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I, Ahmed Alwulaili, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology.

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**The Body Experiences of Men and Women in Saudi Arabia**

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by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research examines how men and women think about and experience their bodies in Saudi Arabia. Only a few years ago, Saudi Arabia was one of the most gender conservative nations in the world, but the country is undergoing fairly rapid changes in areas that affect the ways in which social life is gendered. In this study, I sought to understand how men and women think about their bodies in Saudi Arabia. Over Zoom, I conducted in-depth interviews with a total of 40 Saudis to find out how the participants would respond to questions about they think about and experience their bodies and how their bodies impact their lives in Saudi society. I chose Saudi Arabia for several reasons: the history of gender segregation in social life, the cultural context of traditional clothing, and the fact that Saudi Arabia is a non-Western country. There is a lack of research about how the body and gender are perceived in non-Western countries. Recent scholarship that has emphasized non-Western studies of bodies and gender have focused more on women's experiences than on men's. Such studies have mostly focused on the negative consequences of unrealistic cultural standards concerning the body, such as eating disorders, social anxiety, dissatisfaction, and depression. Much less attention has been directed at men's bodies and men's engagement with ideal body standards. This study aims to contribute to our understanding of the inequality between men and women in terms of the body in non-Western countries. The women and men who were interviewed in this study agreed that fatness is a stigma for both men and women. The study also showed that women are more concerned about their bodies than men are, and there are differences between the generations in terms of accepting and agreeing upon wearing Western clothes or traditional clothes. Those who are under 40 years old are more willing to wear Western clothes than those who are more than 40 years old.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

Some years ago, a friend came up to me at a wedding and asked me how the groom, one of my friends, had married, since the groom is very obese. We continued our conversation about what a man should do for his body before marriage. My friend spoke about the importance of losing weight by working out and said that if a person is extremely fat, he should have surgery. My friend further explained that it is not a good idea to get married when one is overweight. As he spoke, I realized that our understanding about the male body in Saudi Arabia has changed, but how about women's views? Because of the nation's gender segregation, there is no way for me to see how body concern has changed for women in Saudi Arabia. However, interactions with my relatives and family have shown me a little about what has changed in terms of body concern for women in Saudi Arabia.

Examining stories people tell about their body experiences allows one not only to understand an individual's sense of who they are, but also the ways in which a given culture organizes gender. This project examines how men and women in Saudi Arabia think about and experience their bodies. A few years ago, Saudi Arabia was one of the most gender conservative nations in the world, but the nation is undergoing fairly rapid changes in areas that affect the ways in which social life is gendered. In this study, I sought to understand what men and women say and think about their bodies in Saudi Arabia. Using Zoom, I conducted in-depth interviews with a total of 40 Saudis to find out how the participants would respond to this question. I examined how men and women think about and experience their bodies and how their bodies impact their lives in Saudi society.

I chose Saudi Arabia for many reasons. First, Saudi Arabia has a long history of gender segregation in social life. For example, one of the features of Saudi Arabian society has

long been gender segregation in public spaces, such as universities, schools, restaurants, and government offices (Alsadaan et al. 2021; Le Renard 2012; Meijer 2010). However, more recently the government has sought to expand women's rights by easing the restrictions on a woman's ability to drive and by reducing gender segregation in some public places, such as hospitals, restaurants, stadiums, and government offices (Meijer 2010). This change can help us study a society that is experiencing an important stage in the transition in gender relations from segregation to convergence. Studying a society at this stage can give an indication of the effect of these transformations on both men's and women's thoughts about their bodies.

The cultural context of traditional clothing is another reason for focusing on Saudi Arabia. Traditional clothing includes the abaya for women, which covers the entire body as well as the face, and the thobe for men, which covers the body and is typically worn with the ghutra or shemagh on the head (ghutra or shemagh are same, but they are different colors; the ghutra is white and the shemagh is red). Even though the hijab or abaya is essentially required attire for women in most Muslim societies, a new generation of Saudi women has begun using the abaya as a fashionable article of clothing that can be individualized in various ways. While the abaya and hijab in Saudi Arabi and other Muslim countries have attracted some scholarly attention, traditional clothes for men in Saudi Arabia have received significantly less (Donica 2020). The ghutra, shemagh, and thobe are most distinctive to Saudi men's cultural identity. There is evidence that the government seeks to keep the traditional clothes alive by discouraging the wearing of Western clothes, occasionally making traditional clothing a requirement for entering any government spaces (Meijer 2010). Studying the clothes of Saudi society may offer an insight into the extent to which the Saudis are influenced by Western culture.



The other reason for choosing Saudi Arabia is that Saudi Arabia is a non-Western country. There are few studies regarding body and gender in non-Western countries, so this project aims to contribute to our understanding of the differences between men and women in terms of attitudes toward the body in non-Western countries.

Stigma, body concern, and clothes are the three concepts that I address in the findings. Stigma is described by Goffman (1963) as a "deeply discrediting attribute," one "that classifies a person as dangerous or unacceptable based on three categories: 1.) race, nation, and religion, 2.) an abomination of the body, for example, various physical deformities, and 3.) a blemish of individual character, for example, laziness, dishonesty, and mental instability" (Goffman 1963:3–4). Some people interviewed in this study described fat people, both male and female, as careless and negligent. Thinness became one of the determinants of social acceptability for both women and men (Hesse-Biber 2010). Some studies have found that simply looking at a fat person leads other people to think they know something about him or her, as a sort of "collective knowledge" (Brewis 2014:153)—they infer, for example, that the person is fat because he or she overeats and is lazy (Murray 2005).

Body concern is common in both men and women and includes feelings about body size, body attractiveness, and other feelings associated with body size and shape (Grogan 2007). The general appearance of the body and how others see it is mostly related to the degree of satisfaction one has with one's body (Cash and Deagle 1997). This concern can change over time, for the society as well as for individuals. For example, at one time, fatness in Arab societies, as well as some Western societies, was considered a mark of beauty for women (Yahia et al. 2011), but recent studies show how Westernized views of the ideal body image have

impacted Arab societies. Today, a thin body is seen as a measure of beauty for women (Yahia et al. 2011).

Clothes can generate meanings about us and our bodies, as well as reflect our feelings in everyday life. Clothes also provide insights into not only how clothes and fashion are perceived by others, but also how clothing can construct a particular image (Silverman 2013). Some scholars analyze gender roles in terms of clothes. For example, Goffman shows how the body is an aspect of social interaction (Goffman 1983) and a "site of the constantly changing expression of selfhood in the social world" (Silverman 2013:73). Goffman also studied how we create for others a specific image of ourselves through the use of clothing, decor, language, and behaviors that reinforce our presentation of self (Goffman 1959).

In this project, I examined how men and women think about and experience their bodies in Saudi Arabia. In Chapter Four, I examine how men and women experience their bodies in terms of fatness and stigma in their social lives. In Chapter Five, I examine body concern and gender between men and women in the way both men and women express concern about the body early in life, what is considered attractive by both genders, and how both men and women see cosmetic surgery as a solution to problems with their appearance. In Chapter Six, I investigate how men and women in Saudi Arabia define their bodies in terms of their social lives, and I examine the attitudes toward clothing from both men and women. All chapters focus on analyzing the answers that come from the men and women that I interviewed about their bodies and genders in their social lives. While most of them preferred not to speak about themselves, they were very open to sharing experiences, for example, about their relatives or friends.

## CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The body has been a topic of interest in various academic disciplines, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, and medicine. Research from these different disciplines has created diverse knowledge about the body and the factors affecting it. For example, some psychological research has focused on the body and the factors affecting bodily dissatisfaction and the psychological diseases associated with dissatisfaction, such as depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, and eating disorders (Kronenfeld et al. 2010; Merten, Wickrama, and Williams 2008; Overstreet, Quinn, and Atocha 2010; Roberts et al. 2006). Some anthropological research has focused on the body as a symbol that has meaning, both individually and socially, and that can serve as a form of cultural representation (Mauss 1934; 2007).

In the 1990s, sociologists began studying the body as well as the social experience of embodiments (Shilling 2007; Turner 1997). The body as a topic in sociology became a focal point for understanding social life. There are a range of phenomena, problems, and issues in society that are connected to the human body, and these issues affect everyday life and how bodies both constitute and move through social spaces. The increasing focus on the body in sociology and adjacent disciplines led to the founding of the *Journal of Body and Society* (first published in 1995), which is devoted to research on the body (Boero and Mason 2020). In addition, the American Sociological Association has recognized the importance of this area of study about the body and embodiment with the establishment of a new section in 2008 (Boero and Mason 2020).

The study of the body in sociology has made a significant impact on theories. For example, the ideas and theories of Michel Foucault, Erving Goffman, Pierre Bourdieu, as well as feminist theory have all played important roles in this field, as have sociologists who focus on

gender distinctions by concentrating on social relations and the body (Bourdieu 2001). An area of the study of domination through bodies has examined areas as diverse as the sexual division of labor and women's use of cosmetics (Silverman 2013). In addition, some sociologists have approached the body as a social product linked to social class (Bourdieu 1984), examining social class influences on the body in terms of food, strength, health, and beauty (Bourdieu 1984). Yet other scholars are concerned with the body as an aspect of social interactions (Goffman 1983). In addition, there is also an ongoing focus on understanding the ways the body is constructed and disciplined through power and discourse (Foucault 1980).

Even though many of the existing works on body studies have come from different academic disciplines, a variety of sociologists have also made important contributions to this area. Goffman wrote about how the body became an aspect of social interactions (Goffman 1983) and another researcher describes how it became a "site of the constantly changing expression of selfhood in the social world" (Silverman 2013:73). These scholars have analyzed details of appearance, noting how, for example, combed or uncombed hair, changing facial muscles, the crossing or uncrossing of legs or glances averted or sought (Goffman 1963) "are an intrinsic component of a general state of performance, as people present (and represent) themselves on the stage of the social world" (Silverman 2013:73–74) According to Goffman, we create for others a specific image of ourselves through the use of clothing, decor, language, and behaviors that reinforce our presentation of self (Goffman 1959). Scholars have focused on how individuals in different social classes use their resources to change or enhance their bodies. The middle and upper classes have the money to follow fashion trends, as well as to try and explore various types of fashion (Healy 2014; Orbach 1993) because fashion or the clothed body is an important element in the distinction and competition between classes (Simmel 1957). Further,

scholars have noted that the middle and upper classes, who have power, "set the standards for what is fashionable" (Grogan 2007:164). This, of course, implies that only the wealthy can afford to buy into the ideal (Grogan 2007:164). The criteria for what are considered fashionable may impact negatively on people in the lower classes (Healy 2014), as they try to imitate the upper classes in "cosmetics, clothing or home decoration" (Bourdieu 1979:57).

The body has become a major part of the commodification of the everyday world. For example, medical developments in health and beauty have contributed to changing viewpoints on treatments such as plastic surgery, which contribute in one way or another to rebuilding the body to match cultural expectations (Turner 1992). In addition to that, the development in entertainment industries such as sports and film, as well as the cultural openness between countries, the increase in travel and cultural convergence, and the rapid development in the media have made the body a primary marketing tool, creating similar body preferences among societies, such as for a thin and muscular gender-based body and a negative reaction towards physical forms that do not follow these standards (Turner 1992).

These and other scholars have made great contributions to our understanding of bodies and how bodies are influenced by society through different aspects such as class, race, and gender. Yet there remains a need for scholars to study the developments and rapid changes in society that will further influence preferences, attitudes, and behavior.

## **THE BODY: BIOLOGY OR SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION**

Feminist scholars have raised the question of whether the body is most productively understood as a social construct. From the 1970s to the 1980s, especially, many studies emerged with the main goal of showing that the body is socially constructed (Fausto-Sterling 1985; Lorber 1993; West and Zimmerman 1987). The focus was on how differences between genders were created. Some scholars argued that women became women through social and psychological processes that built them as female (Beauvoir 1972). This argument has generated much research that examines questions related to how relationships between women and men are built and how that affects women's bodies; some scholars argue that relations between women and men are built on power and that different forms of male control affect women's bodies (Brownmiller 1984; Greer 2001; Rubin 2006).

Some studies examine how femininity is associated with various restrictions on the body, including what a woman's body should look like, what it can and cannot do, and how it is supposed to comport itself (Bordo 1993; MacSween 2013). From this perspective, the differences between men's and women's bodies are not natural but instead socially produced and constructed. Scholars have also explored the social subordination of women's bodies. Some, for example, investigate eating disorders in women (Bordo 1993; MacSween 2013), how fat became a feminist issue (Orbach 1993; Saguy 2012; Simic 2016), how women's bodies have become consumer objects through plastic surgery (Abbaszadeh et al. 2012; Bucknor et al. 2018; Synnott 1990), and numerous other issues related to gendered bodies.

### *Power and the Body*

Another area that sociologists have studied is how power is exercised to control the body. Some researchers have shown how representations of the body were the result of relations of power (Foucault 1990). Foucault is one of the scholars who opened new ways of thinking and more discussion about how bodies are represented in society and how the body is constructed by power (Turner 2008). According to Foucault, power is exerted on the body because the body requires discipline (Foucault 1990). Disembodied power is expressed in daily practices and routines that make people engage in self-surveillance and self-discipline, for example, in terms of hygiene and healthcare (Foucault 1979). These ideas contributed to new ways of thinking about and studying the body. Studies have also explored the role of the body in racial domination (Stoler 1995) and examined how racialized representations of bodies in media and culture reinforce inequality (Mercer 1994; Yancey and Kim 2008).

### *The Body in Social Life*

The third main perspective in the sociology of the body shows how and why individuals behave the way they do in society. Some scholars are interested in how individuals manage their bodies and learn how to behave based on social norms (Mauss 2007), while others focus on the mechanisms that contribute to producing certain body forms through different practices (Silverman 2013). Clothing, tastes in food, exercise, and other body-related social practices vary across different classes and produce bodies that differ in appearance, posture, stature, health, etc. (Bourdieu 1984:192). Moreover, Bourdieu argues that masculine domination produces collective expectations linked to class or gender in ways that “tend to inscribe themselves in bodies in the form of permanent dispositions” (Bourdieu 2001:61). These studies pushed other scholars to ask

questions about how women and men think about, use, perceive, and manage their bodies in different class situations (Dea and Caputi 2001; Talukdar and Linders 2013). All these questions contribute in one way or another to the enrichment of social research as well as creating an opening for more questions about the body, race, class, and gender that need to be studied.

### *The Body and Gender*

Up to this point, researchers have focused more on how women experience their own bodies than on how men experience theirs, but this is changing as the links between masculinity and bodies are increasingly studied. The primary goal of body image research has been to understand the female body image (Hargreaves and Tiggemann 2006), and this reflects the large number of studies that focus on explaining the perceived pressure for women, in general, to be thin, which can cause eating disorders and social anxiety (Cash and Pruzinsky 2002; Thompson, He, and Tantleff Dunn 1999).

While researchers have long focused on studying the female body, studies on male body image have also started to emerge (Brennan, Lalonde, and Bain 2010; Ricciardelli and McCabe 2004). One prevalent subject of study relates to body dissatisfaction and the way it is experienced and expressed differently by men and women. The feeling of dissatisfaction with the body for women is mostly expressed as concern for thinness, while for men, it is mostly connected to their muscle size and shape (Garner 1997). Some researchers have found that women experience more body dissatisfaction than men (Davis, Best, and MacNeill 2017; Fallon and Rozin 1985; Garner 1997; Rodin 1985). Additionally, women have more eating disorders than men (Davis et al. 2017). Some researchers indicate that men's body image is a social problem because it is hidden, and men avoid speaking about this because they feel ashamed or



embarrassed (Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia 2000). Therefore, few researchers have examined and studied men's body image.

The relationship between gender and the body has been addressed by many scholars. Goffman, for example, analyzes the body and gender in a dramaturgical model to understand and explain social phenomena such as the social behavior and interactions between individuals in society (Goffman 1959), writing that "gender is to be defined as the culturally established correlates of sex" (1976:1). These shows and interactions help to create gender categories (Smith and Smith 2016). The definitions of "normal" or "not normal" about gender come from within social structures, and the social meaning becomes more specific through interaction (Smith and Smith 2016). For example, a healthy body plays a significant role not only in preventing illness but also in increasing one's self-satisfaction and confidence when they present to others (Howson and Inglis 2001). People who are overweight, however, face more challenges than those who are not, including dealing with some stereotypical characterizations such as being considered lazy and sloppy (Gilman 2008). These stereotypes reflect stigma toward a specific type of body (Goffman 1963). Moreover, fatness can hold stigma more on one gender than another. For example, women are much more afraid of fatness than men are (Gilman 2008).

Many studies have dealt with body image perceptions between men and women in different areas such as body dissatisfaction and body experience (Davis et al. 2017; Fallon and Rozin 1985; Garner 1997; Rodin 1985), body image, eating disorders (Davis et al. 2017), and physical appearance (Brennan et al. 2010). Studies done by researchers from different perspectives are seeking to understand the body and how body perception has been influenced by different factors for men and women. Yet there remains a need for researchers to analyze men's bodies to reduce the gap in studies between men and women in social life.

### *The Body and Class*

Sociologists have long written about and analyzed the relationship between the body and social inequality, and some of these analyses have highlighted the differences between bodies in terms of gender, and the intersection of race, class, and gender has also gotten some recent attention (Mason 2013).

Several scholars have noted the importance of class location for women's dis/satisfaction with their bodies. For example, in western communities, women from higher socio-economic classes are more dissatisfied with their bodies than women in lower classes (Holmqvist and Frisé 2010; McLaren and Kuh 2004). Scholars have observed that class, like race, impacts women's expectations of and satisfaction with their bodies (Adams 2007) and that women and men embody their class positions differently to ensure the reproduction of gender distinctions (Bourdieu 2001). Like any other cultural practice, the body takes on symbolic meanings that enhance the reproduction of social hierarchies (Bourdieu 1977).

Other studies emphasize how body and employment are related and how they impact each other in social life (Mason 2013). For example, scholarship has shown that individuals who have non-normative bodies—are fatter, less conventionally beautiful, have darker skin color, or any bodily blemish—face discrimination in the workplace and are deprived of pay bonuses and some job privileges because of their bodies (Mason 2013). Much scholarly evidence demonstrates that employers do not like to hire people of certain body types that do not follow the standard of the good body or of beauty in a specific culture (Averett and Korenman 1996; Carr and Friedman 2005; Cawley 2004; Cawley and Danziger 2005; Gortmaker et al. 1993; Haskins and Ransford 1999; Mason 2013). Studies have demonstrated that beauty has long been

an important condition for employment for women in occupations that capitalize on women's appearances (Wolf 2013), including flight attendants and marketing and customer service (Sutton 2009). Thus, normative bodies are more employable than non-normative bodies. Studies have shown that "white-collar" jobs are related to normative slender bodies (Carr and Friedman 2005).

Other studies have focused on how individuals in different social classes use their resources to change or enhance their bodies. The middle and upper classes have both the power to set fashion standards (Healey 2014) and the resources to follow fashion trends (Grogan 2007; Healy 2014; Orbach 1993). In contrast, the upper classes have access to better health care and high-quality nutrition, and overall have fewer health problems, less chronic high stress, and live longer lives (Syme and Berkman 1976). Furthermore, caring for the body, treating, feeding, and maintaining it, as well as the natural features of the body, are different across class (Bourdieu 1977 Mason 2013). In short, scholars have examined the role of social inequality in terms of class, race, and gender, and have shown how these influence, and are influenced by, the body in differing ways. Some of these analyses have used an intersectional approach to understand the multiple issues that relate to the body.

To conclude this section, researchers have studied how social class plays a role in a variety of body-related issues, including the links between disadvantage and non-normative bodies and variations in body acceptance among people in different social classes (Holmqvist and Frisé 2010; McLaren and Kuh 2004).

### *The Body and the Global Context*

Scholars have studied the body and its connection to various social locations—for example, to race, gender, and class. However, non-Western societies have not received the attention they

deserve regarding these topics. Scholars have noted that studies about bodies and globalization are rare (Casanova and Jafar 2013). There are few studies and research on the body being done in any other part of the world other than in Western nations. Therefore, studies on body and body image issues in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa are limited and inadequate.

The limited number of studies about the body and globalization points to some questions that need to be examined, including how people in different parts of the world think about and experience their bodies. How do people beyond Western democracies act and interact with their bodies? How can we see the impact of politics and economics on their bodies? Why do most studies focus on western nations? What is the impact of globalization on bodies in terms of gender, race, and class? In the next section, I will address studies about race, class, gender that are connected to studies of the body to understand how "non-Western" people relate to their bodies and respond to body-pressures coming from the West.

### *Gender and Body in a Global Context*

Some studies have found that women in the global South face more pressure regarding body image and suffer from eating disorders at rates that approach those of Western societies (Sharps, Price-Sharps, and Hanson 2001; Wardle, Haase, and Steptoe 2006). Scholars have also found that thin bodies symbolize the privileges and advantages that rich women enjoy over women in other classes (Brumberg 1997; Vester 2010). Women are more often implicated in new messages about the body than men are (Jeffery and French 1996; McLaren and Kuh 2004), and women in non-Western societies have been influenced to strive for the ideal body. In this sense, and drawing directly on Bourdieu, the body takes on symbolic meaning and enhances the reproduction of social hierarchies like any other cultural practice (Bourdieu 1979:190). In

addition, the body is “is the most indisputable materialization of class taste” (Bourdieu 1979: 190). The taste and preferences regarding the body are connected to class also (Dworkin and Wachs 2009).

The spread of body preferences and pressure on women contributed to the increase in studies that attempt to explain this phenomenon in non-Western societies. For example, women on the Indian subcontinent have a long history of modifying the body by using traditional herbs and medicines (Zimik 2016). Further, women's bodies in India are "openly scrutinized and criticized" (Kapadia 2009) and the ideal body for Indian women has become thinner than before (Markey 2004). Men also have faced scrutiny of their bodies in India in recent years. For example, male actors in India are more muscular than those in the previous generations (Kapadia 2009). This can be, in part, the result of the influence of the Western model on the body in India. Further, Kapadia's research on Indians also found that most women in the study were dissatisfied with their body size and shape, and that family, relatives, Western media, and friends played important roles in influencing body change in women (Kapadia 2009).

Some researchers have found that individuals in Western societies are especially concerned with physical appearance (Brennan et al. 2010), reporting that physical attractiveness is beneficial in various ways. People who are judged to be more attractive in Western societies are also seen as more intelligent than unattractive people (Solomon, Zaichkowsky, and Polegato 2005). Also, in Western societies, attractiveness is judged differently for men and women. For women, attractiveness is connected more to thinness, while for men it is more connected to muscular appearance (Brennan et al. 2010). Additionally, some researchers have studied the differences in the way society judges ideal beauty in women and men (Fallon and Rozin 1985; Lynch and Zellner 1999). And some studies have shown that media (e.g., advertising, movies,

magazines, newspapers, and television) play roles in the discourse of ideal body and beauty for both men and women (Fraser 2009; Solovay 2012). Some studies have discussed how media contribute to spreading the idea that there is an ideal standard for female beauty and how an attractive body would give women the chance to choose better jobs or spouses (Fraser 2009; Solovay 2012). However, other scholars have recently begun to shift some of their attention to constructions of the ideal male body (Fuller-Tyszkiewicz and Ricciardelli 2010; Farquhar and Wasylkiw 2007; Ricciardelli, Banfield, and McCabe 2000). For example, the muscular body is seen as the ideal for a man (Farquhar and Wasylkiw 2007; Fuller-Tyszkiewicz and Ricciardelli 2010). Researchers think that by increasing attention on men's bodies from media, more pressure has been put on men to achieve certain societal ideals (Banfield et al. 2000; Fuller-Tyszkiewicz and Ricciardelli 2010). Furthermore, body dissatisfaction and eating disorders have increased among men, which may lead to reducing the gender gap in body image (Banfield et al. 2000; Fuller-Tyszkiewicz and Ricciardelli 2010). But the evidence is still uncertain about this. An Australian study, for example, found little evidence that adolescent boys are concerned about their bodies (Banfield et al. 2000). The possible reason for this lack of a relationship between mass media and the boys' body images might be that the boys cannot admit to body dissatisfaction because of social and cultural reasons such as shame (Hargreaves and Tiggemann 2006).

Like in the west, scholars of the Eastern Mediterranean Region and Arab societies have noted that in the past fatness was considered feminine, a part of female beauty (El Ansari et al. 2014). However, recent studies have found that the body ideals of western societies have now reached Arab societies (Yahia et al. 2011), where thin female bodies are now considered beautiful (Musaiger, Bin Zaal, and D'Souza 2012). In addition to that, research has also

identified an increased risk of eating disorders in the United Arab Emirates (Thomas, Khan, and Abdulrahman 2010). Overall, body image dissatisfaction is increasing in Arab societies, especially among women (Thomas et al. 2010).

To sum up, studies from around much of the world have shown that gendered perceptions of the body are growing increasingly similar in some respects. However, this field needs more in-depth study to explore what men and women think about their bodies and how they experience their bodies in their everyday lives.

### *Class, Body, and a Global Perspective*

Body-type preferences vary across societies. For example, Western societies put more pressure on individuals to follow the standard of thinness especially when the socioeconomic status for individuals increases (Goldblatt, Moore, and Stunkard, 1965; Silverstone 1970; Silverstone, Gordon, and Stunkard 1969). In contrast, in some countries, for example, South China (Chang et al. 1963), India (Mayer 1955), and Latin America and Puerto Rico (Dolan 1991), the relationship between socioeconomic status and body size is positive. In other words, some cultures value fat bodies, whereas others value thin bodies.

However, the cultural value of body size can change in societies, including as a result of ubiquitous Western media images and other cultural products. Recent research has shown how bodies in non-Western countries are becoming increasingly important in people's lives. For example, a study by Talukdar and Linders on urban Indian women examined "the ways in which [women] resist and embrace cultural demands on their bodies" and how these "vary by social class locations" (Talukdar and Linders 2013:101).

Some cultures have been influenced by the West in terms of clothes and how their clothing choices differ based on social location. For example, the so-called “new woman” in Bangladesh is represented in the media as professional, educated, bold, and outgoing, as well as wanting to be free from domestic obligations (Hussein 2015). Bangladeshi middle-class women now spend more money on clothing to maintain a middle-class lifestyle (Sabur 2010). But rather than adopting Western norms unreflectively, women in Bangladesh try to establish a good balance between traditional Bangladeshi clothes and fashionable Western clothes (Gilbertson 2011; Hussein 2017). The hijab, or head scarf, in Bangladesh has become popular among working urban women as well as among lower-class young women at the universities (Rozario 2006). The influence of Western cultures plays an important role in terms of spending money on Western clothes.

## **FATNESS, GENDER, AND THE BODY**

Over the last few decades, the increase in gender studies has contributed to the emerging field of fatness studies (Harjunen 2009). This field focuses on the social, cultural, psychological, economic, and historical aspects of fatness and seeks to explain how fat people are treated and portrayed. Scholars in this field see body weight and size as carrying a set of social meanings, depending on gender, traditions, values, and the culture of societies, and they emphasize how meanings pertaining to fat bodies can change across time and place (Harjunen 2009; Sobal and Maurer 1999).

Broadly speaking, theoretical approaches to the study of fatness are either objectivist or constructivist (Sobal and Maurer 1999). The objectivist approach addresses the problems associated with fatness (obesity, ill health, etc.), while the constructivist approach concentrates



on the ways an individual's body is defined based on its weight. The constructivist approach also focuses on the fact that, more than ever, a greater number of people are overweight (Harjunen 2008; Sobal and Maurer 1999).

Scholars working in the constructivist tradition have identified the processes whereby various social actors and institutions have erected boundaries between normative and non-normative bodies (Foucault 1979). As a result of such processes, the bodies are seen as different and separated based on the judgement of society as to the distinction between fatness or thinness (Harjunen 2009). All of these differences, for example "fatness or thinness," between bodies, either normative or non-normative, are considered social constructions. Thus, normative and non-normative bodies are linked to the social meanings that reflect the history, culture, tradition, values, and norms of certain nations. For example, social acceptability and respectability have always been linked to body size. Historically, the respectable body of both men and women was stout and sturdy, but now the respectable body is thin (Featherstone 1982). This is especially so for women, and increasingly so for men as well (Cordes et al 2017; Galioto and Crowther 2013). In the section, I will highlight the studies on fatness with an emphasis on gender in different social settings as well as focusing on media and how it impacts on the body image.

### *Fatness and the Media*

Much research has been done regarding media representations of women's bodies, and attempts have been made to understand how such representations impact women's experiences of their own bodies. Some scholars have studied how cultural products such as advertisements, talk shows, and movies impact women's experiences of their own bodies, regardless of whether they are fat or not (Bordo 1993). Much work has been done on the portrayal of fat bodies in television

(Farr 2021; Kosier and Renfrow 2016). Researchers have also focused on how television programs have created diverse ways of understanding fatness on American television (Zimdars 2021). Taylor and Gailey have explored how women who face fat hatred in the United States are treated by healthcare professionals, loved ones, friends, and strangers (Taylor and Gailey 2019). In addition, recent studies have begun to analyze the fat body in various online media sites. Some of these studies have shown how fat hate discourse is increasing in Western digital media and becoming part of everyday discourse (Cain, Donaghue, and Ditchburn 2017) and how it negatively affects well-being (Bresnahan et al. 2016; Cain, Donaghue, and Ditchburn 2017; Lupton 2017).

### *Fatness and Experiences in Social Life*

The interest in academic research about fatness and women in the mid-nineties focused more on body norms and ideals, how to control the female body, thinness and the pressure to achieve a thin body, and dieting (e.g., Bordo 1993; Orbach 1983; Wolf 2013), as well as eating disorders (e.g., Hesse-Biber 1996; Heywood 1996), and the consequences of being fat on social life. In the next part, I will discuss more recent scholarship on fatness and the experiences relating to being fat in the healthcare system, educational settings, and the labor market as places that related to social life.

Many scholars have addressed how fat women fare within the healthcare system and have analyzed their various experiences and interactions (Ioannoni 2020; McPhail et al. 2016). Some have addressed the treatment of fat women by healthcare professionals and how fat women face barriers to accessing health care (Ioannoni 2020). Other scholars have explored the stigma attached to being fat and how fat people fare throughout the medical profession (Lee and Pausé

2016). In educational settings, scholars have looked at how fatness affect experiences of both teachers and students (Fikkan and Rothblum 2012; Hunt and Rhodes 2018; Cameron and Russell 2016), including stigmas in the classroom (Hetrick and Attig 2009), and towards both fat professors and fat students (Escalera 2009; Fisanick 2014; Koppelman 2009). Additionally, scholars have focused on stigmas based on weight specifically for women in North America in educational settings (Fikkan and Rothblum 2012). Many studies have shown that fat people in the education system face institutional barriers such as lower college acceptance rates, harassment, and unfair evaluations from instructors (Puhl and Brownell 2001). Studies have found that fat professors work more than others in areas of education, even beyond the classroom, to combat the societal belief that fat people are less credible or knowledgeable than thinner people (Hunt and Rhodes 2018).

Additionally, some researchers indicate that fat women suffer more in the labor market (Czerniawski 2021; Less et al. 2019; Solanke 2021). For example, fat people are less likely to be hired, and, once they have a job, make less money than slim people (Lee et al. 2019). Further, scholars have analyzed how the intersections of fatness, race, and gender impact people's experiences in the workplace (Solanke 2021), and some studies have found that fat women suffer from racism in the workplace more than fat men (Flint et al. 2016).

### *Fatness and Socioeconomic Status*

Many studies have sought to determine the economic consequences of fatness (Gailey 2012; Lindly et al. 2014; McFarland et al. 2018). Some previous research provides evidence of negative consequences of fatness, for example, lower wages, for women in particular (Conley and Glauber 2006). Researchers have found employment discrimination (Fikkan and Rothblum

2005; Griffin 2007), slower rates of promotions, poorer performance evaluations, and lower compensation (Fikkan and Rothblum 2011) are generally connected with body size, but that all these have greater impact on women than men (Fikkan and Rothblum 2011; Roehling et al. 2007).

Scholars have also analyzed other aspects of social status that impact fat people. Some earlier studies found that fat women had a lower chance of getting married, which results in lower overall household incomes for fat women (Averett and Korenman 1996; Gortmaker et al. 1993). Further, when fat women get married, they are more likely than other women to end up with partners who have less education (Garn et al. 1989), lower income (Averett and Korenman 1996; Conley and Glauber 2006), lower social status (Oreffice and Quintana-Domeque 2010), and are less attractive (Carmalt et al. 2008). However, fat men experience fewer of these socioeconomic consequences (Fikkan and Rothblum 2012).

### *Why Study Gender and the Body in Saudi Arabia?*

The reasons that make Saudi Arabia such a rich site to examine men's and women's responses to body pressures are varied. Most important is the long history of gender segregation in social life. One of the features of Saudi Arabia's society has long been gender segregation in public spaces such as universities, schools, hospitals, restaurants, and government offices (Alsadaan et al. 2021; Meijer 2010; Renard 2012). However, more recently, the government has sought to expand women's rights by easing the restriction on women's ability to drive and by reducing gender segregation in some public places, such as hospitals, restaurants, stadiums, and government offices. In other words, while social restrictions on women are still a dominant part of society, the recent orders from the government about women's rights have produced some

progress toward gender equality, which probably has the greatest impact on the new generation who is growing up in the midst of this rapid social change. For my purposes, these changes are important as they increase the occasions for non-familial cross-gender contacts and, hence, require a new set of strategies for how to present a gendered self.

Another reason for focusing on Saudi Arabia is the cultural context of traditional clothing. Traditional clothing includes the abaya for women, which covers the entire body as well as the face, and the thobe for men, which covers the body and is typically worn with the ghutra or shemagh on the head. Men's clothing in western societies is different from Saudi clothes. Even though the hijab or abaya is essentially required attire for women in most Muslim societies, a new generation of Saudi women has begun using the abaya as a fashionable article of clothing that can be individualized in various ways. Therefore, women in Saudi Arabia increasingly view the abaya as a deliberately chosen cultural marker rather than a religiously mandated piece of clothing (DeCoursey 2017). Moreover, as Saudi Arabia becomes an increasingly open society with global connections, the presence of Western-clad foreigners is more ubiquitous. While the abaya and hijab in Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries have attracted some scholarly attention, traditional clothes for men in Saudi Arabia have received significantly less (Donica 2020). The ghutra, shemagh, and thobe are most distinctive to Saudi men's cultural identity. There is evidence that the government seeks to keep the traditional clothes alive by discouraging the wearing of western clothes, and occasionally making traditional clothing a requirement for entering any government spaces. The wearing of traditional or nontraditional clothes in Saudi Arabia is important beyond its simple function of covering the body: the clothes are an important way that people present themselves to others. Clothes contribute to the creation of an image of ourselves that we give off to others, and they also

contribute to the formation of the impressions we perceive of others. More specifically, they play a role in defining the difference and boundaries between what is appropriate for men and what is for women.

Yet another reason that makes Saudi society a rich site to examine the bodily experiences of men and women are the traditions of food. Food consumption can be traced to the history of Bedouin tribes who have greatly influenced Saudis' current diet (Greco 2022). The oil concession and the increase of income, as well as the traditional norms to respect and welcome guests and visitors (Greco 2022) with abundant food (lamb with rice, for example), have contributed to an increase in the amount of food that is served to both guests and family members.

Moreover, non-Western studies of bodies and gender have focused more on women's experiences than men's experiences. Such studies have mostly focused on the negative consequences of unrealistic cultural standards concerning the body, such as eating disorders, social anxiety, dissatisfaction, and depression. Much less attention has been directed at men's bodies and their engagement with ideal body standards. So, this project aims to contribute to our understandings of the difference between men and women in terms of the body in non-Western countries.

## **CONCLUSION**

In short, theories of the sociology of the body address the body from different perspectives, such as the power of discourse to control and invest bodies or see the body inside social relations or in three major interrelated factors: social location, taste, and habitus. The stigma around fat has

spread in social world, and scholars agree that gender plays an important role in terms of body concern in the areas of attractiveness, fatness, and other social interests such as clothes.

The stigma around fat, the discourse about the health and body concerns of men and women, and the studies about this phenomenon in the non-Western world can help us to understand what people think about their bodies and how they see the stigma around being fat or about the body in general. In this study, I want to see how Saudi men and women practice their body concern (differently or similarly) in various social contexts. In other words, this dissertation addresses gender and body in one non-Western country by looking at how Saudi men and women think about and experience their bodies.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### *Research Questions*

My principal research questions center on how men and women think about and experience their bodies. Given the paucity of studies conducted in the non-Western world (Casanova and Jafar 2013), I focused this study on men and women in Saudi Arabia. Until very recently, Saudi Arabia was one of the most gender conservative nations in the world, but currently the country is undergoing fairly rapid changes in areas that affect the ways in which social life is gendered. I want to know what men and women say and think about their bodies in Saudi Arabia. To answer this question, I interviewed men and women about their body experiences. I examined how men and women think about and experience their bodies, and how their bodies impact their lives in Saudi society. This study involves in-depth interviews conducted over Zoom or other comparable virtual platforms with a total of 40 Saudis.

### *Methodological Approach*

I used a qualitative approach to examine how Saudi men and women experience their bodies, collecting data from the interviews. A qualitative approach contributes unique understandings of social phenomena that are not accessible with quantitative approaches. Qualitative research focuses on understanding social phenomena by answering the questions of how and why the reality is socially constructed (Cleland 2017). Using a qualitative approach can help us understand what the interpretations and experiences of individuals are “at a particular point in time and in a social context” (Merriam 2002:4). Therefore, the method allows researchers to draw conclusions about how people construct “their world and their experiences” (Merriam



2002:4–5). Thus, this study used a qualitative approach to more fully understand how people experience their bodies, specifically along the lines of gender, in Saudi society.

### *Participants*

Recruitment was limited to Saudi people living in Saudi Arabia. Individuals of all backgrounds in Saudi Arabia were eligible to participate, but must be at least 19 years of age. I chose 19 years because most people in Saudi Arabia use the Islamic calendar instead of the English calendar and the years in the Islamic calendar are shorter than those in the English calendar. I chose 19 to make sure that participants were adults by American standards and to fulfill IRB requirements.

Flyers was posted on the social media platforms Twitter and What's up. I chose Twitter and What's up because they are the platforms most used by Saudi people. People who were interested in participating in this research were asked to contact the researcher directly by email, as described on the recruitment flyer. The invitation to participate included the primary investigator's contact information as well as a brief description of the study. I interviewed 40 Saudis: 25 men and 15 women about their experiences about their bodies.

In addition to social media announcements, I used the snowball method where participants recommend other potential participants. First, I used my personal networks to recruit participants. Then I asked them to introduce me to their friends, neighbors, and relatives. A copy of the invitation script is attached with the documents of the research in the appendix. From social media, I collected 12 participants (5 women and 7 men), and I collected 28 participants from the snowball method (10 women and 18 men).

The individuals who were willing to participate in the study received an Informed Consent Document by email at least one week prior to the scheduled interview date, giving them

time to ask any questions that might affect their participation. All who chose to participate in the study read and signed the consent form and scanned and sent it back to me by email. The consent form contained information about the primary investigator and the investigator's contact information. Before the interview began, the participants had a chance to ask questions about the study.

To ensure that the participants understood what they were agreeing to, I explained the goals of the research and the research questions to make sure they still wanted to participate in the study. Because my native language is Arabic, it was easy to explain the purpose of this study and ensure that they were willing to participate. Then I discussed the consent form with the participants in the Arabic language. In addition, I explained to the participants that their participation in the study was voluntary, and they were free to not answer a question or to discontinue the interview at any time for any reason. None of participants chose to discontinue. I answered all questions asked by participants through the recruitment process and the study phase. If potential participants had any questions while completing the survey questions, they could ask me. All participants indicated their consent by signing the Consent Form. Below I have added a table listing the participants' preliminary data. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

**Table 1.** Participants' Preliminary Data

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Employment Status</b>
1	Rawan	28	Female	Unmarried	Unemployed
2	Nada	22	Female	Unmarried	Unemployed
3	Ruba	27	Female	Unmarried	Employed
4	Wafaa	51	Female	Married	Unemployed
5	Sara	45	Female	Married	Unemployed
6	Tagreed	45	Female	Married	Employed
7	Mashaal	53	Female	Married	Employed
8	Rehem	28	Female	Unmarried	Employed
9	Amal	45	Female	Married	Employed
10	Hussah	41	Female	Unmarried	Employed
11	Aruwa	43	Female	Unmarried	Unemployed
12	Renad	22	Female	Unmarried	Unemployed
13	Aljwharah	30	Female	Unmarried	Unemployed
14	Reham	30	Female	Unmarried	Unemployed
15	Seham	33	Female	Unmarried	Unemployed
16	Mohamed	33	Male	Unmarried	Employed
17	Majed	27	Male	Unmarried	Employed
18	Abdurrahman	44	Male	Married	Employed
19	Moayed	38	Male	Married	Employed
20	Ahmed	41	Male	Married	Employed
21	Aziz	48	Male	Married	Employed
22	Khalid	45	Male	Married	Employed
23	Abu Zaher	44	Male	Married	Employed
24	Nasser	41	Male	Unmarried	Employed
25	Khaled	51	Male	Married	Employed
26	Yazeed	29	Male	Unmarried	Employed
27	Abdirahman	45	Male	Married	Employed
28	Abdelaziz	47	Male	Married	Employed
29	Mohammed	33	Male	Divorced	Employed
30	Salman	51	Male	Married	Employed
31	Moaaz	27	Male	Unmarried	Employed
32	Ibrahim	31	Male	Married	Employed
33	Talal	21	Male	Unmarried	Unemployed
34	Mohmed	33	Male	Unmarried	Employed
35	Mubarak	41	Male	Married	Employed

36	Mohammed	50	Male	Married	Employed
37	Abdulteff	50	Male	Married	Employed
38	Mouayed	37	Male	Married	Employed
39	Suleiman	39	Male	Married	Employed
40	Abdullah	56	Male	Married	Employed

### *Study Participants*

The site of the research was Saudi Arabia. I recruited a total of 40 individuals: 25 men and 15 women. The interviews were conducted by me between November 2021 and January 2022. All interviews were conducted virtually on a mutually agreed platform (e.g., Skype or Zoom). Out of consideration for Saudi Islamic culture, I gave the women the option of having their husbands or a male relative present during the interview and/or to have my wife present during the interview. All the women in this study preferred to have a relative or my wife listen in on the interviews, except one woman who preferred to do the interview with a relative or with my wife. Most of the participants live in or close to cities. The youngest person was 20 years old and the oldest person was 59 years old. Most young women do not have jobs, and they depend on their family income, but a few women who are above 40 years old work in the government sector. Most of the men work, but a few of the young men did not work and depended on their family income. The average monthly income for men is between \$2,300 to \$8,000 and for women between \$1,800 and \$4,000.

### *Data Collection*

The data for this study came from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 40 Saudi women and men for one hour. All participants were over 19 years old. Of the participants, 25 were men, and 15 were women. The data address how men and women in Saudi Arabia experience and think about their bodies generally and fatness in particular. More specifically, I sought to understand how individuals think about the links between body size and the prospects for a good life, including in terms of marriage, finding a job, making friends, and living a full and healthy life.

The interview guide had five sections: First, I asked the participants general information including age, education, profession, marital status, where they live, their income, weight, and gender. The second section contained questions about their perceptions and experiences of their bodies over time, including how they described and felt about their bodies and whether their bodies had changed. In the third section, I asked the participants about fatness, including how they viewed and defined fatness, and what, if any, are the differences between men and women when it comes to fatness. The fourth section deals with social life and body/fatness. In this section, I asked about attractiveness and the body, how the body affects their daily life, what kind of clothes they prefer (e.g., traditional clothing or Western clothing), and how body size impacts their choice of clothing. In the final section, I asked the participants if they had ever tried to change their bodies—for example, through dieting, exercise, or weight loss surgery—and if so, why. I also asked if such efforts changed how they felt about their bodies.

In addition, during the interviews I also took notes about their reactions to the questions, the emotions they displayed (such as laughter), and how they answered the questions (e.g., did they hesitate, did they show confidence). All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated to English, and all participants were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

### *Data Analysis*

My analysis of the data focused on identifying both similarities and differences between men and women in Saudi Arabia about their thoughts and experiences pertaining to their bodies as well as how they link body size and the prospects for a good life such as marriage, finding a job, making friends, and living a full and healthy life. The analysis was guided by the principles of grounded theory, which emphasize the importance of letting the findings emerge from the data (Charmaz 2003). For the analysis, I used NVivo to assist in the organization and coding of the data. The aim of the coding was to identify themes that emerged from the interviews. I first identified main codes that deal with the most prominent research themes, and then I identified smaller themes; for example, I selected stigma as a main theme and stigma in marriage and work as a smaller theme.

### *Limitations and Challenges*

There were several challenges associated with this study. First, the different time zones in Saudi Arabia and United States introduced some challenges. The seven-hour time difference between the two countries sometimes made organizing the interviews difficult. Second, gender segregation and other cultural constraints can make it difficult for me, a Saudi man, to interview women. Therefore, I gave all the women the options of either having their husbands (or another male relative) present during the interview or having my wife present when I conducted interviews (via Zoom). For example, one woman asked for the interview to be conducted via phone instead of zoom and to have my wife ask the questions, but she consented to use speakers so that I could hear the conversation. I gave all participants the option of not using the camera

and/or not having me audio-record the interviews. Out of the forty participants, none of the women and only three of the men preferred to use the camera during the interview. Both men and women were more comfortable speaking about their body experiences without being seen on camera.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FATNESS AND GENDER

In this chapter, I explore themes around fatness that emerged from the interviews. I am particularly interested in how fatness is defined and how gender is related to the definition of fatness. This analysis is organized into five themes: 1) the meaning of fatness; 2) fatness as a problem; 3) the stigma associated with fatness; 4) fat acceptance; and 5) how fatness influences marriage and work. All five themes are explored in relation to gender. The themes are overlapping and interrelated in both the men and women's stories, but they will be analyzed separately in order to clarify for the reader the cultural pressures on both men and women in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, each of these themes also contrasts the differences between modern and traditional elements of Saudi society, especially in relation to gender.

This analysis will show how women and men think about the fatness of others and how they see their own body weight. The impact and reactions from relatives and friends about the participants' bodies will also be discussed, as well as the impact of fatness in different social contexts, such as work and marriage. The evidence shows that men and women have complex and different interpretations of the meaning of fatness. Cultural considerations also play a role in determining what is and is not acceptable about fatness. Men and women spoke differently about how fatness is interpreted in social situations and how the consequences of being fat are not the same for both genders. However, they all agreed that fatness is a problem.

### *The Meaning of Fatness*

Without exception, all participants thought that fatness is not only a health problem but can also be a problem that impacts individuals socially and psychologically. However, when we first



discussed how they defined fatness, both men and women spoke about fatness in similar terms. I began by discussing their definition of fatness. Most women saw fatness as weight or when the body gains weight. For instance, Rawan, a 28-year-old woman, said:

When the body weight exceeds what is considered its normal weight, the person becomes fat. Weight is highly dependent on height and other things, but fatness becomes significantly evident if the weight of the body exceeds a normal weight.

In a similar response, Nada, a 22-year-old woman, said that fat “is an increase in an individual's body size which causes a person damage and danger to his health.” Finally, Ruba, a 27-year-old woman, defined fatness in this way: “When the individual has fat in his body that causes weight gain, which affects his health and damages his life.”

Most women agree that fatness is mostly related to body size and body shape. Therefore, they see fatness as fat in the body or as an increasing body size.

Men define fatness in the same way the women do. The first way in which Saudi men defined fatness was in relation to the body frame. Others see fatness as related to health and illness. Sometimes, respondents said that fatness makes the body and the shape of the body unfamiliar. For instance, Mohamed, a 33-year-old manager says:

Fatness is mostly related to body size, when the body and all parts of the body no longer fit the frame of the body.

Majed, 27, agrees:

Fatness is mostly related to health and illness. Fatness is when the body exceeds the ideal body weight.

Saudi men all defined fatness in relation to the body frame and health. Sometimes, respondents mentioned that fatness impacts the body and its ability to move and act. For instance, Abdurrahman, a 44-year-old man, says:

Fatness becomes clear, in general, when weight and height are disproportionate. This is what is known as being overweight. Usually, an overweight person cannot control his weight and eating habits.

Men and women defined fatness in similar ways, linking it to a body size that is disproportionate to the body shape. Both men and women said they noticed when bodies changed (becoming bigger or smaller). Moreover, both men and women see fatness as a health problem as well as a social one. Next, we will see how men and women see fatness differently.

### *Fatness as a Problem*

Most of the participants thought that fatness is not only a health problem but also a social, economic, and psychological one. For example, Rawan, 28, spoke about why fatness is problem:

Fatness causes great harm, but it depends on the person. Sometimes he's very fat and it affects his health. In others, obesity is just overweight, so it's okay. It doesn't affect the person's health. For example, there are examples of women who are very obese, and this causes problems during pregnancy. Also, they might develop diabetes. Fatness causes laziness because a person can't work unless they're thin.

Providing a similar response to why fatness is problem, Wafaa, a 51-year-old woman stated:

Yes, I think that a fat person feels annoyed by his fatness because it affects the type of clothes he can wear, how he sits or stands . . . everything. He does not look good. People laugh at him and bully him because of how he looks.

Sara, a 45-year-old woman, says that fatness is not only a health problem:

It is a health problem, a psychological and social problem as well. It is psychological fatigue. A person wants to improve his or her body but cannot. And socially, people look at him or her critically. I mean, they would make fun of the person.

Sara, Wafaa, and Rawan's responses are common examples of how the women thought about the problems associated with fatness. They see fatness as not only a health problem but also a social one that makes some social activities difficult. The women respondents were outspoken about their understanding of the problems created by fatness, and several gave examples of what they have faced in their lives—for example, "bullying because their bodies are big, threats to their social lives, and criticisms of their clothing" (Sara 45).

Men thought somewhat differently about how fatness is a problem. Some of them see fatness as only a health problem that does not damage men and their personal lives. For example, Ahmed, 41, Moayed, 38, and Aziz, 48, all agree that fatness is only a health problem that does not impact other aspects of a man's life because he should have confidence in his body. Fatness cannot do any damage to his personality. Moayed said:

Fatness is mostly a health problem that can put you in danger of getting some diseases.

The criteria of masculinity are not related to obesity, and obesity has nothing to do with masculinity. Rather, obesity does not affect men, unlike women.

Another example comes from Khaled, who is 45:

Yes, fatness is a health problem and not a social one. People don't look at it socially, but mentally. I don't think it affected me socially because 80 percent of the men in our society are like me. Yes, I mean half of them are either overweight or average.

However, other respondents see fatness as a problem. For example, Abu Zaher, 44, said:

I do consider it a problem, a health problem. A health and behavioral problem, and a social problem, especially in hot weather. Honestly, it's more of a social problem in hot weather. It's hard to be around obese people in hot weather. They come into the office from outside and are sweaty and smell bad. We tell them to just sit and rest for a while, so we are not exposed to their body odors.

In a similar response to why fatness is a problem, Nasser, 41 said:

It can be a social problem when obese people are bullied. It's a problem. The problem not only affects the person's health. If it's social, the impact on the obese person is very big. I mean, as you have mentioned, in some jobs, the obese person cannot be employed. The job might require a person who is very fit. Also, his family members are affected as well. They may be annoyed that he is always careless and negligent as fat people are. Obese people also smell badly and alienate people from them.

Nasser mentioned that fat people are "always careless and negligent"--quite a strong and negative stereotype. Most of participants thought that fatness is problem and can be both a social problem and health problem.

### *The Stigma of Fatness*

This section addresses the stigma associated with fatness. Both the women and men expressed that fatness was a problem and spoke about how they face the stigma directly or indirectly in their social lives. Some of the participants spoke about their own experiences, while others described how people in general might face the stigma of fatness. The women were more willing to speak about the concerns they have about their own bodies and about how they themselves or

others have dealt with the stigma of fatness. The men, in contrast, needed much more prodding to speak about themselves or others.

Tagreed said that she sees fatness as a problem and that it impacts different people socially:

We had an employee who liked to wear high heels even though she was very obese and weighed 150 kg. or so. Before she got married, she went on a diet, and she was happy with the weight she lost. After she got divorced, she gained back more weight than before. She went to the amusement park. She wanted to go on the rides but couldn't because of her body. She couldn't skate because of her body. She couldn't do anything because of her body, and she always complained about it saying, "I want to be thinner so I can do everything!" But she didn't have the will, not even one percent.

Taghreed's remarks express how most of the respondents think about fatness and the stigma that is associated with it. Participants said that people stigmatize fat bodies. Women participants spoke more about how other people experience fatness and they gave some information about it. Taghreed, for example, spoke about other people's experiences, but did not want to give an example of her own experience. This was true for some of the other participants also who represent the conservative Saudi culture in which it is an embarrassment to speak about one's own body and, in particular, fatness. Rawan, 28, thought that people find fatness funny, and that it is acceptable to make fun of fat people:

In Saudi society, people tell you if they think you are fat. You will always be called "chubby fat" as a joke, and everyone agrees that it is funny. Everyone in Saudi society, in general, agrees that the fat person is the one who laughs and has a good heart, and the skinny person is tedious and boring.

In general, most of the women who were interviewed spoke about other people's experiences, and they avoided speaking about themselves. One exception was Mashaal, a retired working woman who spoke about her life and how her husband bullies her for the little bit of belly fat she has because she has given birth to nine children. Mashaal, 53, said:

He always talks about my belly, and, frankly, this makes me think about how to slim my belly all the time. You know, many pregnancies and childbirth cause the abdomen to sag, but men do not understand this. He talks about my belly, saying “Your belly is flabby and big.” This annoys me a lot. Sometimes he calls me “bear” even though I weigh only 50 kgs. and am not considered fat.

Men spoke about fatness and the stigma associated with it like the women do, but they focus on their personal experiences, unlike the women. Even though they tried to not speak directly about their experiences, but during the interview, men became more open. Men respondents said that the stigma of fatness is present both at home and outside. They saw people in the street who did not comment on them directly, but they could feel the criticism and hear it with their eyes.

Khaled, 51, said:

If my own son bullies me, what do you think the rest of the society will do? No, they don't dare say anything, but the way they look at me is enough. One time my wife and I were walking, and a random lady said, “He is fat!” and I still feel it today.

Khaled, like other male respondents, spoke about the stigma associated with fat. They spoke about being fat themselves, or, if they were thin, about other people's experiences. Being fat for men is the same as for women, but when men speak about it, they laugh and try to not pay attention to it. Women pay more attention to the stigma of fatness. They think it is hard to hear their body described as fat because that makes them sad. For example, Nada, 22, says that it

causes psychological disorders, including depression and stress. Men, on another hand, saw fat people as always connected to stigma and this is a problem. For example, Nasser, 41, said:

It is a problem, and it will always be associated with the fat person. For example, a fat person will always be taunted with “The fat left, the fat came, where’s the fat?” Over time, he may accept it, but it’s considered bullying.

Some respondents experienced public commentaries because of their bodies, including Yazeed, 29, who talked about being taunted when walking down the street:

They taunt me when I walk. “Hey bear, bear, bear!” Some kids in our neighborhood have yelled that. But I do not feel anything because they are kids. But I avoid walking close to them in our neighborhood.

Khaled, 51, faced similar taunt, but in his case the taunts came from his own children:

Because my belly is big, my kids make fun of it. They say, “Bear with a big belly who doesn't have teeth. You eat too much!”

Other respondents talked about fat people more generally, and they characterized them as lazy, as overeaters, always feeling sad about themselves, not having self-control, and as making others "feel scared of them" (Talal 21); they are described as a “barrel” (Suleiman 39), a “big bag” (Ibrahim 31), or as a “big tent” (Abdullah 56). For example, Nasser says, "He is always careless and negligent and has unpleasant body secretions too. "

Fat is considered a stigma (Cooper 2009; Farrell 2011; Puhl et al. 2012; Saguy and Ward 2011). As Goffman describes it, “stigma” is a "deeply discrediting attribute" (1963: 3–4), one "that classifies a person as dangerous or unacceptable based on three categories: 1.) race, nation, and religion, 2.) various physical deformities, and 3.) a blemish of individual character, for example: laziness, dishonesty, and mentally instability" (Brewis 2014:153). Respondents’

description of the character of a fat person as related to the person's body shape stigmatize the fat person because of his or her physical flaws. If fatness is seen as physical deformation, then fat individuals will have a bad self-image, will suffer, and will be stereotyped; for example, they will be characterized as lazy or as "bears," and such stigmatizing makes them avoid participating in social life.

The stigma of fatness can result in unfair treatment in everyday interactions with others, such as being ignored, teased, or rejected (Brewis 2014; Pescosolido et al. 2008). Even though all respondents and studies agreed that fat people are exposed to stigma and discrimination from others at work or in the family, the degree to which people see, notice, and have feelings about the stigma and fat varies (Brewis 2014; Brewis and Wutich 2012). Some studies agreed that discrimination against a fat body can affect women differently from men (Boero and Mickulas 2012; Gailey 2012; Harjunen 2009). For example, Taghreed spoke of how fatness is perceived differently by men and women:

Women are more critical of women because it is assumed that women care more about their appearance than men. If a thin man gets a belly, there's no shame in it. He can get married and so on, but an obese woman has few who accept her. American women are very skinny, way too skinny, you can see their bones because they are so concerned about their appearance.

Men are aware of fatness in women. Men, too, think that women suffer more from fatness than men and agree that no one accepts fatness in women, but for men it is acceptable. Nasser and Yazeed represent one example of that. When asked if they thought fatness is different for men and women, Nasser, 41, replied:



Of course, I think so, for the man maybe. But look, if we say obesity, I don't think it's different for men or women. I do not see it as a good thing at all. Men and women coexist in society and obesity is a problem for both. But, personally, as for me, I accept fat men but not fat women.

Yazeed, 29, said something similar:

I asked a doctor once which gender gets plastic surgery the most, males or females. He said that females have plastic surgery more frequently. I think that women are fatter than men in general. And besides, who wants to marry a fat wife or live with someone who has a flabby body?

Some of the scholarship dealing with fatness and gender suggests that women are expected to be slim and attractive, and they are expected to have smaller bodies (Murray 2008). On other hand, men are expected to have larger bodies (Owen 2012). Therefore, the stigmatization of being fat and the pressure to follow specific standards of size is highly gendered (Boero 2012; Tischner 2013). In this study, most men agreed that women experience more pressure than men when they are fat. For example, Aziz, Moa'th, and Abdurahman agreed that a thin body and gracefulness are attractive characteristics for women. Aziz, 46, said that it "is harder for women to be fat because they become less desirable among men." Moaaz, 27, thought that "the man must be good looking, and the woman must be graceful and fit." Finally, Abdirahman, 45, said that:

Relatively, a man can deal with it as part of his personality, unlike a woman whose body and weight are consistent signs, and it can impact her life.

Some studies suggest that the obsession with thinness comes from Western cultures and advertising, from fashion, focus on health, and on cultural beliefs (Fraser 2009). The discourse in

media has focused on individual behaviors as reasons for obesity. Therefore, the message is that people become fat because they are not doing exercise or not eating healthy food. For example, Rawan, a 28-year-old, women, mentioned that:

In some of them, it is not an excessive obesity, it is in between, so he should go to the gym and consume healthy food, but some of them have health issues. You have [to] fix health problems in order for fatness to disappear.

For the current study, women's tendency to focus on explicit stereotypes lead them to conclude that a body without fat and one that is not too thin is ideal for women and they should follow that.

Pity, they (fat people) can't enjoy life as I do . . . look at them when they walk or eat . . . I feel sorry for them. (Mohammed, 33)

I see them poor because of fatigue and lack of enjoyment of life. (Abdelaziz, a 47-year-old man)

When it comes to fat, there is no variation within and across groups; all respondents, both men and women, say that they feel negative when they see a fat person. Participants saw fatness as a problem that needed to be solved, primarily by altering the bodies of fat people. Some men and women participants gave a sharper answer. For example: Salman, 51, a married man, mentioned that:

I'm kindly trying to advise them to lose weight . . . they do not have determination . . . you feel sad about them.

In regard to the same discussion about the stigmatization, Moaaz, 27, observed:

I see the fat person as carelessness and laziness and I prefer to not take them as example . . . so that I will not be like them.

Similarly, Abdulrahman, a man of 44, said that:

There is no treatment for this category, but I think that they should take care of their natural weight through diet or sports.

Lack of determination and persistence, lethargy, laziness, and other characteristics are examples of how the interviewees describe fat people. Men respondents saw fat as a problem, a problem that needs to be solved. Most think that any fat person is in trouble and that there is nothing wrong with saying so in front of them and telling them that theirs is a problem that needs to be fixed. Women respondents are similar, but women respondents give more descriptions of what they feel about the fat person. For example, Rawan 28, said that:

I don't know, but I feel sympathy. They [fat people] are poor people, you see them walking and barely catching their breath, no energy. And he walks unlike the average person, this is bad . . . because they are unable to, how do I say this, they are not unable to give extra effort, no energy. . . . And some of them do not have the ability to go up the stairs.

Wafe, 52, said that:

Excessive obesity is disgusting. If he becomes really obese, he looks disgusting. Even if I see them sometimes, I just look away and thank God for blessing me. Their looks aren't good, their abdomens or from behind, not looking good at all. Even if he wears a thobe, it is as if he is wearing a tent. . . . The best is to be moderate, looking a little bit full and healthy is amazing. Not excessive obesity, because some of these are disgusting.

Rawan and Wafe represent an example of how the women respondents' saw fatness.

Respondents agreed that accepting fatness is not easy, because they have a bad image of fatness.

Studies from different perspectives, e.g., psychology and sociology, research the discourse about

fatness and accepting fatness. Some studies report findings similar to those reported here—that both men and women respondents express critical opinions about fatness. For example, more research is being done regarding the media’s representation of women’s bodies, both fat and non-fat (Bordo 1993) and how fat affects people and their lives in social settings, and how they are treated negatively by loved ones, friends, and strangers (Taylor and Gailey 2019).

### *Stigma and Marriage*

Before I begin this section, I will describe the process of how couples get married in Saudi Arabia. Marriage is not an individual decision that relates only to the man and woman who want to be married. The family participate in making the final decision. First, polygamy is legal in Saudi Arabia, and a man can have up to four wives. However, sharia or religious law in Saudi Arabia has conditions that must be met for polygamy to be legal. For example, the man must have the financial capacity as well as the physical capacity to afford another marriage. The laws on polygamy are not structured by the courts but required by religion.

Marriage in Saudi Arabia has its own character illustrated by a number of customs and traditions associated with it. The most prominent of these is that, according to marriage traditions in Saudi Arabia, the groom first asks the bride’s father or the eldest man in her family for the bride’s hand in marriage; upon the approval of the father or guardian and the woman, the two families agree to the next steps for the ritual of Al-Shufa.

The Al-Shufa comes with the intention to complete the marriage, and if both families agree to the request, during the Shufa, the bride is invited to sit and attend in the presence of the future husband. After this, they agree about the dowry. The dowry is one of the main customs and traditions in Saudi marriage, and it is a specific amount that is the right of the bride. The

dowry is accompanied by other conditions that are negotiated between the groom and the father of the bride.

After agreeing on the dowry, the book (the marriage registration contract) is written, which is one of the official marriage ceremonies, and it is held at the time of the dowry contract. The mechanism of writing the book is as follows. The imam gives a short speech about how husbands and wives honor each other and about the religious significance of marriage. Then legal documents are filled out with the required information, signed, and attested, and the book is kept in the house of the bride or groom, but it can also be kept in the court.

An event known as the family meeting is a celebration for both families hosted by the bride's family, at which time the groom presents the bride-price, the engagement ring, and gifts of jewelry. The dowry depends on the financial position of the groom and is paid in cash. He puts the ring on the bride's right hand, and then the families of the bride and groom come together to choose the date of the wedding ceremony. The purpose of this meeting is to set the dates for each event and announce them in a formal manner.

This is when we look outside the marriage process at many things that can alter the future husband's or wife's decision about getting married. One of them is body size or body shape. In the Shufa process, for example, a woman sees the future husband, but if she doesn't like his body because he is fat (or a man sees the future wife, but he does not like her because she is fat)—these are embarrassing moments in the marriage process. This point is highlighted because it relates to the importance of the role of attitudes toward fatness when studying gender differences and examining how fatness is viewed by men and women in marriage.

When it comes to accepting fatness in marriage as a useful tool for highlighting gender differences, there was variation within and across groups. Some respondents, both men and

women, saw accepting a fat person as a partner between partners as easy for women. They were more willing to accept fat men, but men did not find it easy to accept fat women as wives. Some women participants viewed love as an important component, which could combat problems of body size in marriage. For example, Mashaal, 59, said:

If I love him, I will not care about his body size. All men do not like fat women . . . they think she is ugly, disgusting, do not care about her body. . . . Men do not feel shame from fatness.

Fatness also plays an important role in terms of approval in marriage. Some women respondents think there is no compatibility between fat men and thin women. In addition, a few women said they would not consider marrying a fat man. For example: Aljwharah, 30, mentioned that:

I do not prefer marrying a fat person at all, and I think that compatibility between them will be completely difficult.

Some women respondents want to get married even if the man is fat. Most of them recognize how men think about fat women as partners in marriage. For example, Wafaa, 51, said:

Maybe in marriage [a] fat person will face problem[s]. . . . If a woman sees him and she doesn't like his look . . . if an obese person proposes to me, I will not refuse him. . . . Honestly, no . . . also, if he wants to marry my daughter and an obese person proposes to her. . . . Honestly I don't like it, but I won't stand in his way . . . but If I am a guy, I don't want an obese woman, like very obese.

Tagreed, 45 years old, a woman, said:

If a thin man gets a belly, there's no shame in it, he gets married and so on, but an obese woman—there is few people marry her.

Most women respondents have the same feeling about how men avoid having fat women as partners. Even though the women respondents have little flexibility in terms of accepting fat men as husbands, men respondents agreed that fat women are not their choice, and all of them would reject fat women as wives with no exception. In Saudi tradition, men are not at all coerced into marriage, but they are still questioned why they are not married. For example, Abo Zaher, 44, said:

I think that body size is important when looking for a life partner. Honestly, it depends.

If it is excessive obesity, I would say no to her from the beginning. But what is reasonable is acceptable, and with time, hopefully they will become compatible.

Taking the same approach, Khaled, 52, mentioned that:

I think that men or women suffering from obesity like struggle finding partners. . . . Yes, they will but men still can get married, but they will struggle on other things. . . . Women likely won't, but men will.

Most men and women respondents agreed that fat women suffer more than men in finding a marriage partner. Both men and women respondents said that fat men are acceptable, even if the potential spouse does not like it. For example, Abo Duffer would not choose to marry a fat woman, but he thinks fat men can treat and alter their bodies when they want to marry.

### *Fatness and Work*

Work is an important element for bringing resources to a family. In Saudi Arabia, there is still a difference in the types of work men and women can do. In the past, women preferred to work only in the education sector, but now, women look for work in every sector. This reflects the amount of change that has occurred between generations in thought and traditions. Also, the

impact of media and the increase in the number of both men and women in higher education has made a large impact on the culture. Now women enter the labor market to meet their needs first, then family needs, and to increase their financial independence from men.

One area that really shows the differences between Western and non-Western countries is work. Saudi Arabia has a long history of gender segregation, and one area that shows how the country has changed is the recent importance of women in the labor market, and this area too illustrates strong opinions about being fat. Both men and women respondents agreed that it was difficult for fat men and women to find and keep jobs. However, some women think that it is even harder for men than for women because men are fiscally responsible for the house and family. In addition, respondents think that since women are not required to work, they do not have to face the challenges that men must face regarding employment. This is most likely true because most jobs still have gender segregation, but one respondent told a story of the importance body size plays in maintaining a job. She recounted how a job might not even be offered to a woman because of her size. Rawan, 31, said:

I encountered this. I applied for a job, and the person who interviewed me said, “One of the conditions for employment is that if you are fat, you will not be hired. But if you are thin, you are welcome, because the job requires effort and movement, so it is not suitable for an obese person. Men were affected more than women because they had more job opportunities.

Rawan thinks that obese men face many problems getting jobs as well. Taghreed tried to focus on women and how fatness makes it hard to stay in a job that requires more activity. Taghreed is working in a job that requires gender segregation between men and women and she represents an



example of some answers coming from women. Taghreed, 42, spoke about her experience at her job:

In my job, in every field tour, those who are obese get tired. They say it's a hard work, exhausting. We can't tour buildings, walk and run up and down, we can't.

Difficulty walking, tiredness, body odor, people avoiding sitting next to them, and being lazy are descriptions of fat people which represent how people stereotype and stigmatize fat people.

Some women respondents agreed with the men that stigma was not limited to women—beauty and good looks for men were also important to being selected for employment. Wafaa, 53, said:

I do not think they [fat people] get a job very easily, if they want to work in a bank, I guess they won't accept him because the bank requires that he wears his clothes elegantly, etc., so I think that they will not accept him in a bank.

Most women respondents felt less comfortable than the men when they were speaking about jobs and fatness. They tried to speak about their own experiences and gave examples about what they thought. At the same time, men are more focused on beauty than fatness. They agreed that beauty is an important qualification for women. Talal, 21, explained:

Yes, recently beauty has become the most important element of employment . . . especially for women.

Ibrahim, 31, thought that "Regardless of the job . . . size and consistency in the body is important for any job."

Some male participants thought that men also face the same challenges in finding or doing a job when they become fat. Fat men face the same obstacles and stereotypes when they are looking for jobs, and these are linked to fatness. For example, Mohmed, 33, said:

Right, imagine with me that you are working as a security man, a fat and hard-to-move man. Can you do your job? . . . Absolutely no. As for the marital aspect, let's take a look, the bed is not enough for two fat people.

Khaled's interpretation of the utility of fatness suggests that it can be useful in some jobs, such as security where people will be scared when they see the security guard's body size. Khaled, 52, said:

No, in Saudi Arabia, both are treated equally in hiring . . . but it is a rule so fat people don't apply—either try to lose weight or look for another industry.

## **CONCLUSION**

Fat people, men and women, were clearly stigmatized because of their body size. Men and women in this study face the same problem that comes with body size. People in this study mentioned their thought about the fat people like smell bad, hard movement and lazy are the most common words that say about fat people. There are differences and similarities between the western and Saudi Arabia. The similarities because of the western views about fatness and body size moved around the world and impacted some countries by discourse about body size. Saudi Arabia was a country that was impacted by Western discourse about bodies and fatness. This impact has been clearly seen in stigmatization of both fat men and women.

In addition, the impact of Western descriptions of the body, and fatness and health issues has had a clear impact on Saudi society. The concerns about body image and body size are similar to those in the Western societies. For example, as Rawan said about hiring fat women, “If you are fat, this job is not for you.” The difference between Western and Saudi societies is that the Saudi society has a long history of gender segregation. This helps us understand

this conservative society when compared to how other societies are dealing with the social lives of men and women who are considered fat.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: BODY CONCERN AND GENDER**

When I tell people what my research is about, most people prefer not to speak about themselves; usually, they avoid speaking about sensitive issues related to their own bodies. However, when they speak about the experiences of others, they are not at all hesitant to speak. Nevertheless, despite the freedom with which they discuss the topic in general, few women and men speak about concerns they have about their own bodies. The bodily concerns of those who live in countries like Saudi Arabia is a new area of study.

Bodily concern is common in both men and women and includes thoughts and feelings about body size, body attractiveness, and various other feelings associated with the body (Grogan 2007). The degree of satisfaction one has with his or her body is mostly related to its size, shape, general appearance, and how others see it (Cash and Deagle 1997). For example, at one time, fatness in Arab societies was considered a mark of beauty for women (Yahia et al. 2011), but recent studies show how Westernized views of the ideal body image impact Arab societies. Today, a thin body is seen as a measure of beauty for women (Yahia et al. 2011).

In this chapter I address some issues related to Saudi women and men and the concern they express about their bodies. In other words, how do Saudi men and women experience their bodies, what reactions do they receive from others about their bodies, how is attractiveness perceived between genders, and how do both men and women feel about cosmetic surgery?

### **FINDINGS**

This section addresses body concern and gender. We will discuss how both men and women express concern about the body in early life, what is considered attractive by both genders, and how both men and women see cosmetic surgery as a solution to problems with their appearance.

Concern about the body is a topic of great urgency for women in this study, far more than it is for men. Of the 15 women and 25 men out of a total of 40 interviewed, women overwhelmingly identified concern about their bodies and expressed dissatisfaction with their bodies, unlike the men, most of whom expressed satisfaction with their bodies. For example, Tagreed, a self-identified fat person, first stated that she is obese and thinks about her body all time. At first uncomfortable with the interview, she gradually became more relaxed and answered the interviewer's questions more completely. She said: "I am always thinking about my body. My body makes me worry all the time." Tagreed's concise statement sums up the feelings that other women expressed about their bodies. In contrast, most men did not want to share their concerns about their bodies. Yazid also described himself as a fat person, but says that he will change his body by diet or exercise: "I love my body. I want to lose some weight, and I was thinking about what others say about my body, but now, I do not care."

Below, I examine four key themes that emerge as women and men discuss their concerns about their bodies, namely: how bodies are perceived in the environment of school and college, the reactions to different types of bodies, what determines the attractiveness of bodies, and how respondents view cosmetic surgery.

### *School and College*

Both men and women are concerned about their bodies not only in early life in school or college, but also in their adult lives and imagined futures. Some studies support the interview data and stress the importance of body concern among adolescents and young adults as well as how satisfaction about their bodies can give them positive support inside the society (see Cash and Pruzinsky 2002 for a review), but not all studies support these findings. Both men and

women at these ages were particularly susceptible to social pressure about their physical appearance.

The adolescent and young adult stage is a crucial stage in the formation of identity, personality, and self-worth as well as physical self-evaluation (Crocker and Wolfe 2001; Crocker et al. 2003). Studies have found that both men and women are concerned about their appearance, and that these concerns are associated with cultural standards for ideal body types. Thus, women are more concerned about the attractiveness of thin bodies and men are more concerned about muscular bodies which symbolize power (Jackson 2002).

Adults, more than young people, face more pressure to lose or gain weight or muscle, which can lead to engaging in dangerous body-changing practices (McCabe and Ricciardelli 2003; Smolak et al. 2005). This pressure can come from different sources such as the media, parents, and peers (McCabe and Ricciardelli 2003; Smolak et al. 2005).

Several of the women said that they faced pressure about their bodies, especially in school or college. Some of them are thin, but they are also concerned about their bodies and want to change them. Two women participants, Tagreed and Ruba, express what many women participants said about their childhood bodies. Tagreed, a married woman who works at a university, said:

When I was in primary school, I didn't think my body was good. I felt that I was too fat for my age, fatter than any of my peers. They were thinner than me and I was overweight. You feel that everyone is bullying you; they don't call you by your name. They call you fat, "Come, you fat chubby."

Tagreed added some information about how she had felt at a later age, at college.

I went to college and decided to go on a diet when I saw everyone around me.

Unfortunately, dieting made me very tired. I wasn't eating anything. I was on an unplanned diet. It was a diet I made up by myself, not from a doctor or from a clinic, just me . . . and I got upset.

In the same way, Ruba also was concerned about her body. Ruba, 27, faced pressure from her peers. She is an unmarried woman who lives in a small city close to Riyadh. She described her feelings about her body as "Good. I'm satisfied." Ruba described the changes that had happened to her body in the past and what she is doing to care for her body presently:

Yes, it changed a lot. I was thin in the beginning. I don't want to say very thin, but it was not acceptable to me. By the time I attended the university and after university—now—my weight satisfies me. In primary school, my mother took care of my appearance.

During middle school, no one thought about my body. It was a transition phase between two phases. At the end of high school, I started to care about hair care brands, for example. I would dedicate a day every week, like every Saturday, to take care of my body. I would do a body mask, a face peel, and a hair mask, for example. That was my method. Now, because I almost neglected myself for months or nearly a year. So, right now, I feel like I'm reacting to a long period of neglect, and I've become obsessed with care. Any money I get from my father immediately goes to care. Creams—I go to buy a Moroccan bath, creams and exfoliators of Marmara, and yet, this is not good enough.

When asked if she worried about her body changing, she replied, "I should be thinking more about my body. If I were to get fat or something changes in my body, this would ruin the details of my body. I mean, I'm a girl! I care about how I look in my clothes." She described herself during college and how she was dissatisfied with her body:

Look, at the university, I was unsatisfied, but the girls around me were interested in cosmetic procedures, like nose jobs, or fillers. But I was very satisfied. However, after talking to my friends a lot, I felt like, “Why I shouldn’t do something,” but then I made up my mind and said, “No, I don’t think I want it.” I am satisfied, thank God.

There are differences between men and women when facing pressure in school or college about their appearance and body. Studies have found that low self-esteem, fear of negative evaluations, and seeking perfectionism are associated with the body for both females and males (Davis et al. 2005). Meeting perceived idealized body image standards is conditional and contingent, and acceptance of one’s body is no different for males and females (Crocker and Wolfe 2001). Therefore, the feeling of social acceptance, as well as self-evaluation, makes both men and women satisfied with their bodies. (Crocker et al. 2003; Deci and Ryan 1995). Some male respondents’ answers in this study were no different from those of the women. For example, Yazzed, 28, an unmarried man who works in the government, described himself as a fat person. Yazzed talked about his life during primary school and how he felt about his body. He talked about how changing his body impacted his feelings about himself:

In primary school, I was a little fat, I mean neither thin nor too fat. In high school, my weight was 114 kg. But then my weight started to go up. I mean, when I entered college in 2014, I felt that I needed to lose weight to change my appearance. . . . I was afraid to go swimming in public because of the shame I felt because of my weight. Then I decided to do some exercise and diet and my weight went down to 93 kg. My feelings about my body were changing to be more positive and I felt satisfied about it.

Yazzed described the reactions from his friends at school about his body:



When I was in high school my friends called me “bear bear” or “Tofkh,” which means you are fat like a bear.

Words like "negative" were repeated by some of the male respondents when I asked about how they thought about their bodies when they were in school. In fact, the men were mostly concerned about their body size or trying not to gain weight. Kilhled's main concern was the size of his stomach. Kilhled, 49, does not always feel good about his body. In direct response to body change from the past until now, Kilhled, a married man, said:

My body has changed from the past until now. I feel negative about it now. I am fat, and I feel frustrated and depressed. I have so many new clothes that I haven't worn yet. I am obsessing about my body. I feel like my body is out of proportion. I will answer you honestly. If my stomach were gone, I would be fine.

Hiding their emotions was common for the men in this study. They also made excuses to explain why the body changes occurred as a way to avoid the embarrassment and fear about their bodies. Kilhled described the reactions from his family:

Every month I go on a diet for 15 days. Then I mess up the other 15 days because of the bread. That's what my wife, my friends, and my child, Naif, said that to me. I laughed when they said it. If they said that I was overweight, I would say, “Maybe because of cortisone.” Even when I don't take cortisone, I lie to hide the fact that I am fat.

Marriage is one situation that makes some men worry about their bodies. What the men think and feel about their bodies can change when family obligations increase after getting married. Mubarak is one who thinks marriage is changing his body and changing his thoughts and feelings about the body. However, most men like Mubarak thought that men are more satisfied than women when they looked at their bodies. For example, Mubarak, a married, 41-year-old

man, who is working in a hospital, describes himself as below average in terms of body size—that is, not fat. He feels social acceptance about his body and body size:

I am an athlete. And sometimes my weight decreases and increases. And honestly it stays at about 65 kg., because when [it] reaches 67 kg., I go on a diet, and if I lose a couple of kilograms, I make sure I eat enough for it to go back up. Not every athlete does this. And the weather makes a difference, too. During the winter or summer, my body changes a lot. Six or seven years after I graduated from college everyone said, “Oh God, Mubarak, you’ve changed a lot.” Honestly, after I got married, my body changed. I gained weight. I was thin, very thin, before. Everything changed in me. But now, I am very satisfied.

In addition, Mubarak described why he is comfortable with his body and how his family speaks about his body and how his brothers are not comfortable with their bodies:

My brother said that my body is great. He said that I never got fat even though I ate junk food. I said his problem was because of his eating habits. I eat, and I go to the gym. I feel comfortable this way and I don’t [worry] about my body. My brothers did not go to the gym at all, and they ate Mandi and Kabish. Look at them now! Their bodies have changed because of this food.

Even though both women and men report having been concerned about their bodies all their lives, most women have been more concerned about their bodies at some level than men in terms of the size and shape of their bodies, their faces, and individual parts of their bodies. Men have mostly focused on body size. At first when I started asking them, they did not show their concern about their bodies like women do, but after that, they began to show how much concern they feel about their bodies. In the discussion below, we will see how men and women think differently

about attractiveness and plastic surgery, and how that gives us insights into how they think about their bodies.

### *Reactions from Others*

Worrying about the body is very common. This explains why men and women react strongly to criticisms from others about their bodies and how these criticisms make them feel. First, most women respondents avoid answering these questions by saying there was no reaction, or they do not allow anyone to say anything about their bodies. Tagreed was the only one who spoke about the reaction from others when she played with children in school and how she felt about herself:

If you played with them, they would say, “She can’t run, she can’t play with us, she can’t catch, she just can’t.” I did not play with them much, only a little. They would say, “No, she is not fast. she can’t catch us.”

Male respondents gave more details about the reactions of others now or in the past. For example, Yazeed described the reactions from his friends in school about his body when he wanted to play soccer with them:

I was in love with soccer. That I was fat was holding me back. I couldn’t play football with friends because your friends or teacher would put me in as goalkeeper, or because of my size, they would put me in as the defensive center in order to block anyone on the other team from moving forward. This is one of the things that hindered me. You were not getting to practice your hobbies, but others were making you do what they wanted, not what you wanted.

Yazeed tried to sound happy and laugh when he spoke about reactions from others when he played soccer, unlike Tagreed, who did not like the reactions from others. On the other hand,

some of the male respondents wanted to change their bodies after seeing others' reactions, because they were thin and wanted to be heavier with more obvious muscles. For example, when I asked Mubarak about the main things he wanted to change about his body, he said:

I would be happier if it were larger. I'd be satisfied if I gained more weight. When I sit at a table, I swear I would like to eat like a fat person does. God, they're never done eating.

I see them at my job. I am a supervisor in patient relations, and most people who complain about how they are treated at the clinic are those who have to carry an obese relative into the clinic without help from the clinic staff.

Men and women share some responses when speaking about the reactions to their bodies or about changing about bodies. In describing their experiences, Yazeed and Tagreed talked about similar reactions from others about their bodies, about playing with children, and playing soccer. They describe how those reactions made them feel bad about their bodies and want to change. Yazeed's description of being made to play goalkeeper shows how others can limit one's options depending on one's body size.

### *Attractiveness and the Body*

Many women and men in this study have commented on how attractiveness is generally perceived. More specifically, both the women and men in this study are particularly concerned with how they see themselves and how they are perceived by others. Attractiveness as a body concern has been the subject of much scholarship. Some researchers have found that societies like those of the West strongly emphasize physical appearance (Brennan et al. 2010). Attractive people are viewed more favorably. This can make attractive people seem more intelligent, for example, than unattractive people (Solomon et al. 2005). In Western societies, what makes a

person attractive varies between men and women. For women, attractive traits are connected more with thinness, while for men, they are more connected to a muscular appearance (Brennan et al. 2010). Being athletic and doing exercise to build muscles is more widespread among men than women.

The women and men in this study are aware of these perceptions. In their own estimation, they ranged from somewhat attractive to fully attractive. None of the women reported feeling that their bodies were not attractive. For some characteristics, they acknowledged a minimum level of attractiveness. Some women participants with normal weight range between 50–60 kg also agreed their bodies had at least a minimal level of attractiveness. However, some women who felt they were fat thought that their bodies were not attractive. Answers like "I don't know" or " There is no attractiveness " were common among the women. For example, Rehem, 28, a university student, is single, and lives outside Riyadh. She said:

I do not feel that I am attractive. In fact, nothing about my body is attractive. I am tall, and I need to be shorter or gain a little weight. Men want women who have some fat on their bodies and are not too thin. Men are focused on women's bodies more than anything else. Women need to work hard because of that.

The assumption that they are attractive was common among the women. Women in this study face the same pressure that Western women face in terms of the losing and caring about their weight (Cash and Pruzinsky 2002; Thompson et al. 1999). In fact, studies from many different parts of the world have found that women in the global South face more pressure regarding body image than men do (Sharps et al. 2001; Wardle et al. 2006). Amal, who is 45 years old, married, a teacher, and lives outside Riyadh, addresses the idea of not feeling attractive. Like Ruba, Amal does not think her body is attractive. She thinks men have some requirements that women must

fulfill in order to become a wife and they are all related to the appearance of women's bodies.

Amal explained:

Attractiveness is linked to the proportions of the body in a large part for many people, especially now. The emphasis nowadays is on attractiveness from social networking sites to plastic surgery. I feel that I need to change and lose some weight because I do not feel attractive. Men look for specific things in women's bodies, and I don't feel that I meet their expectations.

Nada, a 22-year-old, single university student lives in Riyadh. Nada is dissatisfied with her body and attractiveness, but at the same time, she thinks she is somewhat attractive. She agreed that she was not fat, but like Amal and Ruba, she feels that attractiveness is extremely important:

To a certain degree, attractiveness is one of the most important characteristics of the body. I cannot judge myself and my body as attractive. Others can see me, and they react to what they see. Even though I am not fat, I think my shape is not good enough. I do not know. Maybe I am attractive, but not super attractive.

Studies have found a range of different responses from women about how they see their bodies in terms of attractiveness and what they feel about their bodies. Most studies about body image have focused on women (McCabe and Ricciardelli 2004) and how most women are dissatisfied with their bodies (Karazsia et al. 2017; Keski-Rahkonen and Mustelin 2016). In addition, the ideal female body for women, which emphasizes thinness, is internalized by both men and women because of the image promoted by the media, particularly in Western societies (Halliwell and Dittmar 2004). The discrepancies between their own bodies and the difficult-to-achieve ideal leads to dissatisfaction with their bodies, and they do not see themselves as attractive (Grossbard et al. 2011; Voges et al 2019).

The men participating in this study, however, reported feeling that their bodies were very or somewhat attractive except for one. Mohammed, a 50-year-old married father of three, feels his body is not good because he is fat and needs to lose weight. He does not feel, however, that his weight influenced his choice of a spouse.

I think that attractiveness, to a great degree, is related to the shape of your body. Yes, my body is very balanced, and I feel very confident. I think that the body basically determines your relationship with your wife, so it is not logical to want a beautiful woman with a beautiful body, but you do not have one. Nowadays, if a man is not proud of his appearance, he is undesirable. If you are fat, for example, you will face problems in marriage because the girl judges you by your appearance. This is especially true in traditional marriages. However, this has changed in the current generation. Some men have tried to connect the idea of money with attractiveness, not the body. They do not see the body as attractive. They think women are attracted to money, and that women do not look at the body.

In fact, most men in this study when asked about attractiveness, spoke of “marriage,” “girls,” and “women.” They did not associate the word “attractive” with men and what it would mean for men and boys to be thought of as attractive. For example, Abdulteiff is 50 years old, married, lives in Riyadh, and he sees himself as fat. Abdulteiff said:

It is true that the extent of acceptance sometimes decreases if you are fat, which can reduce your attractiveness. For attractiveness, the ideal weight of the body is required. But if we speak frankly, you are what you are. If you have no money, no one will even look at your face.

Abdulaziz is 47 years old, married, weighs 85 kg., and is 176 cm. He lives in Riyadh and sees his body as in the middle, neither fat nor thin. Abdulaziz agrees with Abdulteiff in that he does not think attractiveness is associated with an ideal body shape. He does think that money is the important element that makes a person attractive. Abdulaziz explained:

There is no attractiveness except in money. At least, thank God, I have confidence. The girls will be attracted to you if you have money. No one looks at your body if you have money. If you have money, you can marry any girl, even if you are really fat.

In short, Abdulteiff and Abdulaziz mostly agree that money is the number one reason men are seen as attractive, and the body is considered after that. It is clear he thinks money is more important than body, but this also suggests that fatness is a negative trait, just not as important as money. Even though Waleed said that the body size is important for men, he agreed that having money can increase one's chance to have a wife. Women respondents are more concerned about their body shape and body size, and they think that to be attractive, one must work hard to achieve the ideal body shape, unlike men. Men respondents are less concerned about their bodies than women, but that does not mean they are not concerned at all. Rather, they are concerned at some level; they rank money first and the body second. Most of the men agreed that although women are concerned about the appearance of their bodies, men are attractive if they have enough money to care for their families well.

In recent years, the male body has received more attention from researchers, especially in Western societies ( Ridgeway and Tylka 2005; Smolak and Murnen 2008). These studies note that an ideal body image is not only the focus of females but that it has also become so among males. Some studies that analyze attractiveness explain that men are more focused on being muscular, lean, and strengthening their bodies (Crossley et al. 2012; Ridgeway and Tylka 2005;



Smolak and Murnen 2008). Like women, men are also faced with very high standards for an ideal body that are difficult to achieve (Voges et al. 2019). Some studies found that men, like women, are more dissatisfied with themselves when they compare themselves to standards of the ideal body, for example, to the pictures of men in fashion magazines (Arbour and Ginis 2006; Blond 2008; Cordes et al. 2017; Galioto and Crowther 2013; Karazsia and Crowther 2009).

### *Cosmetic Surgery and the Body*

The relationship between plastic surgery and concern for the body has been addressed in research. Findings from such studies link the motives for plastic surgery to body dissatisfaction, depression, eating disorders, discomfort with the body, and lower self-esteem (Berer 2010; Karadavut and Abbas 2017). The media industries and purveyors of diet plans both contribute to making the image of the normal body in both men and women unstable and hard to achieve (Berer 2010), resulting in both men and women being dissatisfied with their bodies. As a result, some devote substantial amounts of time and money to achieving the perfect body through plastic surgery.

Movies, celebrities, and advertisements contribute to creating the image of the desirable body for both men and women. Some scholars have observed the power of the media to make individuals feel that the media are the arbiters of what makes an attractive body for ordinary people and for the stars themselves. In other words, this power often subjects the hyper-visible individuals to a strict discipline (Heyes 2009). In Foucault's words, "It is the fact of being constantly seen, of always being able to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection" (Foucault 1979:187). This disciplinary power is omnipresent in the street, in advertisements, movies and television, and sometimes in seemingly ordinary comments in

conversation (Heyes 2009); for example, “You are fat,” or “You gained weight,” or “You need to lose weight.”

Younger women participants in this study were more willing to try plastic surgery on their bodies than were participants over 45. Most men are essentially against plastic surgery for themselves. However, men and women vary in the types of surgery they find acceptable and the reasons for the surgery. First, women in this study under 45 speak more openly about plastic surgery and what treatments are needed to alter their bodies, unlike those who are 45 and older. Women 45 and older prefer to alter their bodies through exercise if they are fat, but not through surgery. For example, Mashaal, 58, and Wafa, 51, agree that plastic surgery should not be done on their bodies. Wafa said:

I love my body and I do not want to have any plastic surgery. Even though I have a high triglyceride level, diet is okay, but plastic surgery is a no no.

Mashaal said the same thing and added a reason for her objection:

Having plastic surgery is a bad idea. I do not agree about using it on me or on my daughters. Even on small things. It’s against our religion.

For the younger women, plastic surgery is an option they consider, but they identify different reasons for approving of surgery and different parts of their bodies they would consider changing through surgery. Bariatric surgery, liposuction from thighs, buttocks, arms, or a neck or cheek lift, fillers, and raising the eyebrows with needles were the most popular surgeries. The main reasons for surgery that they mentioned were health, achieving a nicer body, and feeling more comfortable with their bodies. For example, Tagreed feels her body is fat and she needs to lose some weight. She has tried to diet, but it does not work. She thinks about her body every day, and she does not like her body’s shape. She does not feel comfortable:

Almost daily I think about my body. Yes, I wish to be thinner. I have always wanted to be thinner. In previous years, there was no bariatric surgery, and it was not popular worldwide like it is now. If there had been bariatric surgery, it might have been a good idea for me. Then I wouldn't have to worry about dieting.

Other examples of the willingness to use plastic surgery to alter their bodies come from Rawan, 28, and Hussah, 41. Rawan did not like her body, and reported that she was obsessed with makeup and anything related to her skin:

One time my friend said that I was skinny. So, I began following her when she was talking about self-care. I was attracted to self-care, so I was noting all the creams that she says are the best for skin care, adornment, and vitamin C for health reasons. Injections with a cream under my skin is one of the treatments I would like to try. Yes, I did a filler, as well as a cheek lift. And raised an eyebrow with needles.

Hussah is very specific about the areas of her body that she wants to alter:

Because I am not convinced my body is attractive, I do not feel comfortable with it. I think I need to change everything. I need liposuction in different areas of my body such as the abdomen. hips, thighs, arms and neck.

Among the men in the study, few assume that they will have plastic surgery for specific reasons.

In fact, most of the men think that plastic surgery is not necessary for men. As Aziz plainly states, "Plastic surgery is not for men." This sentiment was echoed in almost every interview.

Nasser explains how he concluded that plastic surgery is not good for his body or his health:

I mean, for example, even if I want plastic surgery, I will not do it even if I needed it for my health. If I am fat or too heavy, why would I do surgery on my body? I don't think it's a good idea to lose weight instantly with surgery. Exercise and diet are better for me.

When Nasser refers to “plastic surgery,” he assumes that plastic surgery is for women only, and that it is easy for women to have plastic surgery but is difficult for men:

Men do not have plastic surgery for any reason. Others will talk about you if you do and say that you have become like a woman or a girl. Women or girls can do it, but men cannot. Just see what others say when they see you at the clinic or see a change to your face or nose or lips. This is what women do, not men.

The underlying assumption is that plastic surgery is not for men unless there is emergency surgery that must be done, or something such as teeth implants or a hair transplant. Men thought that these procedures do not threaten an individual’s manhood. However, men here tried to make some boundaries between genders; teeth implants or a hair transplant are acceptable for men, and women can have other kinds of plastic surgery. For example, Mubarak, 42, is satisfied with his body and weighs about 70 kg. He said:

If I choose plastic surgery, I will choose simple things like a tooth implant. Nothing else. There is nothing that will push me to have plastic surgery because it will change your body. That’s not good.

Mubarak agrees with most men that having plastic surgery is not a good idea for men. Mubarak seems to understand why men would have plastic surgery and analyzes the reasons for doing so. Unlike Nasser and Aziz, Mubarak does not seem to believe that there is a need to do plastic surgery, even when there are some unavoidable situations. Similarly, Mouayed, who sees his body as normal, explains how he sees plastic surgery for men:

Plastic surgery is shameful for men. I would not do it unless there are serious reasons. I mean, if I have an accident or serious condition that would require it, I will have plastic surgery. But I would not do it to make myself more handsome. . . . Women want to make

themselves beautiful to get married, and some of them do this, but men do not need this type of surgery. Women are interested in a man's money, not his body.

When Mouayed refers to "shame," he is saying that plastic surgery is not for men. This point was also made by other men:

I think any man who has plastic surgery has [a] problem because it is shameful for men to change their bodies just because they want to be good looking. (Suleiman)

One of my friends did something to his chin. He said that one of his relatives told him that he was not a man anymore and that men should feel ashamed for doing such a thing. (Mouayed)

Most men in this study, like Mouaad, Suleiman, Mouayed, Mubarak, and Nasser, think that plastic surgery is unacceptable for men. Some of them go a step further and add that plastic surgery brings shame on men. But some of them feel that for women such procedures are not a problem. They feel that women need it because women should be beautiful. Even though men participants deem it shameful, it is evident that some men do have plastic surgery.

Women, on the other hand, believe that plastic surgery for women adds beauty to a woman's body. Some of the women were more specific about what kind of surgeries they would want and what part of the body they would need to change if they could. In short, many of the women see plastic surgery as an acceptable solution to their bodily concerns.

## **CONCLUSION**

Concern about the body's appearance and what makes people feel attractive are different for men and women. Women worry more about their bodies and are more open to altering their bodies

with the help of plastic surgery. Men worry less about their bodies or they believe that their money is a more important element in attraction than their bodies are. Women were more concerned about how to meet the requirements of physical admiration and satisfaction and how to relieve their anxieties about their bodies. These points of view open the door to an exploration of other topics related to the body and gender and how men and women regard them differently in terms of their social lives.

## **CHAPTER SIX: BODY, CLOTHES, AND GENDER**

Subjects such as “clothes” and “fashion” are frequently the object of serious academic analysis. Studying clothes is important because it provides insights not only into how appearance and fashion are perceived by others, but also how clothing can construct a particular image (Damhorst 1990). In fact, clothes can generate meanings about us and our bodies as well as reflecting our feelings in everyday life. Therefore, there are connections between body image and clothing practices and are often different between men and women, particularly in a more traditional culture like that of Saudi Arabia.

Many scholars in sociology study clothes from various angles. For example, Erving Goffman shows how the body is an aspect of social interactions (Goffman 1983), and how the body is a "site of the constantly changing expression of selfhood in the social world" (Goffman 1963; Silverman 2013:73). Goffman also studied how we create for others a specific image of ourselves through the use of clothing, decor, language, and behaviors that reinforce our presentation of self (Goffman 1959). Similarly, other scholars have studied dress and fashion as important elements of distinction and competition between classes (Simmel 1957) and have shown how the body can speak through dress and fashion (Entwistle 2015).

Some sociologists have examined how the body shows how and why individuals behave the way they do in society. Scholars are interested in how individuals manage their bodies and learn how to behave based on social norms (Mauss 2007), while other scholars analyze the mechanisms that contribute to producing certain body forms through different practices (Silverman 2013). Scholars like these see the body as a social product linked to a social class location which influences the body in terms of food, strength, health, and beauty (Bourdieu 1984). In these studies, clothing draws some attention, and scholars point out how tastes in food,

exercise, and other body-related social practices vary across different classes and produce bodies that differ in appearance, posture, stature, and health (Bourdieu 1984:192).

Through this perspective, some studies have raised questions about the relationship between class and body in terms of clothes, examining, for example, how men and women in different classes resist or transgress against class assumptions about their bodies (Skeggs 1997). They also question how class gives more access to resources and how that reflects on their bodies (Boero and Mickulas 2012). Moreover, other scholars discussed gender distinctions by concentrating on social relations and the body (Bourdieu 2001). Bourdieu, for example, addressed male domination and how it is socially constructed and imprinted on bodies (Bourdieu 2001:39), and how collective expectations for class or gender “tend to inscribe themselves in bodies in the form of permanent dispositions” (Bourdieu 2001:61). These studies pushed other scholars to ask questions that need to be studied; for example, how do women or men think about, use, and manage their bodies in different class situations (Talukdar and Linders 2013). Other scholars studied how class plays a role in body image perception and how the impact of these factors can be different for men and women (Dea and Caputi 2001). Dea and Caputi also questioned body satisfaction and how it is different even for men and women from the same class (Dea and Caputi 2001). All these studies contribute to the enrichment of social research as well as create an opening for more questions about the body and gender that need to be studied. In this chapter, I am seeking to answer questions related to body, gender, and clothing. One focus of these questions is whether there are any differences between men and women in Saudi Arabi in terms of practices concerning the clothes and body and how, in a non-Western country, they view and use their clothes in public and in private.



Other studies have focused on how individuals in different social classes use their resources to clothe their bodies. For example, the middle and upper classes have the money to follow fashion trends, as well as to try and explore various types of fashion (Healy 2014; Orbach 1993). Further, some studies have argued about how the middle and upper classes, who have power, have "set the standards for what is fashionable" (Grogan 2007; also see Healy 2014). This, of course, implies that only the wealthy can afford to buy into the ideal (Grogan 2007:164). The criteria for what is considered fashionable may negatively impact people in the lower classes (Healy 2014), as they try to imitate the upper classes (Bourdieu 1979:57). The lower classes have limited financial resources which can be reflected in their bodies and clothes (Mason 2013; Williams, McClellan, and Rivlin 2010).

Clothes receive attention for study in many different parts of the world. Some cultures have been influenced by the West in how their clothing choices differ based on social location. In this chapter, I present evidence and analyze themes around gender and bodies that emerged from the interviews. The stories from men and women around the theme of clothing overlap and are interrelated in the interviews, but for analytical purposes, I will discuss them separately, since they are influenced by different aspects of the cultural pressures on women's bodies and on men's. In other words, each of these themes, in a different way, highlights the tensions and pressures as well as the entanglement of modern and traditional social elements for men and women in Saudi Arabia.

The analysis will show how women and men actively consider their bodies in relation to clothes and food. Also, I discuss how cultural expectations involving themselves, their families, relationships, and motives influence their bodies as well. The findings provide a more complex image of men and women in terms of giving a space for their bodies to practice their culture and

how much they allow other cultures, such as the Western culture, to be expressed through their bodies. The rapid transformation of Saudi society, as well as the rapid transformation of fields related to women's and men's bodies, has produced a new generation of Saudis caught between the modern and traditional.

I address how Saudi women and men respond to the cultural signals concerning their bodies. In other words, I will discuss how men and women use their bodies—feed them, clothe them, and present them—in public life.

### *Clothes and the Male Body*

The first theme addresses clothing as a problem of appearance. Although few of the men suggested that appearance was their primary bodily concern, when issues related to appearance were discussed, most of them showed what their thinking and practices are in relation to their clothes, in general. Most expressed concern that their bodies are defined by the clothes they wear. The influence of Western styles is expressed in their bodies because men generally conclude that Western clothes require thin bodies to look and fit well. This changes slightly for men in different age groups, weights, and places of residence. The new generation, who has been influenced the most by Western clothes, because they grow up with media from the West, discussed their experiences when wearing different clothes, and how others see them in public spaces or inside the family.

In other words, clothes speak from the body, and wearing traditional or modern clothes has meaning for most of the men in the study. Weight is one element that can influence both men and women in terms of clothes. On the face of it, it would seem that the men in the study do not care on some level about appearance, and they do not feel pressure about their appearance in

public life. Most of them say that they are comfortable with their weight, and few of them actively try to lose weight. Most of the men reject appearance as a legitimate motive for efforts to lose weight, either through diet or exercise, but they think losing weight is important for health. However, losing weight for some men is important because they want to look good in front of others. Yazid, 29 for example, said that:

God willing, by God's power and strength, I will lose some weight for this. This means mostly my general health, but I am often saddened by clothes. The main problem for me is what clothes I should wear.

Yazid also explains why he rejected wearing Western clothes such as jeans, t-shirts, or shorts.

My body does not look good if I wear jeans. If I wear jeans, everyone will look at me and see the fat move. My belly is big and so is my chest, as well as other parts of my body. I think they will make jokes about my body.

Moreover, few of the men prefer what they consider the excesses of the muscular Western body, proposing, like Ibrahim (31 years), that having muscles and doing sports activities can facilitate wearing Western clothes:

The Western European's body has a strong physique, often because of his commitment to sports that make them wearing jeans and t-shirts and these clothes [that] show them how their body looks.

Additionally, Mohamed, 33, feels that a strong body and having muscles is important for looking good, and that can influence how one wears clothes. He says, "I like the Western clothes and bodies because they focus on the health of the body through sports." Comments like these suggest that the younger men are trying to follow Western ideals of appearance and clothes.

And yet, most men in the study expressed some body-related concerns, and those concerns were deeply entangled in issues related to appearance. Some of the younger men expressed disdain for both fat and thin bodies and had taken measures to rid their own bodies of fat or had put on weight to avoid being too thin. Thus, their desire for the appearance of a strong muscular body compelled them to wear clothes that revealed their muscles in public. The motives and practices that related to their bodies were created from their concerns and worry about their appearance. They tried to balance between what is traditional and modern, wanting to respect the old while experimenting with the new.

Several men used terms such as “shame,” “disrespect,” or “ostracism” to describe men who wore jeans in front of the older generation. It is generally accepted that it is not good for men to show bare skin in public.

My friend was fully clothed with jeans and a t-shirt that had a picture on it. He was sitting with his family when his father saw him. His father immediately told him to go and change his clothes. His father asked him if he wanted people that he did not know to think he did not raise him properly. My friend felt disrespected at that moment but chose to respect his father’s feelings. So, he changed his clothes and wore a “thobe” [a long-sleeved, floor-length robe].

The dilemmas triggered by Western-style clothes are linked not only to the fact that they express Western values, but that these clothes can also show some parts of the body, unlike the traditional clothes. A thobe, for example, covers the entire body and does not highlight a person’s size or body shape. People do not pay attention to a person’s body and the wearer feels satisfied when wearing this kind of clothing. However, wearing Western clothes can make a person feel fat or ugly. Men feel freer in large cities to experiment with Western clothes, but

being in public can also limit the practice of wearing Western clothes. Our clothes and how we feel about our bodies are closely related to each other and this relationship plays a role in creating our self-image, either positive or negative.

Most men who participated in this study expressed what they are feeling when wearing traditional clothes like the thobe. They tend to be happier and more satisfied. Abdullah, 56, and Mohammed, 53, like most men in this study, preferred to wear thobes in public and what Saudi people call "a comfort dress" at home. A "comfort dress" looks like a thobe but is more colorful and looser than a thobe worn in public. This type of thobe gives the body more space and covers fat, and it makes the wearer feel more comfortable. Mohammed explains:

I like our clothes. I don't like Western clothes. This is our custom and we must preserve it. . . . Wearing a t-shirt and shorts or pants to the gym is acceptable, but these clothes greatly define the body. Sometimes I feel embarrassed when I go to the gym. Some friends say, for example, that I have a big belly. In fact, if I wear a thobe, no one says anything. Honestly, the thobe covers all defects.

Abdullah, similarly, noted that Saudi clothes more effectively cover the body and added that they are much more comfortable:

Saudi clothes are comfortable and appropriate, and you can face people in them. If I go to a place where there are guests, and I am wearing jeans and my shirt is out and my stomach is out, people make comments. People here notice what a person wears and it is difficult to break traditions when you are my age. Our clothes are comfortable, unlike Western clothes, which are tight and display the features of the body. They are not comfortable at all. I see people in the mosque who wear Western clothes struggling to keep their bodies covered all the time.

Most men, especially the older ones, agreed with Abdullah's and Mohammed's assessments. They believe traditional clothes are preferable and that men should not wear Western-style clothes. They feel traditional clothes give the body more space to relax and allow the wearer to be fat, but still feel comfortable. However, Nasser, 42, who himself preferred Western clothes thought that "if someone is fat and obsessed with how he looks, he should continue wearing traditional clothes." This is because traditional clothes like the thobe, unlike jeans, tend to flow over the body and do not draw attention to body fat or the contours of the body.

Frequent references made by the men to clothes, as well as the care of the face and body, signal their awareness that the demands on appearance are growing, and can create more of a clash between traditional clothes and modern clothes in different social contexts. The rapid transformation of Saudi society, especially after the development of the petroleum industry, opening the country to tourists and businessmen, and the spread of Western media, has made this generation more flexible because they see the number of men of different nationalities wearing Western clothes in public.. For example, Abdullah, 56, states that:

Western bodies are consistent [he means that they are not fat and look fit or nice] and [they] enjoy wearing jeans or shorts. But if I wear this type of clothing, my wife will say these clothes are not for me. They are for kids. Your friends and your family, in general, will say something. After all, my body, currently, does not look its best wearing these clothes. A thobe conceals many flaws, in fact.

The rapid transformation of Saudi society allowed this generation to be more open about Western culture and clothing. Muscles are an important aspect of the body for young men to show to each other. Although the younger generations still do not wear Western clothes in

public, traditional clothing is showing the effect that Western culture is having on the younger generation. This generation of young men are emboldened to try traditional clothing that have the flavor of Western culture. Moaaz, 27, for example, who prefers wearing jeans and t-shirts, comments:

I like to wear jeans and shorts at home and outside, but not at family gatherings if my grandmother is there because I respect her, and she doesn't not like nontraditional clothing. The new style of thobe reveals your body details. When my friends wear the new thobe, I can see if they have muscles or are fat. I do not see any difference between our culture and American culture when it comes to clothes.

To many men then, wearing Western clothes that reveal the contours of the body prompted a range of negative experiences, including “embarrassment” (Khalid, 45). In Khalid's case, one of his friends had noticed the fat pushing through his t-shirt and started asking Khalid about losing weight, but none of his friends asked him this when he was wearing the thobe. Khalid added this about Western clothes:

I try not to wear them [jeans] because they show the details of my body. . . t-shirts and jeans—if you are fat, do not wear them. I am annoyed when someone says something to me about how fat I am. I don't like my t-shirts to be tight, because they show some part of my stomach, so I try not to wear them. I would love to not have any extra fat on my body.

For most men in this sample, the exposure to Western media or other cultures is reflected in their lifestyles. Clothes play an important role in creating an image of oneself in front of others as well as creating a space of respect for the norms of their culture. Wearing a thobe, for example, contributed directly to preserving the Saudi identity for the generations who are 50 years old or older. However, the current generation has tried to balance traditional clothes and

modern Western clothes. Attempting to find a balance between the two styles creates a conflict between individuals and their perceptions of the value of the traditional or modern in their society and culture.

Concern about one's image in front of others is important and most men try to avoid violating norms and expectations around clothing and food. At the same time, the current generation is trying to practice Western dress with their peers of the same generation in order to avoid the culture of shame that may surround the person if he sits with someone older or who is from a different generation. However, body size also plays a role in men's negotiations around Western clothing, which are considerably more revealing than the thobe, which more effectively conceals an overweight body.

### *Clothes and Female Bodies*

This section addresses clothing for women as a problem of appearance. Many of the women said that appearance is their primary body concern. Issues related to appearance provide insights into how the women think about clothing in their communities and in public. In addition to that, the influence of Western styles is evident in the way they think about their bodies.

Women, like men, almost unanimously agreed that Western clothes require thin bodies. But, as with the men, this perception varies by age. The current generation of women who have been influenced by Western fashion spoke of their experiences wearing Western-style clothes, and how others see them in public spaces or inside the family and in their peer groups. Hence, the distinction between traditional and modern clothes is deeply meaningful to the women. One important element that can influence more women than men in terms of clothes, both traditional



and modern, is weight, because that can affect their clothing choices and impact their appearance.

The men in the study appear to care on some level about appearance, but this consideration does not pervade their public lives. Most of them were comfortable with their weight, yet most of them also actively tried to lose weight, ostensibly for reasons of health rather than appearance. However, some men consider losing weight an important part of maintaining an attractive appearance in front of others. Women, on the other hand, said that they care more about their appearance than men because there is more societal pressure put on them regarding their appearance than on men. The number one concern for women is their weight. The body's appearance was the main motive for efforts to lose fat through diet or exercise. Women also said that health was a good reason to lose weight.

Body size is the first worry for women when they wear clothes. Because Western clothes require a thin body, women felt that this is the primary problem, especially because Western clothes reveal the shape of the body. How women articulate this problem, however, varies especially by age, but also by class situation. Tagreed, 46, for example, said:

See, I am always wearing our clothes. I mean, our normal, traditional clothes, but jeans and other clothes are on my mind. I wear them when I am thinner.

Waffa, 51, explained why people do not look good in Western clothes when they are fat:

The shape of Western-style pants is not good for people who are fat. They need to lose weight to fit into this kind of clothes.

Moreover, the women who are over 50 years old almost unanimously reject what they consider Western-style women's clothes. These clothes do not fit Saudi women because they require the kind of thin body that Western women subscribe to. As Mashaal, 53, said:

I love to wear traditional clothes more than jeans or any other Western clothes. Actresses in Europe wear clothes that show how thin they are. They are too thin, their bones show. I do not love these clothes. I think they are disgusting.

Other women of the same age as Mashaal said the same thing. They feel that Western women's clothes do not give women the space to enjoy their lives as Wafaa, 51, explains:

Warning: jeans make my body ugly. No one loves clothes that make her feel bad. I love to wear things that make me feel good or comfortable.

Most women in the study expressed concerns about their bodies. Women's bodies are primarily subject to assessment by women because women in public spaces wear abayas, loose dress-like garments that are worn over their clothes and cover the entire body except the hands, feet and head. Thus, men cannot see women's body shape, and this makes women feel more comfortable about what they wear in public. A woman can wear pajamas, for example, and no one will notice because the abaya hides the whole body. Women, however, dress for men in an indirect way (for example, one woman might see a girl and describe everything about her to her son for marriage), but women dress for women in a direct way. The increased scrutiny that comes with participation in public life comes mostly from the women in the community who criticize women's bodies and clothes. This makes women concerned about their bodies and appearance in front of other women in the community. Aruwa, 43, for example, explains why she should be more concerned about other women she is about men:

I love to be in good shape . . . modern clothes or traditional clothes are both good for me, but I choose my clothes carefully because women here do not give you any mercy when they see something wrong with your clothes. Everything depends on women's views. if

they love your body and they see your clothes are organized, that will increase your chance of getting married.

Several young women described traditional Saudi clothes as “old fashioned” and said they do not like them. It is evident that the increased prevalence of Western-style clothes as well as Western clothes stores have affected women’s ideas about clothes and their own bodies. The problem triggered by Western-style outfits is linked to the fact that such clothes challenge traditional clothes. All of the younger women in this study said they do not like traditional clothing. They indicated that they like Western clothes because they reveal more about the body than the traditional clothes. Rawan, 28, explained:

I like to wear clothes that are loose at home because I want clothes that are comfortable.

At weddings or other special events, I strongly recommend wearing dresses or something tighter. As for traditional Saudi clothes, I do not like them, I do not like them at all.

Ruba, 27, said the same thing:

I do not like our clothes. I prefer to wear the jeans or leggings, but at home I love comfortable clothes.

Comments like these suggest that young women are influenced by Western beauty ideals, and they love to show their shapes in front of other women, even though they cover their bodies when they are in public. For example, Rawan and Ruba both agreed that they do not like the traditional Saudi clothes, and they both like Western clothes like jeans. Rawan spoke about special events and how she selects clothes like "dresses or something tighter." In Saudi culture, there is gender segregation in all events like weddings. Therefore, Rawan chooses what to wear for other women because there are no men who can see her in this event. In addition, young women are confronted by the scrutiny that comes from women in public life; young women want

to create their own space and try new clothes to experience different cultures, especially as young women grow up with Western media. As women's rights expand and the government gives them more space to freely live their lives, women of this generation have more ability to experience these other cultures.

Answers from women about their clothes reflects the pressure that the demands on appearance can create. The media's emphasis on being in good shape in different social contexts is powerful. Women's roles in Saudi Arabia have changed from taking care of the home to working in public, from being dependent on men for almost everything to being independent. However, this are just the first steps, and they have not affected the vast majority of women. These changes open the door for women to see and explore new styles of clothes, and these changes also allow women's bodies to be seen in public as well as scrutinized and commented on (Runkle 2005). For example, wearing an abaya in public is different depending on the wearer's age. Young women prefer to wear the abaya without covering their faces. However, even with these changes in the use of the abaya, most women still prefer to wear it to cover the body. In addition, women feel that wearing the abaya is part of their Islamic culture, as Wafaa, 51, said:

I am wearing an abaya because I am afraid of God.

Hussah, 41, also mentioned the importance of the abaya in religion:

Wearing the abaya is related to our religion. I cannot go outside without wearing my abaya.

To many of the women, wearing Western clothes that reveal the contours of the body prompted a range of negative experiences, including being "afraid of bad words" (Tagrred, 46). Tagrred described herself as fat person, and she had heard a lot of stories about others who were fat and wore revealing clothes. She heard that women who wore non-traditional clothing were

subjected to embarrassing comments about the size of their bellies and bodies, and that they needed to wear clothing that would make them look good, not bad. Mashaal, 53, laughingly spoke about what her husband says when she wears clothes like pajamas at home and how he pushes her to lose weight even though she is thin:

My husband always comments on my clothes, especially the pajamas. . . . He always says that “You have a big belly and you need to lose weight,” knowing that I am skinny and not fat.

This an example of the different forces that can push women to lose weight so that they feel better about themselves and not lose confidence. Rawan, 28, for example, said:

Wearing jeans with a fat body can make you lose confidence because your shape is visible, and people will see your belly if you are fat.

I have spoken about the social functions of dress and how Western clothes create pressure on women to have thin bodies so that they will look good in tight fitting clothes, like jeans. Also, the desire to be fashionable can create other challenges. Western clothing for women (e.g., tight-fitting dresses, jeans, shorts, and high-heeled shoes), are most often designed to work as objects of sexual attraction rather than to make women beautiful or facilitate movement (Gilman 2002). Most women in this study mentioned feeling uncomfortable when they wear jeans because they are tight and uncomfortable and restrict movement, especially when they are at work or at home. Most women commented on wearing high heel shoes in public and that they see a lot of women outside wearing them, but that mostly they are worn by young women.

The spread of Western clothes, as well as images portrayed in Western movies, have an impact on the young men and women in Saudi Arabia. Young women assessed Western clothes, saying that these clothes are their preference. At the same time, women in Saudi Arabia wear

abayas in public. Therefore, the abayas give them freedom to move and to hide the body from men's eyes. But they expose their bodies to other women in private places. wearing jeans without an abaya in front of other women. Young women still worry about their weight as they fit into this kind of clothes and this reflects the spread of discourse about health and thinness that comes from Western culture. Young men also impact the spread of this discourse on health. That attitude is represented in their answers and their preference for Western clothes, even though they face some challenges on this preference from older men.

## **CONCLUSION**

An individual's dress almost always sends messages about the wearer. Of course, men and women wear different clothing styles from one another other that represent them in public or private differently. One way that individuals use clothing is to conceal imperfections (Clarke et al. 2003). Imperfections can be any part of the body that makes anyone feel uncomfortable, such as a fat belly.

Making decisions about how to dress is mostly controlled by social constraints, such as what one should wear in public or not wear as dictated by the expectations of traditional culture. For some women, like the young women in this study, preferring Western clothes and voicing concern about their bodies and their weight allowed them to distinguish themselves from older age groups. They did this by accepting Western clothes, unlike older women. Young men also express their preferring the clothes from the West and think these clothes required a thin body, which in some way represent the spread of health discourse in Saudi society. This discussion of health has spread across the world, and the Saudi young (both men and women) are impacted by this discourse which is clear in their concern about weight and Western clothes. The gap between

two generations – and the choice to wear Western clothes or traditional clothes – can reflect the extent of influence Western media has on the younger generation, as well as the disagreement between different sources about the body and the body ideal. However, men in Saudi Arabia face more pressure because they can wear Western clothes in public, unlike young women who wear the abaya and a head and face covering in public. Women have the freedom of choice only when they are with other women in private.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS**

The gender and body issue in the world is considered an important subject that needs to be studied and analyzed. One country that has a long history of gender issues is Saudi Arabia. Gender and body studies are paid less attention in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East than they are in the West. Therefore, I selected Saudi Arabia because of its long history of gender issues as well as its culture being more open to the modern world than ever before. The history of gender issues in Saudi Arabia became apparent after the discovery of oil. The emerging oil industry and the successive increasing wealth led to an increasing number of both young men and women receiving higher education at universities as well as an increasing level of income among the university graduates (Khalil and Storie 2020). Even though that led a greater number of Saudi women to enter the workforce, a large number of families still relied on the wages of men as the main source of income for their families. This reliance reduced the number of Saudi women in the workforce (Al-Khateeb 1998). On the other hand, conservatives and clerics also demanded that women stay at home to fulfill their primary role of caring for children and their husbands instead of working outside of the home (Al-Khateeb 1998; Khalil and Storie 2020). Staying at home as the primary role for women had an influence on gender issues, such as the ban on women driving, traveling, and working outside the home. The ban on women driving was not the only restriction on Saudi women, who also endured restrictions on traveling and working to earn an income.

For a woman in Saudi Arabia to have a job requires a driver to take the woman to work or any other place. Thus, Saudi Arabia has more than 1.2 million foreign drivers and all of them work at Saudi homes to support Saudi women's needs (Khan 2017). As result, these large numbers of drivers inside Saudi society create some financial problems for the Saudi government



in general and for Saudi families in particular. When King Salman became king in January 2015, he made several changes that affected the Saudi society in general (BBC 2015). In September 2017, King Salman decided to allow women to drive (ABC 2017). That decision caused a large debate inside Saudi and Western media. Another of these changes was to allow women to travel abroad without permission after August 20, 2019. In 2017, he had allowed women to enter a stadium to watch a soccer match (ABC 2017).

These gender inequality issues in Saudi Arabia are being studied by many researchers, but gender and body issues in Saudi Arabia have been among several subjects that are paid less attention. Among these under-studied areas are clothes, fatness, body concern, and beauty. Thus, it was decided that it was necessary to shed light on these important issues.

I decided to investigate how men and women think about and experience their bodies in Saudi Arabia. Because of the paucity of studies about the non-Western world (Jafar and Casanova 2013), I focused this study on men and women in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia was one of the most gender conservative nations in the world, but currently the country is undergoing fairly rapid changes in areas that affect the ways in which social life is gendered.

This study fills a gap in the literature in several ways. First, since the study of bodies focused on a non-Western country, studying a different place can show how people in another culture think about and perceive their bodies. Second, focusing on both men and women in this study can highlight how each gender thinks about the body, even though information from women participants was greater than that from the men. This allowed me to show the diversity of points of view among participants of the same gender.

### *Summary of Main Findings*

I began this research from the perspective that women and men in Saudi Arabia have different experiences in their social lives in part because of how they perceive their bodies. However, an analysis of answers from the participants showed that there are some similarities as well as differences between men and women in terms of the experience of the body in their social lives. My investigation sought to explore these differences and similarities in different social settings. The findings presented in this dissertation yield insights into the ways in which men and women create their personal spaces and social experiences in terms of how they perceive their bodies.

In Chapter Four, I investigated fatness in terms of how men and women see and think about fatness and how they see fatness as a problem in social contexts, e.g., marriage or work. Then, I decided to look at stigma in social contexts and how men and women respond to this stigma about fatness. I found that, in addition to agreeing that fatness is not only a health problem but also a problem that impacts individuals socially in many different ways, men and women see this problem differently according to their position in society. Men think the fatness does not affect men, while women think fatness affects women in different ways socially. Specifically, I found that when I discussed stigmatization, gender, and body, both men and women who are overweight clearly face stigmatization because of their body size. Men and women in this study face the same problems that come with body size. Smelling bad, difficulty moving and being lazy are the most common words that people use when describing fat people. This study also shows that the Western view about fatness and body size has spread around the world and impacts the cultures of some countries through discourse about body size.

In Chapter Five, I investigated body concern and gender between men and women. Participants expressed concern about the body early in life. They spoke of what is considered attractive by both genders, and how both men and women see cosmetic surgery as a solution to

problems with their appearance. Concern about the body is the topic of greatest urgency for women in this study more than men; women overwhelmingly identified concern about their bodies and expressed dissatisfaction with their bodies, unlike the men, most of whom expressed satisfaction with their bodies.

In Chapter Six, I investigated how men and women in Saudi Arabia define their bodies in terms of their social lives. I focused the analysis on two themes: clothes and men and clothes and women. The stories from men and women around these two themes are overlapping and interrelated in the interviews, but for analytical purposes, I discussed them separately as they are influenced by different aspects of the cultural pressures on both women's bodies and men's bodies. In other words, each of these themes, in a different way, highlights the tensions and pressures as well as the entanglement of modern and traditional social elements for men and women in Saudi Arabia. The findings provide a more complex image of men and women in terms of giving a space for their bodies to practice their culture and how much they allow other cultures, such as Western culture, to be expressed through their bodies. The rapid transformation of Saudi society, as well as the rapid transformation of fields related to women's and men's bodies, has produced a new generation of Saudis caught between the modern and traditional. In other words, for some young women in this study, preferring Western clothes and their bodies, as well as concern about their weight clearly contributed to distinguishing themselves from older age groups. They did this by accepting Western clothes, unlike older women. Young men also express their preference for clothes from the West. They think these clothes require thin bodies which in some way represent the spread of health discourse in Saudi society. This health discourse spread across the world and the young Saudi men and women were both impacted by discourse which can be seen in their concern about weight and Western-style clothing. The gap

between two generations – to choose to wear Western clothes or traditional clothes – can reflect the extent of influence of Western media on the younger generation, as well as the disagreement between different sources about the body and the body ideal. However, men in Saudi Arabia can face more pressure because they can wear Western clothes in public, unlike young women who wear the abaya and a head and face covering in public. Women have the freedom of choice only when they are with other women in private.

### *Future Research*

Future studies of gender and the body should consider that class and race are also important elements in terms of studying the body and gender. Future studies should also attempt to analyze men's bodies globally in order to fill the gap in body and gender studies, since, generally, studies of men's bodies receive less attention than studies of women's bodies. In addition to that, future studies should try to highlight the subjects related to body and gender globally in terms of body concern in terms of the issues addressed here, beauty, fatness, thinness, and attractiveness. In addition, widening the scope of study and increasing data collection will help to generalize the findings, in particular in global communities like those in the Middle East. In this study, I relied on interviews of 40 men and women.

Future studies of body and gender globally should focus on other non-Western countries because we need to know the experiences of people in different cultures. The intention is not to ignore the Western studies, but instead to recognize that in other countries men and women have varying experiences based on their cultural background. Although specific concerns with the body vary by culture, the questions matter to men and women everywhere. Future researchers have a rich field in which to uncover how these issues play out in countries across the globe.



## APPENDIX 1: RECRUITMENT STRATEGY AND DOCUMENTS

Recruitment Script sent via email (English)

Hello Mr./Ms. (fill in the blank),

My name is Ahmed Alwulaii. I am a sociology Ph.D. student at the University of Cincinnati, and I am from Saudi Arabia. I am looking to connect with people who live in Saudi Arabia who might want to participate in a research study. The purpose of this research study is to explore how men and women in Saudi Arabia experience and how they think about their bodies. I want to have a conversation with you about how you experience social life and social interactions. Participation in this research is confidential and completely voluntary.

If you are interested in participating or learning more about this study, please reply directly to this message.

Sincerely,

Ahmed Alwulaii

UC study IRB# **2021-0575**

**please contact Ahmed Alwulaii if you have any questions or concerns via email:**

**[alwulaan@mail.uc.edu](mailto:alwulaan@mail.uc.edu) or [Ahmedalwulaii@gmail.com](mailto:Ahmedalwulaii@gmail.com). Or Phone number: +966554449249 / +12028677440**

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته:

إن هذه الأسئلة المرفقة في هذه المقابلة هي جزء من دراستي في الدكتوراه في علم الاجتماع في جامعة سنسناتي في الولايات المتحدة حول استكشاف حول تفكير السعوديين في اجسادهم على سبيل المثال: تجاربهم في السمنة او النحافة او عمليات التجميل . و لا شك أن مساهمتكم في الإجابة على أسئلة هذه المقابلة تشكل عاملاً مهماً في انجاز هذه الدراسة.

المشاركة في هذا البحث سرية وطوعية تماماً، و لن تستخدم البيانات إلا لغرض البحث العلمي.

إذا كنت مهتماً بالمشاركة أو معرفة المزيد عن هذه الدراسة ، فيرجى الرد مباشرةً على . هذه الرسالة

مع خالص الشكر والتقدير

أحمد الوليعي

UC study IRB# 2021-0575

إذا كان لديك اي استفسار يرجى التواصل مع الباحث احمد الوليعي عبر البريد الالكتروني:

[alwulaan@mail.uc.edu](mailto:alwulaan@mail.uc.edu) or [Ahmedalwulaii@gamil.com](mailto:Ahmedalwulaii@gamil.com)

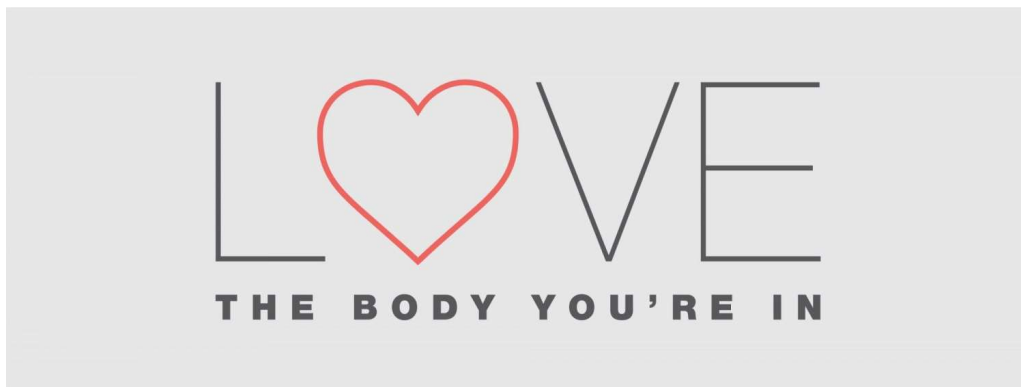
او عبر الاتصال بالهاتف المحمول:

+966554449249 / +12028677440

## Recruitment Flyer

**Are you a female or male and currently 19 years or older? If so, this research is interested in you? I am a doctoral student in Sociology at the University of Cincinnati, Ohio, in the United States.**

**Research participants are needed to share their experiences and thoughts about their body (for example, in terms of fitness, weight, appearance) and the role bodies play in social life. All that is required of you is a virtual interview lasting about an hour. UC IRB# 2021-0575.**



**To sign up for a survey study, please contact Ahmed Alwulaii via email:**

**[alwulaan@mail.uc.edu](mailto:alwulaan@mail.uc.edu) or [Ahmedalwulaii@gmail.com](mailto:Ahmedalwulaii@gmail.com) OR**

**Phone number: +966554449249 / +12028677440**



Recruitment Flyer (Arabic)

Recruitment Flyer (Arabic)

هل أنت أنثى أم ذكر وتبلغ من العمر 19 عامًا أو أكثر ، هذه الدراسة تهتمك؟  
هذا البحث يحتاج الى بعض متطوعين للمشاركة في هذه الدراسة حول خبراتهم وأفكارهم أو قصصهم  
UC IRB# 2021-0575.. حول كيفية محاولتك فقدان وزنك أو الحفاظ عليه وما هو رد فعل الآخرين تجاهك



UC IRB# 2021-0575.

. للتسجيل في هذه الدراسة يرجى التواصل مع :أحمد الوليعي عبر البريد الإلكتروني

: alwulaan@mail.uc.edu أو Ahmedalwulaii@gamil.com:

او عبر الاتصال بالهاتف المحمول  
+966554449249 / +12028677440

## APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW GUIDE

### Interview Guide (English)

#### Interview Guide

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#### Semi-Structured Interview Questions:

- **General information:**

Age, education, profession, (family) marital status, member of your family, (city)Where do you live, income, weight:00 kg? gender?

#### A- History of body:

Tell me about the history of your body. Possible follow-up prompts include:

- 1- How would you describe your body?
- 2- If the body change over time? e.g., in school, college, job. How would you describe your feelings about your body?
- 3- Are you often thinking about your body? explain?
- 4- Describe any experiences that make you feel uncomfortable with your body.
- 5- Are there things you want to change about your body?
- 6- Are there any situations that led you to change your body?

#### B- Fatness:

Tell me about your thoughts on fatness. Possible follow-up prompts include:

- 1- How do you define fatness?
- 2- Do you think being fat is a problem or not? why?
- 3- Do you think fatness is stigmatized? why?
- 4- Do you think the size of the body is important? why?
- 5- Do you think fatness matter differently for man and women? why?
- 6- When you see people's fatness, what do you feel about them? Why?
- 7- Do you think fatness is your choice? Or you can control it?

#### C- Social life and body/fatness:

Tell me about how you experience your own body in daily life. Possible follow-up questions include:

- 1- Do you like or dislike your body? /Why?
- 2- How would describe the reaction of others toward you? family - friends - co-workers - public space. Do people comment about your body? What do they say?

- 3- To what extent do you think attractiveness is linked to your body?
- 4- To what extent do you think your body affects your daily life? (E.g. at work, with partner, in public life)
- 5- Do you think the size of the body matters when searching for a partner? why?
- 6- When you go to a clothing store, do you think the body size impacts your choice of clothing?
- 7- Do you prefer wearing traditional clothing or not? why?

**D- Change the body:**

Have you ever tried to change your body e.g. - diet - exercise- Surgeries.? Why? If yes, possible follow-up prompts:

- 1- How many times did you try to lose your weight? Why?
- 2- What are the things that change after losing weight?
- 3- How would you describe the reaction of others and noted toward you after your losing weight? family - friends - co-workers - public space.
- 4- How would you describe you're feeling about yourself?
- 5- What are the motivations to change your body?
- 6- Are you satisfying with effort to change your body?

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