fitness. The totality of an individual's deeply ingrained practices and habits (habitus), resulting from socialisation, can play a significant role in their social positioning.

He argues that symbolic violence imposes a standardised model of beauty through the media, advertising, and fashion without the use of direct force. Individuals submit to this model and reproduce it unconsciously. Overall, Bourdieu provided a robust conceptual framework for explaining how body image is produced and imposed socially through symbolic violence, deeply ingrained habits, and traditions. He also explains how social structure becomes embodied within the body. Key references for understanding Bourdieu's approach include *La distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, *La Domination Masculine*, and *Le Sens Pratique*.

1.1.4 Body image and symbolic social interactions

One research area that seeks to explain human behaviour and social interaction is symbolic interactionism. This theory is based on the symbols and meanings that individuals assign to things, actions and other people. This theory focuses on how individuals interact in society through



Soumission : 10/12/2024 Acceptation : 10/04/2025 Publication : 15/08/2025

symbols, such as language, gestures and behaviours, which acquire meaning through social interaction.

G. H. Mead is considered the founding figure of symbolic interactionism. He focused on the concepts of the self and the generalised other in the construction of identity through social interaction. Although he did not discuss body image directly, he provided a broad intellectual and philosophical framework for understanding it as part of social identity. He believed that the self is formed through interaction with others and that body image is influenced by their perceptions and judgements.

The 'generalised other', as Mead calls it, refers to society and its expectations regarding the individual's perception of themselves and their body. To him, the body is a symbol in social interaction, expressed through clothing, movements, and even facial expressions and body language. According to this perspective, body image is socially constructed and subject to change depending on cultural and social context. Body image is not merely a form; it is a means of symbolic communication and a physical representation of the self.

In his book 'Mind, Self, and Society', Mead argues that the self is not innate but is gradually formed through social interaction. This ability involves seeing oneself from the perspective of others and using language and symbols as tools to understand both others and one's own perception of oneself within society. Mead considers the 'generalized other' to be an internal representation of society that guides behaviour and enables individuals to act in accordance with social norms. For Mead, the 'I' represents spontaneous responses, while the self reflects societal expectations. According to Mead, the mind is the result of symbolic

interaction, which generates the capacity for thought through communication with others (Mead, G. H., 1990, pp. 45–120).

Erving Goffman presented a unique conception of the body through symbolic interactionism within a dramaturgical approach. For Goffman, the body is a means of expressing the self symbolically in social life, as well as a tool for performing social roles in front of an audience. It is a social façade through which the impressions that others form about the individual are organised. Goffman considered physical appearance, including clothing, facial expressions and movements, to be an integral part of the façade individuals use to manage the impressions they create in the eyes of others (Goffman, 1973, pp. 23–24).

He also discussed how certain physical traits can become ‘stigma’ that reshapes an individual’s identity, presenting coping strategies such as concealing or transcending identity using counter-symbols (Goffman, 1975, pp. 43–44). Goffman believed that body language and personal space were used as social tools to convey information during direct interaction (Goffman, 1974, pp. 15–16). Furthermore, he argues that the way the body is used reflects social patterns of respect and discipline in public spaces, influencing the management of social interaction in the public sphere.

1.2. Conceptual Approach to Social Perceptions

Moscovici defines social perceptions as: “A system of values, ideas, and practices related to specific subjects, with manifestations or dimensions of the social environment, which not only allows for the stabilization of the personal life framework of individuals and groups but also represents



Soumission : 10/12/2024 Acceptation : 10/04/2025 Publication : 15/08/2025

a tool for directing our perception of situations and preparing us for responses” (Moscovici, 1961, pp. 42-43).

In another definition, Moscovici views social perceptions as follows: ‘A form of knowledge specific to society; a cognitive system and psychological organisation that serves as a bridge between the individual and the social. It allows individuals and groups to understand each other through communication, which is part of the dynamic structure of knowledge’ (Moscovici, 2003, p. 388).

He emphasises this by stating that social perceptions are a way of translating and thinking about our daily reality – a form of social knowledge. Firstly, individuals and groups engage in mental activities to define their position in relation to situations, events, and topics that concern them. On the other hand, the social dimension intervenes in multiple ways: through the physical space in which individuals and groups exist, the communication between them, the interpretive framework provided by their cultural background and the laws, values and ideologies related to their specific social affiliations. This is what Moscovici expressed when he stated: ‘Social perceptions are situated between two faces, one psychological and the other social’ (Moscovici, 1961, pp. 360–362).

Denise Jodelet defines social perceptions as follows: ‘A form of knowledge that is constructed and shared socially, with practical objectives aimed at building a reality specific to a particular social group.’ She adds that it is ‘naïve knowledge’, ‘natural’, and different from scientific knowledge. Jodelet sees social perceptions as a ‘system of elaboration that manages our relationship with the world and others, in addition to directing and organising social

practices and communications...’ (Seca, J. M., 2002, p. 37). Jodelet also believes that ‘social perceptions are always a perception of something (the subject) and someone (the actor), and the characteristics of both will impact the nature of this perception’ (Jodelet, 1989, p. 43).

According to Claudine Herzlich, social perceptions are: ‘A process of constructing reality that simultaneously affects the stimulus and the response, modifying the former and directing the latter’ (Herzlich, 1972, p. 304).

1.2.1 Characteristics of Social Perceptions

According to Moscovici (1984, pp. 3–45), there are six characteristics of social perceptions:

- There is no perception without a subject.
- Every social perception involves the perception of a subject, whether that subject is a person, event or theory, interacting with the individual.

Property of Imagery:

Moscovici believes that the ‘imageant’ aspect of perception cannot be separated from its ‘signifiant’ aspect. In this regard, he states that the structure of every perception ‘appears dual, having two faces that are seldom separated, like the two sides of a sheet of paper: the image face and the symbolic face’. We can write perception as ‘image/meaning’, meaning that every image has a meaning and every meaning has an image.

Property of Symbolism and Signification:

A perception is symbolic content, and the symbol is one of the elements of perception. The present subject indicates what is absent from our immediate perceptions.

**Property of Construction:**

Moscovici states: 'Every reality is a presentation, meaning it is posed before the individual or group, formed within their cognitive system and integrated into a system of values. This system is subject to the surrounding history, social environment and ideology.'

Property of Independence and Creativity:

The process of constructing perceptions is not limited to reproducing reality. Rather, it involves reorganising its elements in a different manner. This is akin to constructing a new, imagined reality that is more suitable for the individual and group environment. This new reality aligns with their references, values and prevailing norms, thereby guiding individual and group behaviours and facilitating communication between them.

Social property:

Perception is considered a process of social construction and production, developed through social interaction and communication. When we analyse the actions of individuals who perceive or imagine a subject at the zero threshold of the social level, it always appears that perception carries something social, and the categories that build and express it are drawn from common cultural depths and carry linguistic significance.

2.2 Functions of Social Perceptions

Social perceptions have several main functions, including the following (Abric, 1994, pp. 15):

Cognitive function (fonction de savoir):

Social perceptions explain and interpret reality. Moscovici states that they help individuals acquire knowledge and integrate it into a coherent and organised framework alongside their cognitive activity and the values they believe in. They also facilitate social communication by determining the shared framework of reference that contributes to the exchange process among members of society.

Identity function (fonction identitaire):

Social perceptions partially fulfil the need for a sense of belonging. In this regard, Jodelet refers to 'social belonging', which involves sharing ideas and language to reinforce social ties and affirm identity and social belonging.

Guidance function (fonction d'orientation):

Social perceptions guide behaviours and practices on three levels:

They directly intervene in defining the purpose of the situation, such as determining the appropriate types of relationships for the individual.

They produce a system of expectations that filters and specifies information, as well as providing specific translations of reality that are suitable for the perceptions involved. Our perceptions influence the behaviour we engage in, sometimes even before we act.

They determine the behaviours and practices we engage in, specifying what is and isn't permissible in a given situation – meaning they play the role of norms.



Soumission : 10/12/2024 Acceptation : 10/04/2025 Publication : 15/08/2025

Justification function (fonction de justification):

Social perceptions justify the positions and behaviours of individuals. They enable individuals to 'justify beforehand' before taking action, or 'post-justify' afterwards, thereby contributing to the explanation of positions in different situations and strengthening social differentiation through justification.

1.2.3 Descriptive, normative and functional elements of social perceptions (Moscovici's analytical model):

Based on Moscovici's illustrative works, Molinard (Seca, 2002, p. 77) acknowledges that the construction of social perceptions revolves around the following elements:

Information about the subject:

Information is one of the essential elements of perception. It is a set of knowledge about a specific subject that individuals acquire from their social environment through personal experience, the media, or interaction with others. Both quantitative and qualitative information plays an important role in forming and evaluating social perceptions (Bonardi & Roussieau, 1999, p. 179).

Field of Perception:

The field of perception expresses the idea of organising content in the form of a hierarchical unit of the elements constituting the subject. This arrangement involves excluding some aspects while highlighting others, so the field of perception varies according to prevailing norms and values.

Attitude:

Attitude represents a general tendency to respond positively or negatively to the same subject. It seems that attitudes precede the presence of information and the field of perception, as they can exist with minimal information and a poorly organised field. The content of an attitude is evident to be built on descriptive elements that define the subject, as well as evaluative elements that form the basis of judgements regarding the quality and use of the latter (Herzlich, 1972, p. 311).

1.2.4 Structure of Social Perceptions (Central Core Theory):

According to the Central Core Theory, social perceptions do not consist of unorganised components, but rather rely on two fundamental and general systems: the central system (Système central) and the peripheral system (Système périphérique) (Abric, 1993, 1994a and b).

Central core or core nucleus:

The core nucleus is the essential element of perception, determining its meaning and organisation (Abric, 1994, p. 21). This core consists of a small number of elements (Flament & Rouquette, 2003, p. 23).

The central core of perception is defined by both the nature of the perceived subject and the relationship that the individual establishes with it (Abric, 1994, p. 69). It performs two essential functions:

- 1) Generative function: the central nucleus creates or transforms the significance of the other elements that constitute perception; it is thus the means by which these elements acquire meaning.



Soumission : 10/12/2024 Acceptation : 10/04/2025 Publication : 15/08/2025

- **Organisational function (Fonction organisatrice):** It defines the nature of the relationships that link the elements of the perception, thereby serving as the unifying and stabilising element. Thanks to the central nucleus, perception remains stable and does not easily change; any change to the central nucleus results in a radical transformation of the nature of perception.

According to Molinard, the central core theory provides a descriptive and explanatory approach to the internal structure of perception. The functions performed by the central nucleus give it critical status in recognising social perception (Molinard, 1994, p. 200).

Peripheral system:

The peripheral system consists of elements that are just as important as those of the central nucleus. They are called 'peripheral' because they are subject to the control of the central nucleus, which defines them in terms of meaning, value, proximity to the centre and functions.

The peripheral elements are organised around the central nucleus, and their importance is demonstrated by the three functions they perform:

- **Function of adaptation to physical reality:** The peripheral elements act as an interface between the central nucleus and physical reality as perceived. They help to solidify social perception and facilitate communication and exchange among different individuals or groups in daily life. - **Growth and Abundance of Ideas, Attitudes, and Behaviours:** Peripheral elements are also linked to the growth and abundance of ideas, attitudes, and behaviours.

- **Function of diversifying the content of social perceptions:** The peripheral system is more flexible than the central nucleus and allows its elements to pass through more easily. New content can become part of it, even if it is relatively contradictory to the central nucleus; however, it is positioned within acceptable limits for the overall system through mechanisms such as retranslation and multiple filtering processes. These mechanisms enable perceptions to adapt to developments in the field and current conditions without undergoing radical changes.

- **Defensive function:** The peripheral system acts as a shock absorber for perceptions, absorbing everything that is justified, new or indescribable without harming the core of the socio-cognitive system. Consequently, any transformation in perceptions typically involves altering its peripheral elements (Seca, J. M., 2002, p. 75).

The central system is linked to historical, social and ideological conditions that are directly related to values and norms. It defines the fundamental principles around which perceptions are organised and maintains and ensures their continuity due to its stability. The peripheral system, on the other hand, is connected to the current context as directed by individuals. This allows for the adaptation and evolution of perceptions, while preserving and defending the central system (Seca, 2002, p. 74).

1.2.5 Mechanisms of Social Perceptions

The emergence and organisation of social perceptions are governed by two fundamental processes: objectivation and anchoring.



Objectivation:

This is one aspect of perceptual construction that allows individuals to adopt and incorporate complex knowledge, facilitating the exchange of opinions. Moscovici defines it as 'the gradual displacement of excess meanings through their embodiment' (Moliner, 2001, p. 18).

Anchoring:

This means the internalisation or rooting of the subject of perception within a pre-existing reference framework (perceptions, ideologies, attitudes, beliefs, values, behaviours, etc.), which manifests itself in various ways.

As Moscovici puts it, 'If objectivation is the removal of excess meanings through embodiment,' then anchoring a perception represents the process of rooting it in a social space for use in daily life. This allows for the embodied and functional use of the subject of perception, rendering the unfamiliar familiar.

Clearly, both objectification and anchoring are complementary processes. The former describes how perception crystallises, beginning with the selection of information, which is then arranged according to a pictorial scheme defined by prevailing culture and social norms. This is followed by the perception becoming embodied and nearly materially perceived. The latter illustrates how perception becomes functional by rooting the subject in individuals' reference frameworks and carrying systems of thought, culture, ideology and values with it, which are used in daily life in accordance with groups.

Objectivation can be said to represent the cognitive-psychological aspect of perception, while anchoring

represents its social aspect. Together, they highlight the integrative relationship between psychological and social factors that shape perception.

Secondly, the field framework of the study:

In order to address the issues raised by the topic of body image and social perceptions among male clinical psychology students, we will take the following methodological steps:

2. Fields of study:

2.1 Spatial Field of the Study:

This study was conducted in the Department of Psychology at the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences at Badji Mokhtar University, Annaba, Algeria. The department was established under Executive Decree No. 75-28 on 29 April 1975. The Department of Psychology was established during the 1996 academic year. It includes the following specialisations: clinical psychology, work and organisational psychology, speech therapy and educational psychology.

2.2 Temporal field of the study:

The temporal field refers to the duration of the current study. This field study took place at the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences at Badji Mokhtar University, Bouin Ahmed, Annaba, Algeria, from 15 October to 10 December 2024.

3. Sample of the study:

Due to the nature of the topic and the time-consuming information collection tool, which requires suitable conditions (location and quietness) as it relies on free



Soumission : 10/12/2024 Acceptation : 10/04/2025 Publication : 15/08/2025

association, this study adopted a non-probabilistic sample of volunteers from the clinical psychology specialisation (Master's 1 and 2) at the Department of Psychology at Badji Mokhtar University, Annaba. A total of 20 male volunteers participated in the study.

4. Study methodology:

This study is partly an exploratory study of the nature of the relationship between an independent and dependent variable. Additionally, it is an exploratory study aimed at discovering the distinctive characteristics of social perceptions related to body image. Finally, it is a descriptive study, as it attempts to describe these characteristics.

The descriptive method pertains particularly to studies that focus on issues related to human and social fields. It 'seeks to collect and summarise facts relating to the nature of a group of people, a number of things, a set of circumstances, a series of events, a system of thought or any other type of phenomenon or issue that the researcher wishes to study'.

In pursuit of its operational objectives, which are based on the interactive relationship between an individual's perception and their social environment, with its psychological and socio-cultural dimensions – without neglecting its cognitive and perceptual components – this study has relied on a psychosocial approach, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods.

5. Tools for information collection:

5.1 Associative Network Technique:

This technique was developed by researcher Anna Maria Silvana de Rossa in 1945. It aims to reveal the structure of content, as well as indicators of polarity, neutrality and stereotypes, within the semantic field related to social perceptions. This technique has the limitation that it reveals only some of the semantic and evaluative aspects of a specific perception or group of perceptions of a subject that are interconnected.

It is characterised by its ease of application, which increases the motivation of the individuals being examined. Therefore, this technique is very important for the topics to which it is applied, given its ease of understanding and flexibility in adapting to the objectives of the study during the research process.

It can be said that the ease of guidance, coupled with great flexibility in adapting to various research topics, allows for its application to an infinite number of subjects, simply by changing the stimulus word in the center of the sheet (Abric, 2003, pp. 82-84).

- Calculation of Polarity and Neutrality Indices as Measures of Implicit Orientation in the Perception Field:

The polarity index represents a measure of evaluative components and implicit orientation in the field of perceptions, while the neutrality index represents a regulatory measure, where we ask the individuals in the sample to add the polarity and neutrality indicators in front of each word or group of words according to the subject.

To calculate the polarity index based on the total number of words written by each individual, which is variable due to



Soumission : 10/12/2024 Acceptation : 10/04/2025 Publication : 15/08/2025

individual freedom, two statistical indices have been created.

The first represents the polarity index:

$$P = \frac{\text{Number of Positive Words} - \text{Number of Negative Words}}{\text{Total Number of Words}}$$

This index varies between -1 and +1:

- If P belongs to the range $[-1, -0.5]$ (this value can be coded to 1), it means that most words have a negative connotation.
- If P belongs to the range $[-0.4, +0.4]$ (this value can be coded to 2), it means that most positive and negative words are nearly equal.
- If P belongs to the range $[0.4, +1]$ (this value can be coded to 3), it means that most words have a positive connotation.

The second index is the neutrality index:

This index also varies between $[-1$ and $+1]$:

- If N belongs to the range $[-1, -0.5]$ (this value can be coded to 1), it indicates that few words have a weak neutral connotation.
- If N belongs to the range $[-0.4, +0.4]$ (this value can be coded to 2), it indicates that neutral words are nearly equal to the total of positive and negative words, showing moderate neutrality.
- If N belongs to the range $[0.4, +1]$ (this value can be coded to 3), it indicates that most words are predominantly neutral, showing high neutrality.

These measurements are based on the individuals' own estimates and evaluations, rather than specific analyses by the researcher.

The polarity and neutrality indices can then be calculated based on the ranking of words according to their importance. This allows us to reconstruct both the chronological sequence of the implications obtained from the stimulus and the sequence of associations.

As mentioned earlier, the associative network can help us understand the structure and content of the meaning field. Using multidimensional analysis methods, we can use the data obtained through the associative network to determine the content and structure of the perception field. This enables us to explain the situation of individuals participating in the construction of the perception axis by examining the organisation of concepts and structural dimensions.

5.2 Content analysis technique

As mentioned earlier, the associative network can help us understand the structure and content of the meaning field. Using multidimensional analysis methods in data analysis allows us to obtain data through the associative network and achieve an understanding of the perception field's content and structure. This enables us to explain the situation of individuals and groups participating in the construction of social perception through the organisation of concepts and structural dimensions.

Therefore, we have decided to enhance this technique with semantic content analysis. Semantic content analysis is defined as follows: 'An indirect technique for scientific investigation applied to written, audio or visual materials



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produced by individuals or groups where the content is non-numeric, allowing qualitative or quantitative extraction aimed at expression, understanding and comparison' (Angers, 2003, p. 218).

Number	- The statement	Frequency	Pourcentage	Number	- The statement	Frequency	Pourcentage
1	- Strength	19	7,81	12	- Attractiveness	12	4,93
2	- Athletic build and physical condition	17	6,99	13	- Hormonal disorders	11	4,93
3	- Health	16	6,58	14	- Sexual deviations	11	4,52
4	- Gender identity	15	2,17	15	- Beauty	10	4,11
5	- Social identity	15	6,17	16	- Hairstyle	10	4,11
6	- Self-confidence	13	5,34	17	- Clothing	10	4,11
7	- Self-esteem	13	5,34	18	- Use of dietary supplements	08	3,29
8	- Psychological adjustment	12	4,93	19	- Influence of fashion	07	2,88
9	- Illness	12	4,93	20	- Obesity and thinness	05	2,05
10	- Disability	12	4,93	21	- Accessories	03	1,23



Soumission : 10/12/2024 Acceptation : 10/04/2025 Publication : 15/08/2025

					and use of cosmetic products		
11	- Body language	12	4,93	//	///////// /////////	////////	////////
Total : 21		Percentage: 100%					

We applied this technique to the results of the associative network, considering the produced social perceptions to be a visual basis. The aim was to identify the semantic field and structure of social perceptions regarding single mothers, using the word as a unit of analysis.

6. Presentation of Results and Discussion

After conducting individual interviews, each ranging from 30 to 45 minutes in duration (Abric, 2003, pp. 82–84), and applying the associative network technique, the results are as follows:

6.1 Monitoring the content of social perceptions regarding body image among the study sample:

The study sample, consisting of 20 individuals, produced a total of 21 associative words, with varying frequencies. The following table illustrates this.

Table 1: Content of Social Perceptions About Body Image Among the Study Sample

Upon reviewing Table 1, it was observed that there were 21 associative words related to the study topic, with frequencies ranging from 19 to 3 and percentages ranging from a minimum of 1.23% to 7.81%.

6.2 Polarity and neutrality indices for estimating implicit orientation in the field of social perceptions of body image among the study sample:

After obtaining the social perceptions of the study sample through the associative network technique, the polarity and neutrality indices were calculated to estimate the implicit



Soumission : 10/12/2024 Acceptation : 10/04/2025 Publication : 15/08/2025

orientation of social perceptions of body image. The following table illustrates this.

Table 2 shows the general results of the associative network with the calculated polarity and neutrality indices.

The Sample Individual	Total number of meanings	Number of positive meanings	Number of negative meanings	Number of neutral meanings	Polarity indicator	Neutrality indicator
1	10	6	3	1	P	N
2	21	11	7	3	0,9	-0,8
3	07	5	1	1	0,19	-0,71
4	05	4	1	0	0,85	-0,71
5	09	5	3	1	1	-1
6	12	9	2	1	0,88	-0,77
7	17	13	3	1	0,91	-0,83
8	06	4	1	1	0,49	0,88
9	13	8	3	2	0,83	-0,66
10	18	9	5	4	0,84	-0,69
11	05	3	1	1	0,77	-0,55
12	10	7	3	0	0,80	-0,60
13	08	6	1	1	1	-1
14	15	8	6	1	0,87	-0,75
15	09	6	2	1	0,93	-0,86
16	20	10	8	2	0,88	-0,77
17	16	11	5	0	0,90	-0,8
18	11	7	3	1	1	-1

19	19	13	6	0	0,90	0,81
20	12	8	3	1	1	-1
Total	243	153	67	22	0,91	-0,83
Pourcentage	%100	%62,9	%27,5	%9,05	//	//

After monitoring the total number of associative words and the total for each case, we calculated the number of positive (+) and negative (-) words, and finally the number of neutral words.

We then calculated the polarity and neutrality indices for the study topic, and the results were as follows:

The polarity index P fluctuates between 1 and 0.49, indicating a positive meaning for the social perception under study. This explains why the perceptions of the study sample regarding body image are similar, reflecting their shared social, cultural and scientific backgrounds.

- The neutrality index N shows that it fluctuates between [-1, -0.55], indicating weak neutrality and corresponding directly to the high polarity score.

6.3 The semantic field and its dimensions regarding social perceptions of body image among the study sample:

After monitoring the content of social perception, calculating the polarity and neutrality indices, and conducting a quantitative analysis of the obtained information, it was found that this perception relates to three main dimensions. The following table illustrates this.



Soumission : 10/12/2024 Acceptation : 10/04/2025 Publication : 15/08/2025

Table 3: The semantic field of social perceptions of body image among the study sample

Number	The Dimensions	The Units	Percentage	Total frequencies of the units	Percentage by dimension
1	- Limits - Psychological ... social ... - And symbolic through the social representations of body image in the study sample	- Gender identity - Social identity - Self-confidence - Self-esteem - Psychological adjustment - Genetic attractiveness - Body language - Sexual deviations	6,17 6,17 5,34 5,34 4,93 4,93 4,93 4,11	102	%41,97
2	- Circulating scientific and social information	- Health - Strength - Athletic build - Obesity and thinness	6,58 7,81 6,90 2,05 4,11 4,93 4,93	91	%37,44

		- Hormonal disorders - Disability - Illness			
3	- Aspects of beauty in the social representations of body image in the study sample	- Beauty - Hairstyle - Clothing - Use of dietary supplements - Influence of fashion - Accessories and use of cosmetic products	4,52 4,52 4,11 3,29 2,88 1,23	50	%20,57

From the above table, we can see that, after analysing the content of networks and associations, the social perceptions of body image among the study sample formed a semantic field linked to three dimensions.

These dimensions were organised in varying proportions and took on a hierarchical shape. The dimension 'Psychological-Social-Cultural Boundaries' achieved the highest percentage at 41.97%, followed by the dimension 'Scientific Social Information and Discourse' at 37.44% and then the dimension 'Beauty and Its Manifestations' at 20.57%.



Soumission : 10/12/2024 Acceptation : 10/04/2025 Publication : 15/08/2025

Applying the associative network technique to male clinical psychology students (Master's 1 and 2) revealed that their perceptions of body image were organised into a hierarchical unit characterised by linked, sequential elements based on free associations around this topic. This can be interpreted according to Moscovici's three-dimensional approach: information, field of perception, and attitude.

Information:

This study revealed a wealth of information about the topic under study, representing the social perceptions of the study sample. These perceptions were acquired through social environments, interactions, and media and social media. Notably, a large proportion of this information reflects the influence of specialisation (clinical psychology), as evidenced in the dimension 'Psychological-Social-Cultural Boundaries', covering topics such as sexual identity, social identity, body language, and self-esteem.

Moscovici emphasised the importance of understanding the nature of the information that individuals hold about a topic, as this contributes to defining their social identity. The quantity and type of information held may vary depending on this identity (Moscovici, S., 1976, p. 68).

Field of perception: the field of perception expresses the idea of organising content according to a hierarchical unit of the elements constituting the perception, with a minimum amount of information available for organisation. In the current study, the field of perception was organised hierarchically, with the 'Psychological-Social-Cultural Boundaries' dimension forming the base at 41.97%, the

largest percentage among the dimensions constituting the social perception of body image. This was followed by the 'Scientific Social Information and Discourse' dimension at 37.44%. The apex of the pyramid was the 'Beauty and Its Manifestations' dimension at 20.57%.

Attitude is determined as either positive or negative in relation to the subject of perception. Results from the associative network and polarity and neutrality index calculations showed that most associations from the study sample were positive (62.96%), followed by negative (27.57%) and neutral (9.05%). This indicates that the social perception field regarding body image is clearly positively polarised. Herzlich (1996, p. 309) notes that 'attitude precedes both information and the field of perception, and it is considered more resistant in perception'.

7. Analysis of the study results:

7.1 Psychological, social and cultural boundaries and their role in constructing social perceptions of body image among the study sample:

Referring to the study's theoretical framework, it becomes clear that social perceptions can be used as a measurement tool to understand how individuals perceive body image.

The current study revealed an overlap between psychological, social and cultural aspects in shaping these perceptions. Self-perceptions of the body (e.g. perception, satisfaction, social comparison, self-confidence, and body language) are linked to internal psychological processes such as self-esteem, personal identity (including gender identity) and defence mechanisms (e.g. denial and projection). Individual differences play a critical role in forming shared social perceptions of body evaluation and



Soumission : 10/12/2024 Acceptation : 10/04/2025 Publication : 15/08/2025

associated disorders, as indicated by psychoanalytic theory (Freud). According to psychoanalytic theory, the body is seen as a source of psychological desires and impulses. Meanwhile, self-identity theory (Erikson) considers body image to be an element in identity formation. Festinger's theory posits that individuals seek to compare their bodies with those of others.

This means that body image is a product of social perceptions formed through the exchange of collective meanings and social influence. According to Bourdieu, the body reflects symbolic capital, which in turn reflects cultural taste through bodily discipline. As Foucault noted, modern culture subjects the body to standards such as fitness and slimness.

Goffman argues that body language and personal space are social tools used to convey information during face-to-face interactions. This was evident in the perceptions of the study sample.

According to the social constructionist theory of Berger and Luckmann, aesthetic standards associated with the body are socially and culturally constructed through interactions and norms circulated within groups such as family, peers and the media. These symbols and values play a significant role in determining the ideal body type within a specific culture, resulting in differences in beauty standards and body acceptance between societies.

From this perspective, the social perceptions of the current study sample can be interpreted.

7.2 Scientific, social and discursive information as a component of social perceptions of body image among the study sample:

Moscovici's approach to social perceptions discusses scientific, social, and discursive information, which plays a pivotal role in how these perceptions are constructed and circulated.

The social perceptions of body image among the study sample were associated with a set of scientific academic information, which lends these perceptions a degree of scientific legitimacy, albeit in a simplified manner. This information arises from daily interactions and relationships among individuals, contributing to the sharing and circulation of these perceptions within the community (e.g. physical fitness and an athletic build).

The information produced by the study sample reflects a reservoir of ideas and stereotypes that recur in their collective discourse, which is understandable and communicable.

This overlap explains how the topic of body image can transform into a commonly held social perception.

7.3 Beauty and its manifestations in social perceptions of body image among the study sample:

The study sample discussed beauty and its manifestations as cultural and social values. They believe that the body reflects beauty through societal standards imposed by family, peers, the media and fashion, such as hairstyles, muscular strength and athletic build, which are symbols of masculinity and sexual attractiveness.

In these perceptions, accessories such as glasses, rings, necklaces and earrings are seen as extensions of the body.



Soumission : 10/12/2024 Acceptation : 10/04/2025 Publication : 15/08/2025

They are used not only for adornment, but also to express identity and belonging, or to conceal and compensate for deficiencies. The same applies to clothing, cosmetics, tattoos and hairstyles, which individuals use to present a façade to others and manage impressions (Goffman).

As a social standard of beauty, fashion plays a significant role in shaping social perceptions of body image by producing ideal models that individuals imitate. Fashion also plays a critical role in unifying social perceptions of body image, exerting social pressure by transferring ideal body images into the discursive sphere (Moscovici) through symbolic interaction and impression management.

Moreover, it contributes to the emergence of symbolic domination and social discrimination via the body and clothing (Bourdieu), as well as actively enforcing precise standards through the media and social perceptions (Foucault).

In summary, shifting the focus of body image research from an individual psychological level to a social and cultural level is a valuable approach.

Conclusion:

This study clearly shows that the concept of body image is both a social-cultural construct and a biological-psychological given. It is shaped by symbolic interactions and the meanings of symbols within groups. Social perceptions contribute to the establishment of reference models for acceptance standards and influence individuals' satisfaction with or dissatisfaction with their bodies.

Studying social perceptions of body image is a necessary first step in understanding the dialectical relationship between the individual and society, in order to develop a healthy sexual and social identity and question the cultural frameworks that define what is acceptable or unacceptable within the social environment.

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