

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Navigating Adolescent Health and Aesthetic Imperative: A Qualitative Study of Adolescence in IslamabadWarda Waheed¹, Abdul Qadar^{2*}**ABSTRACT**

Objective: This paper aims to understand the relationship between adolescence, aesthetic imperative, and health in the larger socio-cultural context of Islamabad, a representative urban area of Pakistan.

Study Design: Qualitative research design comprises participant observation, unstructured interviewing and focus group discussions.

Place and Duration of Study: The study was conducted among the adults of Islamabad from August 2022 to November 2022. Places of participant observation, interviews and focus group discussions vary from neighborhoods of a gated community of Islamabad, university cafeteria, and classrooms of the National University of Medical Science Rawalpindi, Pakistan

Methods: Overall, a qualitative research framework has been designed for data collection through unstructured interviews (stretching from somewhat formal interviews to normal conversation in the form of jokes, etc.), focus group discussions, and participant observation, yielded emic perspectives and subjective experiences of adolescents of Islamabad. The argument has been established on the basis of thematic analysis of the empirical evidence leading to the conceptualization of the themes.

Results: It is found that adolescence is considered a crucial phase of life because it shapes the trajectory of life in significant ways. Adolescents refer to the numerous physical and cognitive changes shaping their individual experiences as a period of stress and storm, resulting in high susceptibility to health hazards for adolescents. However, many of these hazards are based on sociocultural grounds that necessitate medical regimens among adolescents. One of the important dimensions of medicalization, which is found prevalent among this age group, is aestheticization as a part of the modern aestheticized culture influenced mainly by the contemporary media landscape.

Conclusion: The narratives present a mix of intrinsic factors and dimensions of socialization that impels them to resort to an aesthetic imperative.

Keywords: *Adolescence, Aestheticization, Medicalization, Medical Imperative.*

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Introduction

Medicalization, literally meaning to make medical, serves as a phenomenon going back and forth in terms of its application and

transmission. It is the expansion of medical jurisdiction in the lives of people, which keeps on classifying behaviors, designating certain forms as deviant from the established norms.¹ Therefore, in this paper, we have tried to explore how the process of medicalization influences individuals who are transitioning their childhood into adulthood, comprising one-sixth of the total population of the world.² However, we agree with our participants of the research who find adolescence in their social parlance as a subjective term meaning a variation of

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biological, cultural, and individual determinants. We are of the view that adolescence necessitates the evolution of an individual's cognition, emotion, behavior, and role transition as a site of the contemporary context of the bio-medical and techno-scientific world in which there are a number of influences upon lifestyle and ideology.³

Due to the very nature of the age group, the phase at times is also referred to as the period of stress and storm.⁴ This transitional phase progresses alongside the morphological changes in human physiology, also called puberty.⁵ Although the exact age of adolescence cannot be defined conclusively, in biological terms, the physiological changes in the body that begin with puberty and end at the termination of the morphological growth. Moreover, its end is defined in terms of an individual's capabilities to think abstractly and reason rationally, marking the adaptation of adult roles.⁶

This research grounds analysis of the situation with respect to the urban context of Islamabad for the adolescent population, belonging to mainly middle-class socioeconomic background. Administratively, Islamabad Capital Territory is under the jurisdiction of the federal administration of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. It is well-known for its metropolitan planning and high cost of living.⁷ Thus, the paper attempts to situate the adolescents in their particular context of socio-economic background and the role of Islamabad as an urban space for assessing the impact of medicalization. The significance of adolescent health in Pakistan is proportional to its adolescent population, which is often considered as a youth bulge. According to the population census of 2017, the population aged between 15 and 33 comprises 63 % of the total population of Pakistan.⁸ The greater proportion of the younger population can be both an opportunity and a challenge to manage properly. However, when it comes to the representation of the youth, the potential of youth in Pakistan is mainly considered a significant demographic dividend.⁸

We have tried to explore of the said youth through their behavior and demeanor as individuals guided by the cultural norms and the response to them. This study has found that among our adolescent participants, the physical appearance and physical manifestation of the human body is becoming increasingly important among adolescents. Resultantly, the human body becomes a subject for commodification and a site of enhanced aesthetic medicalization. Anthony Giddens aptly refers to the human body as a 'project' that has substituted physical utility with aesthetic demonstration.⁹

The course of action that aesthetics has adopted in contemporary modern times is through medical imperative in addition to the genre of cosmeceuticals.¹⁰ The standardization promulgated by biomedicine has found its way to the options that provide just aesthetic satisfaction to its consumers instead of a medical relief.¹¹ Aesthetic Medicine has emerged as a distinctive discipline in medicine with notable attention by the biomedical system as well as the general public. The soft bodies of human beings undergo technical imperative that modifies the natural bodies to a great extent.¹² The topic of aesthetics and body changes are impacting the socialization of individuals and the social position of an individual and thus implying change at interactive levels.

Literature shows attention towards specific health concerns like mental health or reproductive health, but much work is required to evaluate the health problems of the adolescent population of the country.¹³⁻¹⁶ The research aims to probe into the health matters of adolescents, mainly focusing on those types of health problems that are essential for them. The health concerns that adolescents find more pertinent for themselves to solve have been explored through emic perspective in the study. The study design has been devised to identify how adolescents determine the extent of medicalization to weigh benefits and harms as an essentiality of aesthetic imperative in their lives. We observed a general increase in

medicine and medical interference in the lives of adolescents as a phenomenon with its own demand. We have tried to achieve the objectives of the study by a qualitative methodological framework, as discussed in the following details.

Methods

The study was conducted among the adults of Islamabad from August 2022 to November 2022 after taking the ethical review exemption certificate to vide no: 06/IRB&EC/NUMS/104 from the Ethical Review Board of the National University of Medical Sciences Rawalpindi, Pakistan, held on date: 20th August 2022. Places of participant observation, interviews, and focus group discussions vary from neighborhoods of a gated community of Islamabad, university cafeteria, and classrooms of the National University of Medical Science Rawalpindi, Pakistan. We have used qualitative research design to operationalize an arrangement of participant observation, (in) formally conducted interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs). A total of four Focus Group Discussions were performed with the members of the adolescent age group, belonging to urban Islamabad. FGDs yielded the researchers with processes prevalent among the larger community and not limited only among the participants, leading to a broader understanding of the phenomena in society. It also probed into the scope of medicalization that leads to aestheticization among the adolescent. In-depth interviews served as a means to provide narratives of personal experiences. In-depth interviews further provided experiences and accounts that adolescents are subjected to in their everyday lives as well as the social factors that give an extension to the already vulnerable group of individuals. Convenience sampling was used to represent age, gender, and class as representative of the urban settings of Islamabad with anonymized names used through the article. The researchers employed thematic content analysis to analyze the data gathered. It helped to identify the typologies of health concerns among adolescents, helping to locate the emic perspective of adolescents towards the use of

biomedical services to cater to their health problems.¹⁷ The data was further organized and screened for recurrent themes. Moreover, the analysis was aided by the fact that the first author also belonged to a society similar to that of the research participants, making it convenient to analyze their perspective.

Results

The discussion for the paper has been divided into two major themes.

A. Adolescent Health and Aesthetics:

Increasing Synthesis?

Adolescents are frequently heard to talk about the tendency to abnormalize normal conditions. They are observed to be conscious of little inconveniences in their lives and have devised complex terminologies for them: 'For instance, if we are having a headache, we have started giving them exaggerated terms like we will say that I am being nauseous' (Maha). In addition to the changing etymology, their reliance on the medical imperative and medicine is increasing. As another respondent mentioned, 'I have friends who will have a minor headache, and immediately they will use aspirin and they eat two pills at a time' (Ayan). The increased reliance on medicine is attributed to the impatient nature of adolescents. 'One of the respondents opined that 'the thing is that during this age the patience level of adolescents is very low, we need immediate treatment for everything, which is why we depend on medicine too much. We do not give time for things to heal by themselves (Aiza).

In addition to medications, some adolescents realize the technological onslaught they are subjected to, as one of the participants views that 'I guess as adolescents we have to cope up with increasing technology, and yes, I can say that I have medicalized enough to know about the(se) technologies, their purpose their use and everything in the medical settings and outside of it' (Wasi). It seems that not only the institution of medicine has relocated its goal to health maintenance, but the public is also taking up this goal instead of limiting it to the elimination of maladies and disorders.

Similarly, when asked about the significant health concerns them, most of the female adolescents mentioned skin issues, while the first response of male adolescents revolved around mental health. As one female respondent recalled, her foremost concerns were 'acne, hair-fall and stretch marks' (Maha). A similar response that 'every problem is related to dermatology' (Maya) emerged when a general question about the medicalization imperative was asked from the focus group participants. Not just the realization of the health problems, we also found that there is a readiness among adolescents to seek a medical cure; as an interviewee said, 'I used to do nothing about skin problems, but these days as I watch on YouTube, etc., and you follow dermatologist talking about effective products, so I think that I will soon go to a dermatologist' (Rida).

The infodemic in the globalized world order has made it possible for adolescents to diagnose themselves with problematic conditions and devise convenient treatments as well. As one adolescent said, "I think I have a problem; I think it is called comedogenic acne; I will take treatment for that. It is neither visible nor prominent, but you can feel that there are bumps from the inside' (Sara). Not only the problems, but adolescents also locate the etiology of their problems. The same respondent said, 'I think it started due to over usage of products which I shouldn't have used.' they further continued, 'There wasn't a single product; there were a lot of them. I think I did bombardment (smiling) of too many products together on my face' (Sara).

B. Essentialization of Cosmeceuticals

We found that adolescents are well equipped with knowledge and access to a variety of cosmeceuticals. Not only are they actively engaged with the uptake of the products but are also in search of knowledge about the composition, effects, and side effects of them. They also use online sources to seek information about treatments. Thus, use of complex chemical formulas was common in the

interviews as if they were already established bio-chemists. We observed that terms like 'hyaluronic acid' and 'niacinamide' were frequently used during formal or informal conversations. One interviewee (not from any cognate background to bio-chemistry) while talking about the products told that 'there was hyaluronic serum, vitamin C serum and niacinamide too, if all these are in one product that's alright too, otherwise if these are separate, that will do too' (Sara).

The placement of cosmetics in the lives of adolescents is of grave significance. Besides the mention of facewashes and moisturizing or hydrating serums and products, Adolescents feel the essentialization of cosmetics to solve their skin problems, as one of the respondents confidently claimed that although pores on facial skin are a natural thing' (Rida), still she was aspirant for its treatment. Although, another adolescent was averse to the idea of dermatologist due to experience of an acquaintance, fearing that 'If you go to a dermatologist, he/she will give at least ten creams to you' (Sara). Similarly, another participant corroborated, 'when you got to dermatologists, they will give you medicine for one and half to three months, the moment you stop taking the medication, the problem generates again and in addition to the problem, you will also have side effects' (Maya). Adolescent boys also locate the use of cosmetics in their lives. One respondent, when asked to list out the products or procedures he used, mentioned 'face wash, whitening (creams), setting hair with gel, blow drying hair' (Hadi). Males also find it socially suggested to have fair complexion as one respondent confided to recall a friend of him 'who uses serum to whiten himself' (Hadi). There are a lot of products and procedures, which focus particularly on male population and that too younger ones, which are establishing a market of its own demand. When asked to list market items for our understanding, the list included from toners, creams, beard oil to branded trimmers, which are really expensive in some cases. One of the respondents further clarified that for 'those who smoke, for their lips

there are products (in market). Smoking makes your lips black, so these products claim that their application will make them better' (Ayan). In addition to these specialized and novel tendencies, male adolescents have been found to have increased routine of self-care from practices which were evidently quite common as normal practices in recent past. For example, going to barbers, doing facials and taking skin treatment have changed in peculiar ways to essentialize increasing reliance of cosmetics.

In addition to other cosmetics, the makeup genre holds much significance among contemporary adolescents. With the ever-emerging makeup industry, adolescents feel the need to look into it, even if they don't engage with the consumption of makeup to beautify themselves. One of the respondents talked how peer pressure necessitates to keep oneself updated about 'when anything new is in the market, you need to know about it because your friends become curious about it, and you are expected to have knowledge about it' (Maya). Adolescents have comprehension about the abstraction behind the makeup usage, as temporary beautification, however being unable to refrain themselves from it. One of our respondents mentioned how one's sense of makeup defines spirit of beauty among fellow adolescents' (Rida). This regimen is not unique to females, but male adolescents also find themselves to be engaging with it more day by day.

The arena of beauty parlors can be identified as a magical one, where the beautician is the magician and the magic, which is the transformation, is carried out, secretly, away from eyes of the society.¹⁸ Both, male and female respondents reflected upon their similar experience at these settings. Female adolescents told that 'if you go to beauty parlor for upper lips (hair removal), they will point out six more problems and will say should I do this?' (Mona). The focus group respondent at this point told that it happens to him when he goes to his barber for a haircut, 'knowing that my hair is growing white, he will tell me that I have a

product that will make your hair fine (Ayan).

Beauty is a multidimensional concept that not only involves an ideal image but also products and services as well as activities that make an individual physically appealing.¹⁹ In addition to the direct forms of cosmeceuticals, there are other aesthetic imperatives on adolescents which include keeping their body shape and weight in accordance with society's standards. Every adolescent in one form or the other is conscious about it. Male adolescents find it common among themselves to have male pattern baldness or alopecia. They attribute various reasons to it 'from genetical to frequent travel on a bike' (Ayan). Hair is an important feature that completes the self of an individual, besides increased weight resulting in obesity, which is locally called motaapa.

Therefore, to check condition of motaapa, gym culture is also ironically coupled with biomedical regimen. Literature also shows the diffusion of drugs from the professional bodybuilders to regular gym goers, alternatively known as Appearance and Performance Enhancing Drugs (APEDs) or Image and Performance Enhancing Drugs (IPEs).^{20,21} The usage of drugs for muscle enhancement can be attributed to pathological etiology (e.g., Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and body dysmorphia) or psychosocial determinants (aspiration of muscular body etc.).²⁰ One of our key participants summed up that 'steroids are used to have quick effects or to show-off to others. People also ask you that you have been going to gym for a year, but we don't see any difference, we don't see any change in you, then people get into these steroids' (Hadi).

Discussion

Based on the recurrent themes from our conversations and participant observation, it is plausible to say that the adolescents do realize about increasing medicalization in their lives. Adolescents are observed to be giving significance to their aesthetic appearance with respect to health issues and are also seen engaging with the sources of information that claim to have medical associations, like dermatologists. However, they also feel that

sources which play role to increase process of medicalization come from the very spirit of adolescent in current times i.e., entertainment from all forms of media, peer group and family etc. Therefore, the adolescents seem to suggest that there are explicit and implicit inroads of essentialization of cosmeceuticals as particular way of overall medicalization during adolescence.

As an individual becomes increasingly conscious about his/her body, considering it a body project, he/she increases the usage of beauty products and cosmetics.²² The uncontrolled expansions of industries are blurring the boundaries and so the cosmetic impacts are penetrating other domains like nutrition. This argument can be backed by a number of other peculiar examples, like supplements, protein shakes, vaping, nicotine pouches, massage stones and aromatic face masks etc. Consequently, among the urbanized adolescents of Islamabad, the phenomenon of aesthetic medicalization is becoming essentialized, and the availability of products as a self-serving market for aestheticization compels adolescents to be active consumers.

The research finds that adolescents are conscious of their increasing reliance on medical systems and medicine. They often attribute the same to their eager nature for quick fixes, and there are many inroads for intensified sources of information, increasing the inlets of medicalization. Despite our limited sample, we have attempted to decipher the extent of aestheticization that adolescents engage with. It was found that adolescents prioritize their corporeal selves as a site of intervention to gain aesthetic attraction. This significance is expected to proliferate in the future when the body will be reduced to a costume.²³ The aesthetic essentialization assimilates the whole body, evident from the gym culture and diet regimen among adolescents.

Conclusion

Contemporary trends have made it difficult to define the boundary between the use of medicine to meet the requirements necessary

for disease management and aestheticization. The research seeks to discover the medicalization and aestheticization through medical regimens among the adolescent age group of Islamabad, which is identified as an urban site. We have argued that urbanization essentializes processes of globalization, industrialization, and similar macro-processes, which have a profound impact on the choices and behaviors of individuals. Adolescence is a vulnerable time period in the lives of individuals during which they go physiological as well as psychological and social progression. Their choices and interests during this phase guide the future orientation of their lives.

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Authors Contribution

WW: Idea conception, study designing, data collection, data analysis, results and interpretation, manuscript writing and proofreading

AQ: Idea conception, study designing, data analysis, results and interpretation, manuscript writing and proofreading